

1/2/14

Sometimes, a year begins with a slow whimper. It seems a captive strand of the old year submerging in a tidal bore but far upstream where the ocean lies in the subtle play of an inch of water. Mark the calendar because it is all you have to air the timing. This is apparently not one of those years. We begin with a large party. The regulars and Kent and Carole are here. There is a full Williams contingent, practically a double digit clan all by themselves. Chip also came, bearing among many other oddities, a suite of childhood anecdotes about Midway seabirds. They float on the air as he returns to us like an albatross, always a sailor's good fortune (unless, of course, you are dumb enough to kill one). Chip brings us good luck.

The walk begins with a textbook pair of western bluebirds. Jane sees them popping down for lunch near our starting point. The male likes a wire station next to the sidewalk immediately behind the tennis courts and he allows Jane a very close approach before giving it up. The female, who seems to like foraging from the ground is much less taken by her intrusion. Several of us get very good looks, all of which happens before Alan manages to join us. We are off to a good start but Arden is less than exciting and I am thinking that this is going to be one of those socially pleasant walks with a mediocre birding component. However, the end is better than the mean and we arrive at 27 species, not far from the definition of stellar (30) and well above the record low (13), median (19) *and* the previous high number of species (23) for a week 1 walk. We begin the year with a new record, although it was an anomalously low record high and, therefore, a bit of low lying fruit.

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

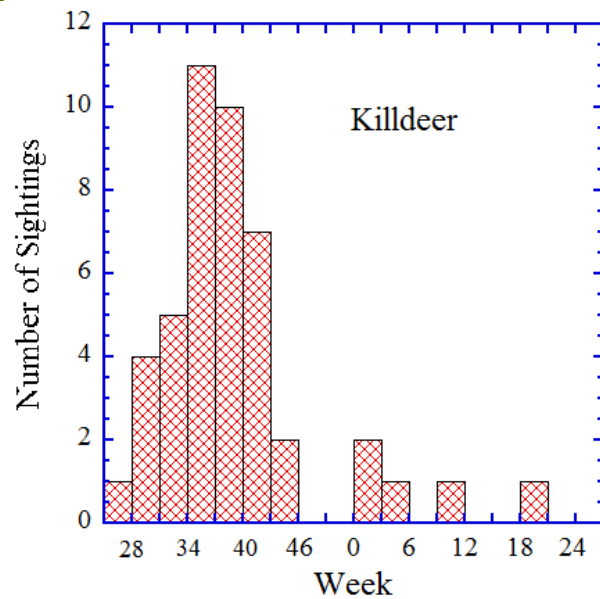
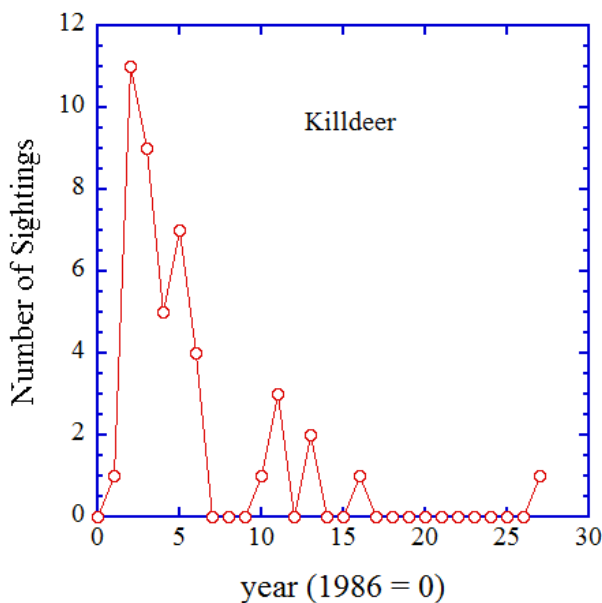


