

2/12/14

Another day, another record. We had 29 different species for the day, just missing out on a second thirty bird week in a row. The old record for week 7 was 26, set in 1990, and this was the second longest standing record we had. The oldest, in case you are interested, is a 17 species walk on week 31 of 1988 (tied but not surpassed in 2012). We now have three records (or ties) in a row, so we seem to have a new paradigm. To extend this sequence into next week, we would need 28 or more, a record that has been met four times (1990, 2007, 2011, 2012).

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)



The first highlight of the walk came as we walked down California towards Arden and precipitated in a yell, "Gulls!!!" Viveca had spotted a flock rising up a thermal in front of us. They soon pop out the top and head west and rapidly disappearing from view before I manage to escape a near-complete discombobulation and fire up the camera. There were a dozen birds. The photo shows half of them. So, what are they? Can we go beyond gull, species? I'm not a gull person but I will lead you

to my best guess and then leave you to your own opinion. The photo is not capable of offering eye, leg, bill or back colorations, which is what you would normally look for in a close-up, even a close-up in flight, so we are left with the undercarriage. A first feature I would like to point out is that the lowest and the three highest birds have white tails and the other two have black/dark tails from below. Different species? Probably not. Gulls take three or four years to mature with major plumage differences for each year, so these are likely young versions of the same species. The grayish bird is probably a first winter gull and the one behind it, a second year bird (a third year bird would have much less black in the tail). So, let's take a look at what the adults can offer us and not worry about the juveniles. We have white bodies and wings with black near the end that cede to prominent white tips. There is also a subtle gray strip along the outer edge (inner primaries) of the wings extending from the black towards the body of the bird. The fact that the camera was picking this up even at a great distance, suggests that the contrast is real. The two major contenders are ring-billed gulls and California gulls. California gulls have stronger contrasting inner primaries and tend to have broader swatches of dark feathers and more prominent white tips (generated by "mirrors" or white spots at or near the ends of feathers on the wings). Also notice that the trailing edge of the wings meets the body forward of the rump, giving the birds a thin-wing look. This is also consistent with a California gull. So, my more likely

than not best guess is California gull but I could easily be getting fooled. I don't have sufficient familiarity with my camera to have confidence in how it degrades images and I don't spend a lot of time working on gulls in flight for identification, particularly at extreme distances. You may well have a different opinion based on what the image offers. Don't be shy. We are all here to learn.



Another early highlight of the walk was visualized in a vocalization. Yoshi and I were at Arden, lagging behind the rest of the group, when we heard the trill of a northern flicker. We gave a minute or so to an attempt to build a visual context but the bird stayed silent after that initial outburst and we were unable to find it. I suppose it may have been looking at or at least listening to us but we were not knowingly looking at it. So, the sex is indeterminate. Since I recently showed an example of a male northern flicker following another vocalization-only capture, I show a recent photo of a female northern flicker taken in Sierra Madre. If this were an adult male, you would be seeing a bright red cheek patch.

Aside from being beautiful birds, northern flickers are a keystone species because they are the dominant primary hole nesters (i.e., they excavate their own nesting holes) over significant portions of their breeding range, which covers much of the U.S., Canada, Mexico and bits of Central America. Without the flickers you would have a local domino loss of numerous secondary hole nesters including chickadees, starlings, kestrels, parrots, parakeets, wrens, bluebirds, and swallows, among others.



Red-tailed hawks have two basic foraging modes. The most obvious is soaring and gliding off a thermal and looking for prey from whatever view the day may offer. The second and preferred operational motif (by two to one or better in terms of time allotted) is to scan from a perch. We were exposed to both modalities on this walk. We picked up a red-tailed hawk soaring early in the walk and, near the end of the walk, we saw another

perched on the top of a pine off Holliston. This may well have been the same bird (same end of campus and within very easy flying distance), so we decided to leave the count at one. The Holliston red-tail was clearly perch hunting as he turned his head about ninety degrees every thirty seconds or so, giving himself a good opportunity to pick up the motion of any small rodents. Red-tailed hawks do eat some birds but the way to a red-tailed hawk's stomach is usually covered in fur. They are also not especially maneuverable in the air much less on the ground, so they are also predominately ambush hunters. If the target sees a red-tailed hawk before the talons can strike, it will probably survive the encounter. So, live squirrels, and rats beware! Generally, red-tails like live prey but they will consort with road kill provided the scavenging job involves the recently deceased but a, shall we say, ripe body is the purview of turkey vultures. Returning to our bird, I think that there is more here than just a statement of perch. If you take a close look at the photo, you will notice that the eyes are yellow. Even though you can't see the tail, the yellow eyes are telling us that this is a young bird and that, therefore, the tail is not yet red. An adult would have had reddish eyes and you would have had the sense that they were sinking into the head for a pose of this form.



I can't say that the ruby-crowned kinglets represented a highlight beyond their being very welcome but I ended up with a photo that at least shows some of the dynamism of this species, so I am going to toss it in as leavening. We usually label kinglets through overall coloring, prominent eye-ring, incessant wing flicking and movement (I usually end up with fuzzy birds or nice sharp leaf pictures), and a dark band under the lower bar on the wing.

The date: 2/12/2014

The week number: 7

The walk number: 1234

The weather: 80 F, partly cloudy

The walkers: Alan Cummings, John Beckett, Yoshi Tuttle, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan, Kent Potter

The birds (29):

- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 15 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 7 American Crow
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 22 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 12 Gull, species

- 3 Black Phoebe
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 1 Thrush, species
- 1 European Starling
- 3 Common Raven
- 4 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 4 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 1 Northern Flicker
- 3 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 House Wren
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Red-naped Sapsucker
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 1 Spotted Towhee
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 4 Bushtit
- 1 White-throated Swift
- 1 California Towhee
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
2/18/14