

2/5/14

It's hard to argue against a thirty-bird day being anything less than spectacular. After all, we've only had a dozen in the history of the walk. This one admittedly felt more normal to me, a solid twenty something bird walk, but that is likely because Alec couldn't make it so I felt compelled to fire the camera off much more than I would normally. However, the tally can't be argued with. We slipped by the record of 28 that was set just last year, easily cleared the median of 21, and more than doubled up on the record low of 14. This is the second earliest thirty-bird walk of the calendar year (most thirty bird walks, including the two highest scores all time (37 and 35, both in 2011) were logged in the band defined by weeks nine to thirteen. We are apparently starting early this year but are hopefully not done with thirty bird walks.

In addition to a strong species count, we had four new first birds of the year: red-shouldered hawk, great egret, dark-eyed junco, and, surprising to me at least, a downy woodpecker. We have now officially encountered 43 different named species for the calendar year and we have broken our little week on week off record cycle. We have also tied or set a record in four of six weeks this year and, perhaps more importantly, tied or set a record, two weeks in a row. Thirty bird walk or not, we had a lot of highlights and a walk of panache.

I will begin in the middle or at least the middle of the beginning. We come to the south Athletic field and there are flecks of sunlight in the green, offered through the clouds of a few beats to an almost spring as they wheel, a caucus dozen, and flow their ragged crew to the south through a sealing pane of trees. We carry an infecting smile to the



numbers and the holding of a noisy name as we play the game (the photo is of a Sierra Madre bird but, I think, typical of the genre). Perhaps, we hold an understanding peel and perhaps we gourd into a sprigging sky whatever label satisfy. I think we know a little but not enough to defame or raise a hand in reverence. We have become the quest of middlers as we watch the parrots go, but a fading vocal afterglow breaks into a single bird flying back across the field to the park, as if sprung from a jetting flame. He is here to claim the odd laggard, I think, and he calls. No answer. He calls. There is no answer but a moment brings a second bird

flying out of the park. We see two birds flying off to join the flock, not clearly together. A juvenile, I think. "Did you not get the memo? Is the blossom so sweet that you forgot to fly in the face of commanding departure?" I file the thought away and we continue our walk into Tournament Park where we are accosted by a woman bursting with story; she has the other part, the one we missed. The flock had risen, as we thought, in a sudden scream of red-crowned parrots but one bird smashed into the fence that separates Tournament Park from the athletic field. He is stunned and drops to the ground where he stays for several moments. A call comes. It flows through the mind like a river and passes away. A call comes and a bird shakes. She says nothing but rises to love. We had seen a pair bonded red-crowned parrot who, having realized that his or her mate had not come with the flock, breaks away and returns to the park. Whether by encouragement or luck, the pair reunites and, hope beyond concussion or an early death, flies to the welcoming sway of life.



There was something mystical about the red-crowned parrots but the first headline of the day actually came earlier, in a tree at the back end of the Health Center. At Vicky's behest, I take more than one photo and I leave one here. We are being watched. We are too large for lunch but perhaps we will disturb some useful prey or become a danger ourselves. We need to be watched and it is soon clear that we are both too big and too interested. The hawk decides it is time to go. The neighborhood is getting too intrusive, so he flies over to the lamppost at the start of the walk and, as we come back around the tennis courts towards him, he takes off again

and flies down California Blvd to a perch in the big eucalyptus at the corner of Wilson. I think briefly of giving chase but instead move with the rest of the group over to the viewing station for the North Athletic field. Our bird is a red-shouldered hawk (note the spangles on the wing and extensive russet on the breast and "shoulders"). A self-respecting red-shouldered hawk should be starting to think about breeding territories this month and, if we are lucky, the thinking will bear a full voice, a courtship flight, and nesting site near campus. A couple of years ago, we had a pair of red-shouldered hawks raise three chicks to fledging. They were generally off campus but the nest was in a large tree southwest of the hummingbird lady's house that was an easy view from our walk. This led to a record number of red-shouldered hawk sightings (18 weeks) in 2011 as parents and/or chicks remained in an easy tangency to the campus over a period of some three months.



Rare for Caltech birds are the spice of a walk. They appear when they want to but you know that they will come. Every year has them. You have to be ready for one to pop out at any time but, sometimes, they will advertise. Earlier this week, a great egret came to check out the local ponds and Alan fires off a rare bird alert in response. Would he stay until Wednesday? I had my doubts. A couple of snowy egrets cleaned out the guppies a few weeks ago, so I figured the odd fish and crayfish wouldn't be enough to keep this bird through the week. Fortunately, I was too pessimistic. He was still here for the walk and we bagged the first great egret of the year, the

first great egret since 2010. Great egrets are obviously rare birds for us, perhaps rarer than you might expect given that they are relatively common in the Huntington Gardens. At Caltech, however, if you set aside the six sightings of 1999, we have never had more than three sightings within a calendar year and zero would probably have to be viewed as the typical total.

Cedar waxwings are one of my prime candidates for the prize of most elegant looking bird in California



(male northern pintails come to mind as possible competition but that's about it). We have occasionally been seeing them in REOMY and near the entrance to Tournament Park but, lately, the best viewing spot on campus for cedar waxwings has been near the Campus Programs Annex off Michigan Ave. A small flock or part of a flock likes to siesta there in the early afternoon [we usually claim half a dozen birds or so (eight this time) but I suspect we are undercounting in the interest of time or missing another tree with a few more].

Last year we had record smashing 13 dark eyed junco sightings because a breeding pair decided to raise a family in the foundation bushes outside Prufrock rather than flying off to Oregon for the summer. We certainly didn't get them every week but the crevices opened with enough regularity to confound any reasonable expectation we might have had for any other sparrow on campus other than a house sparrow. This particular individual was foraging in front of the Student Services Center on Holliston. He was a bird of the shadows (hence the rather ratty photo) but he was a first of the year bird for us and, therefore, he was worth absorbing a little frustration. Certainly, the key identifying bib and pink bill are in full evidence. I am hoping he plans to provide us with some more sightings over the next few weeks and, perhaps, in a little bit of sun, he will offer a great pose in good lighting (or we could just turn Alec loose on him).



The date: 2/5/2014
The week number: 6
The walk number: 1233
The weather: 60 F, partly cloudy
The walkers: Alan Cummings, John Beckett, Deborah Vane, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter, Yoshi Tuttle

The birds (30):

- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Sparrow
- 18 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird

5 Acorn Woodpecker
18 American Crow
3 Mallard
1 Great Egret
2 Red-whiskered Bulbul
3 Bewick's Wren
1 Red-shouldered Hawk
1 Turkey Vulture
1 Say's Phoebe
40 Yellow-rumped Warbler
3 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
15 Red-crowned Parrot
10 Lesser Goldfinch
5 Townsend's Warbler
1 Downy Woodpecker
2 Common Raven
3 Black Phoebe
8 Cedar Waxwing
1 Gull, species
1 Red-tailed Hawk
1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
1 California Towhee
5 Bushtit
1 Dark-eyed Junco
1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
1 Band-tailed Pigeon

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
2/10/14