

10/23/13:

Records are made to be broken and records that dangle like an overripe fruit are just a matter of time. Sooner or later a strong wind blows or a curious child, swishing the dirt from side to side, suddenly throws a rainbow and a record falls. The week 43 record of 23 species, which was set in 2005, has been a noticeable regional low for some time. Week 42 has a record of 29 and the record for week 44 is at 26. No longer. We crushed the 23 with a more seasonally appropriate 27 and made some wine. We got all three of our standard woodpeckers and both wren species but only two warbler species and, without the late capture of a white-crowned sparrow by Viveca, we would have been sparrow skunked. Our walk involved rare birds, two first sightings of the year, and the Stasi waiting for an unguarded word or a careless squirrel.

See the plots at http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html and http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

Roy Williams, sadly without Jane, and Peter Mao joined us. LIGO's schedule has apparently become more permissive of Wednesday lunch breaks, so hopefully, we will see more of Roy this fall. It's a bit like a cat waiting for the primary feeder to come home. There are no surprises when he appears. Even if you haven't seen him for a while, he is always expected. Kent Potter is probably the penultimate walker of this type. It's just very comfortable to have Roy (or Kent) around. With Peter, it's a matter of history. He went on one walk in 1997 and three in 2008. He has been on three so far this year but it is always a surprise, pleasant mind you, to see Peter on a walk.



For birds, I will start with the Stasi. We saw three red-tailed hawks from our Arden stop. They were spiraling up a thermal, gliding off in various directions, and then returning to the thermal. Peter, who generally comes packing a camera, didn't get a good shot of them but after leaving the walk, one of them flew by and he managed to snap a portrait. He looks like he belongs in a Stasi unit. If you are a squirrel, you are sure of it. So, Arden was a good beginning for hawks, although it also turned out to be the end for new hawks. We didn't see any Cooper's or red-shouldered hawks but one or more of the red-tails turned up near Tournament Park, near Morrisroe, perched at the corner of Wilson and California, over Wilson

near California, north of the recycling yard, east of Holliston perching in a tree, and flying north of Dabney as we rounded into the end of the walk. If we had counted all the sightings as individual birds, we would have been well north of twenty hawks. We saw no other raptors but there always seemed to be a red-tail in view or just out of view. By the end of the walk, it was actually beginning to feel a little

creepy. There isn't much in the way of an edible rock pigeon population on campus. They must have thought we were flushing squirrels.



odd little bird foraging in the grass. It is smaller than the phoebe (ergo not a meadowlark), has a long thin beak, obviating a sparrow, and looks a bit like a yellow-rumped warbler but acts more like a sandpiper. We need to get closer. We round out of our observation post and walk down the driveway to a point as close as we can get to the



There is safety in numbers and a posting pattern begins to evolve as we come to the baseball field. Vicky calls a black phoebe at the north end of the field near Cahill even before we arrive but the real prize, lay to the south. From our viewing station at the entrance to the underground parking structure, we can see another phoebe on the bleachers but this bird's focus leaves us with only rear views; we are half convinced of apricot dressing on the side, which would argue for a Say's but we can't be sure. On the puzzling ground, like a wayward hair, is an

bleachers. The phoebe turns and reveals a russet breast. We have a Say's with no ambiguity, but the small bird is still a mystery. Three companions and a meadowlark join him, which does little to ease the mystery. However, Alan wanders up behind the rest of us. It takes us a while to get him off the meadowlark but once properly focused, he quickly announces that "that there is a water pipit." He realizes that he has just dated his birding background and amends the statement to assert that we were looking at American pipits. I enclose a pipit shot that Peter took, this time through the fence. I like this photo because it is just good enough to garner some of the key field markings for these birds. Notice the flamboyant eyebrow on both birds and the white neck ruff on one of them. There is nothing else like it around here. I also show a photo I took a few years ago at Bolsa Chica. Sure, you can see somewhat more detail on this pipit than you can on Peter's, most notably the eye ring, which is a subtle feature compared to the eyebrow, and a streaked breast, but the key is the same. American pipits breed on the tundra and in high alpine meadows, where they are insectivores, but winter from Washington to Central America, where they will eat almost anything, including grass. I suspect that our guys are in that transitional period between an all-insect diet and the more opportunistic foraging of winter. Find some bugs if you can but take whatever you can get. This is only the seventh sighting of an

American pipit on the bird walk. We don't have very good pipit habitat on campus but we occasionally catch them on migration, as we did this week, or moving around during the winter (all of our pipit sightings lie within the band of weeks 38 - 1). So far, we have yet to see a spring migrant (we would expect such birds in April or May).

In other news, I find once again that truth is an ephemeral dream. Three successive weeks of western meadowlarks is a great rarity, something that has happened just twice in 27 years of Caltech bird walks and there has never been series of sightings for four weeks in a row. That was a truth as we knew it last week but it is a truth idled in time and now broken after a week with this walk's meadowlark. He was foraging near the pipits. Anyone for a game of fives? You may have noticed that the yellow-rumps have been here for a month and present in serious numbers for a couple of weeks. The kinglets have lagged. Finally, REOMY (rump-end of the old Maintenance yard) calls; we have our first kinglet of the season foraging in a neighbor's oak. He made up for the fact that the mallard was gone.