http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

Arden was disappointing but the north athletic field provides the first great excitement of the year. Deep in the field near the baseball diamond, there is what looks to be some kind of plover or sandpiper (even at a great distance, you can see a white-dominant belly under a brownish cape. With the binoculars at our disposal, that's about as far as we can get. There is, however, a gap in the fencing around the field where it meets the housing for the entrance to the underground parking garage and I park myself at this slit. The bird is patient, so I fire up my poor man's spotting scope (aka Canon SX50). At full magnification, I can make out a relatively short beak and solid brown back (leaning plover) and two black bars bounding the breast (definitely a ringed plover of some type; see top photo to the left). Now, usually, if you get a close look at a plover you would like to identify, you start with leg color, move to the beak (length and thickness, color and whether or not it's bicolored), the back (gray or brown; variegated or even coloring) and, finally to the breast (does the bar go all the way across the breast? any striping?). It can all be overwhelming. There is, however, an exception to all this extravagant observation. If you see two black bars or rings running across the breast, you are done. The first photo, which was taken from our viewing station, shows two rings. Finito. We have a killdeer. Now, Alan posited a killdeer without the advantage of my pseudo spotting scope range finder look. I don't know how he got there but that's what birding intuition is for. After the walk ended, I went out into the field to try for a somewhat better photo. The lighting was harsh and the bird had a longer discomfort



distance for my presence than I would have liked. I was, however, able to get a much closer view than that available from the fencing. The second photo shows our killdeer from the rear (my preferred view, according to the bird) but this is good enough to show the red eye-ring and a bit of the cinnamon rump that are also calling cards for a killdeer. I was happy. I was tempted to manipulate the bird for a better angle relative to the sun but decided that a great photo just wasn't going to happen at that time of day. I leave our killdeer to rejoin his siesta.



Killdeer used to be a modestly common late summer to fall bird at Caltech but the sightings frequency declined steadily through the late eighties and early nineties and they are absent in the bird lists after 2002. Killdeer are regionally common birds but they have become a very rare capture for the bird walk, presumably reflecting changes in local agricultural practices. The killdeer was also a life bird for Vicky. Beginning the year with a decadal sighting and a life bird for Vicky has to be auspicious.

It's hard to compete with a decadal bird for highlights but there are some additional moments worthy of mention. REOMY (rump end of old maintenance yard) was quite productive. I don't know what dozens of screaming juveniles are going to do for the bird population (the Child Care Center won't be occupied until later this year) but, at least for now, it's a hot spot. We picked up cedar waxwings, a male Nuttall's woodpecker, a soaring red-tailed hawk (guess who picked that one up) and a Townsend's warbler in there. We later saw a female Nuttall's woodpecker next to one of the Wilson parking structures, so I'm hoping for romance and a bevy of Nuttall's sightings in the spring. I would also be remiss in not mentioning Vicky's orange-crowned warbler, seen foraging very discretely along the driveway outside Morrisroe. It was a curiously difficult capture.

The rule for species on the bird walk list is that we accept clearly identified birds seen on the way to the starting point of the walk from your office or home, provided that either you or the bird is on or over Caltech property. We also include birds that are seen on the way to a first stopping point after leaving the walk. This leads to the occasional bird being e-mailed in to Alan. Usually, I walk back to Arms (Geology) from the end-point for the walk and only rarely see something new but, this time, I accompany Alan back to Cahill and go through the building to Cahill's back patio, which has an access gate to the playing field. My intention is to get a better shot of the killdeer than was possible from the fence. So, technically, the baseball diamond was my first stopping point after the walk. As I start walking towards the field, I notice a Say's phoebe on the netting of the soccer goal. He is legal and not on the walk list, which gives us species number 27 for the day. The phoebe soon flies over to one of the bounding trees where I was able to get the enclosed shot.



The date: 1/2/2014
The week number: 1
The walk number: 1228
The weather: 79 F, sunny
The walkers: Alan Cummings, Chip O'Connor, Jane Williams, Jessica Williams, Roy Williams, John Beckett, Kent Potter, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan, Carole Worra

The birds (27):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 House Sparrow
- 2 Mourning Dove
- 4 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 3 Acorn Woodpecker
- 1 American Crow

3 Mallard
20 Yellow-rumped Warbler
3 Western Bluebird
1 European Starling
25 Bushtit
22 Lesser Goldfinch
1 Killdeer
2 Nuttall's Woodpecker
3 Band-tailed Pigeon
12 Cedar Waxwing
2 Townsend's Warbler
3 Black Phoebe
2 Red-tailed Hawk
2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
4 Red-crowned Parrot
2 Bewick's Wren
1 Orange-crowned Warbler
2 Common Raven
1 Say's Phoebe

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
1/30/14