

1/22/14

Let us quickly dispose of the mundane. Our string of records, which was begun last week, ends at one and we didn't even scratch our way to a positive score. We arrive at 18 species, eight shy of the record and one shy of the median (hence a negative score in the Alan metric). We did manage to ease by the record low of 12 and, as Kent put it, "We were embarrassed but not ashamed." For the next month, we will have some more opportunities to not be ashamed. Record highs run 26-28, medians 19-21, and lows 14-15. After that, the record highs start running in the thirties and the medians around 20.

See the plots at [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/species\\_time.html](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html) and

[http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/two\\_plots.htm](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm)



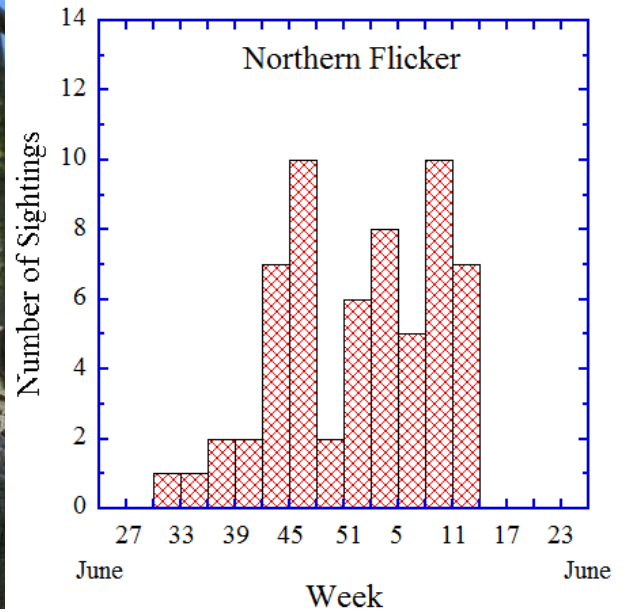
Last week, I forgot to bring a camera and, fortunately, Alec was there to provide some visual stimulation for the report. This week, Alec did not make it but, fortunately, I remembered to bring a camera. The first photo is of our mallards taken on my way to the starting point for the walk. The hen generally chooses where to go during the winter and the male or males follow. In this case, she decided to go over to the Millikan reflecting pool but, after

a few waddles across the coping, she changes her mind and heads back into the small pond. The dominant male with his scraggly breast is with her and the second male lurks in the background. I offer the photo, although I have discussed the mallards recently, because I happen to like the composition. There are just all sorts of asymmetries operating within this photo that, somehow, seem to balance out.

Sometimes absence is a highlight or lowlight. The Say's phoebe who has been living on the North Athletic field, appears to have moved on. Instead, we had an opportunistic black phoebe working the soccer goal, something the Say's of last week would not have tolerated. Generally, Say's phoebes are our first winter residents to leave in the spring (they are desert specialist and can move out as soon as it gets hot enough). This seems exceptionally early but it has been hot and dry lately and perhaps the Say's operates on a temperature - humidity compass rather than going by the amount of daylight.

Perhaps the most interesting bird that we logged on the walk was the one we didn't see. In REOMY (rump end of the old Maintenance yard), Kent finds an American robin that we were very happy to get but we also find a highly disturbed and therefore highly obvious ruby-crowned kinglet harassing,

cussing, and cursing a larger bird who is almost completely obscured. The target of the kinglet's ire does nothing and shows nothing lending itself to identification but he continues to take the verbal abuse for a



minute or so. Finally, he decides the neighborhood isn't worth the price of admission. It's very noisy and the potential neighbor he just met is beyond obnoxious. So, he flies off to the north, giving a trilling flight call as he goes and we have, at last, an easy id. The large bird is a northern flicker. He or she must have outweighed the kinglet by a factor of 20 or 30 (kinglets run about 6g) but it didn't matter. The kinglet obviously knows that being unpleasant can make the neighborhood more pleasant or, at least, a little less crowded. We never got a visual on the flicker or found out why the kinglet took such exception. Kinglets and flickers are not direct foraging competitors and, were I to peer directly into the mind of a kinglet, I would probably be consumed by a completely mystifying experience. There's no telling, so in the absence of anything definitive about sex, I toss in a flicker shot I took a couple months ago at the LA Arboretum as a stand in. The Arboretum bird was a male (note the red throat patch). At Caltech, northern flickers are effectively migration birds, although there's some flying uphill and downhill in the mid-winter, depending on weather and food. Our best chance for a flicker viewing is probably still to come as most of our early year sightings occur after week four.

I end with a couple of photos taken later in the walk. Since the hummingbird lady downgraded to one hummingbird feeder, we have been left in a more natural stasis for hummingbirds. This probably hasn't hurt us very much for Anna's hummingbirds, which are well distributed throughout campus but the Selasphorus is now a significantly harder capture than it used to be and I fear that this is going to be a weak year for black-chinned hummingbirds, if we aren't going to see some drunkards swilling sugar water on the feeders. The photo is of the male Anna's that owns the area just north of the Broad Center. He is a regular in this and some nearby trees and even has a favored set of twigs.

Below, the photo on the right shows a Townsend's warbler who was foraging near the Throop ponds. You will no doubt notice that the head is obscured by foliage. So, why am I sticking in such a "bad" photo? Because it is much better than you think. If we were to slice away the leaves hiding his face, you

would be spending all your time looking at the head and not the important stuff. If you only get to look at the body, you will start to notice other features that you might otherwise gloss over. For example, notice that the yellow feather base that covers the head, is truncated part way down the breast, giving way to a nice off-white. None of our other yellow-bottomed birds have this truncation. The two white bars on the wing are also fairly distinctive. Finally, notice the white under-tail, lined in gray. If this were a yellow-rumped warbler, of which there was an abundance in the immediate area, you would have seen some black running across the underside of the tail as shown in the photo below the Townsend's warbler. The latter is the picture of a Caltech bird taken last week though not on the walk. However, it makes the point for this week. You don't need a Townsend's head to know that it is a Townsend's. You need a moment.



The date: 1/22/2014  
The week number: 4  
The walk number: 1231  
The weather: 76 F, sunny  
The walkers: Alan Cummings, John Beckett,  
Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Yoshi Tuttle, Vicky  
Brennan, Kent Potter



The birds (18):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 3 Mourning Dove
- 15 House Finch
- 6 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 10 American Crow
- 2 Western Bluebird
- 3 Mallard
- 30 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 3 Black Phoebe
- 3 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 1 Northern Flicker

- 4 Townsend's Warbler
- 5 Lesser Goldfinch
- 2 Red-tailed Hawk
- 1 American Robin
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 1 Common Raven

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
2/4/14