As noted above, American pipits are rare visitors to Caltech. However, we encountered an even less common bird at the north end of campus. Alan scoots under the canopy of a tree just across the street from the Caltech Public Events office. He thinks that he is looking for bushtits but, as he scans the foliage, a large chunk of the leaf mass moves. It's a parrot. He has a bright red crown, leading to the visceral reaction of red-crowned parrot, but he also has bright yellow cheek, which is inconsistent. Alan has discovered a red-lore parrot. We have seen only two of these birds (not unlikely the same individual) on the Caltech bird walk, the other on week 18 of last year in the old Maintenance

yard. Alan must have a special affinity for these birds because he is the initial source for both of our sightings.

Red-lore parrots are native to various pieces of Mexico, Central America, and northern South America (i.e., not southern California; every California parrot, no matter what species you care to name, is either an escapee or derived from escapees). There are four recognized subspecies but the ones with the bright yellow cheeks, which are the most desirable for pet trade purposes, hail from the Caribbean slope of Tamaulipas in Mexico, south to northern Nicaragua. Naturally, they are here for the money. Red-lore parrots are not yet and may never be common in the San Gabriel Valley but they have a chance. According to the California Parrot Project (<http://www.californiaparrotproject.org/>), from which I lifted the photo, there were two red-lore parrots in the San Gabriel Valley in 1997 and four to six in 2002. You can sometimes see red-lore parrots in mixed flocks with other parrots but both of our sightings were of a solitary individual. Hopefully, he or she will find love and keep it on campus.

My final story is not from the bird walk but I think it is of interest to our walkers and it is certainly of interest to me, so I am going to include it. On Tuesday afternoon, I am in the middle of weighing out a sample when I get a phone call from Alan: "Apparently, that leucistic crow has been captured! He'll be available for viewing at two o'clock outside Parsons-Gates." I shoot across the hall to tell George Rossman about the bird and he immediately defers an appointment (very unlike George). He grabs a

camera and off we go. The crow is in a large cardboard box nestled up against a shirt and Guy Menking from landscaping and gardening is in charge. It's a great look at a rare defect in an otherwise common bird. There are large swaths of white feathers on the wings and some feathers that are partially colored. George is beaming. He has vindication and lots of pictures, a couple of which I include below. One shows Guy's shirt and the crow and the other is a close-up of the feathers.

I first described the leucistic crow in the report for the walk of July 17, which includes a fairly extensive discussion of leucism and albinism. It was based on a description given by George Rossman, a professor in Geology, who is the first to have seen it. At the time, I thought this was going to be a



one-time wonder and its most lasting effect, at least on me, was a tendency to pay more attention than normal to the plumage of crows. However, last week, Guy Menking tells us that George's crow has been hanging out around the Throop ponds, at least early in the morning. Most likely, he's been taking advantage of the feral cat food outside Thomas. This week the saga takes a formal turn. In the morning, Guy arrives at Thomas and sees that the leucistic crow is being

dive bombed by a three "normal" crow mob. This is something crows do against hawks and ravens and, if food is involved, to themselves. The leucistic crow is presumably being viewed as "other," something to be harassed at the least and killed at the best. Most birds put up with this game and dodge or move as needed but the leucistic crow is having considerable difficulty with the assault because he only has one working leg. He can't maintain a perch without fluttering wings. Guy can do nothing because the drama is playing out on a high stage but he thinks he will try to do something if the opportunity arises. Later in the day, he again passes Thomas. The crow had visited the container of cat food outside

Thomas or flown down there to escape the mob. However, he is stuck in the planter below the cat food because of his bad leg. Guy seizes an opportunity and throws a shirt over the bird. In one simple but effective maneuver, our leucistic crow has been captured.

After viewing, the crow is taken to the Eaton Canyon Nature Center. Now, Eaton Canyon doesn't have the facilities to support rehabilitation and they at first refused to look at the bird. However, one of the people working there apparently also works at a separate wildlife center that can take injured animals and he was willing to place the bird. So, Guy closes up the box and the bird moves to Eaton Canyon. I have been getting conflicting versions of what happened next but I am going with Guy's version as described to me on Friday. According to Guy, the Eaton Canyon staff fell in love with the bird and they are doing what they can to keep him. So far, they have determined sex (our leucistic crow is a male; I haven't seen any research on the sex of leucistic crows, so I don't know whether or not this is a significant observation) and that the leg is swollen but not broken. He is alert and eating (yes, cat food!). Apparently, they intend to keep him, which is a good thing. Crows are bigots and bullies, so our leucistic crow will never be accepted into a crow family. Without family a crow is likely to be looking at a short miserable life but our leucistic crow may be very lucky. He lucked into a food supply. He lucked into Guy. He lucked into Eaton Canyon. If he ever goes to Vegas, I definitely want to be tagging along.

The date: 10/23/2013

The week number: 43

The walk number: 1218

The weather: 67 F, sunny

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Peter Mao, Roy Williams, John Beckett, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan

The birds (27):

- 1 Scrub Jay
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 2 Acorn Woodpecker
- 1 American Crow
- 3 Red-tailed Hawk
- 25 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 1 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 European Starling
- 5 Common Raven
- 1 White-throated Swift
- 5 Black Phoebe
- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 1 Western Meadowlark
- 4 American Pipit
- 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 20 Bushtit
- 1 Bewick's Wren

- 1 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 Downy Woodpecker
- 2 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 1 Red-lored Parrot
- 1 House Wren
- 1 White-crowned Sparrow
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
10/28/13