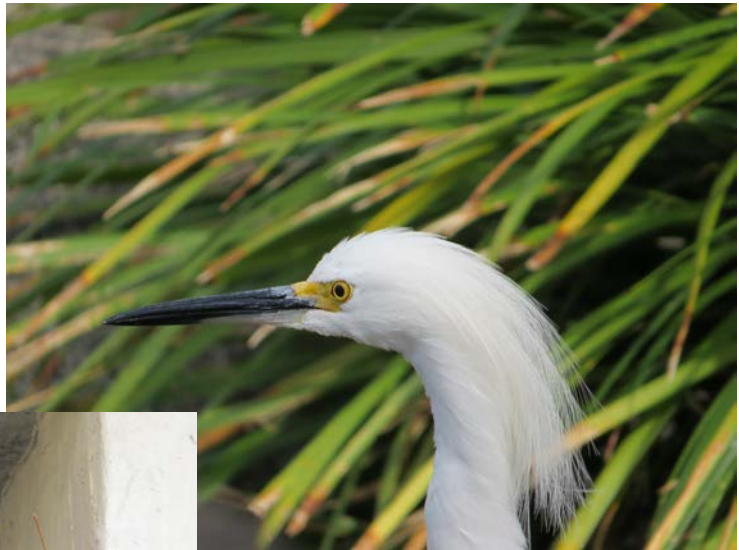


3/19/14:

Pleasant spring days carry their own value, which is a good thing for us, because we were held to the rather mediocre species count of 22. The record high for week 12 is 31 set in 2011 and, lest you think this is some wild anomaly, the second best species score was 28 (set in week 12 of 2010). We seem to have packed a lot of species into the last few years but the record low of 12 was also a fairly recent effort (2008). So, we absorbed the up-side of volatility and had a positive scoring walk. The median is 20 and we were well separated from the record low.

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

Our walk brought no new species for the year, so I thought it appropriate to harbor a discussion from the perspective of the future and the past. They slide time in tangent turns, sometimes acknowledging the same driving forces even as the actions are seemingly independent. We did not see a snowy egret on the walk but, since we are approaching the end of our snowy season, I enclose a shot from the



uppermost Throop pond taken yesterday. Note that our bird is in breeding plumage with the signature plumes that proved so irresistible to fashionable late-Victorian ladies, so much so that, in 1900, the total population of snowy egrets in the state of California was thought to be zero. We had killed them all off. Fortunately, we never managed to completely destroy the South American population and, once the mainstream feather fashion industry collapsed, snowies started moving back up

the coast. Snowy egrets are predominately winter into spring birds for us (i.e., we are most likely to encounter them during the nonbreeding season). They appear (with rare earlier exceptions) starting in week 50 and sightings drop off sharply after week 13. Some juveniles don't migrate in their first year but breeding adults generally move north (Oregon and northern California) or south of us in March and April. So, the pictured bird is about to leave and may even be a migrating bird looking for a quick lunch. The flip side of this dichotomy both in color and time is brought by birds that choose to breed at or near Caltech. In mid-March, the local ravens come to Parson-Gates to build nests in the faux window boxes that line the upper portion of the east and north sides of the building. The administration, which is to

pith it kindly, oft-times myopic when it comes to nature, either does not understand how valuable this nesting habitat is to the local raven population or does not care. So, each spring, there is a battle between the ravens of Parson-Gates and the maintenance of Parsons-Gates. Maintenance installs spikes. The ravens cover the sharp barbs with twigs (see photo). Maintenance brings over the Caltech scissor lift and pulls out the twigs. The ravens redouble their efforts. They build nests in advance of need, so they are vulnerable to a coordinated attack but twigs that are gone today can be replaced tomorrow. Eventually a raven will lay eggs and then Maintenance has orders to stand down. It is a running battle but, in spite of Caltech's best efforts, I am expecting babies.

The photo collage below shows Caltech birds, except that the black phoebe (lower left) is a ringer from Sierra Madre taken over the weekend. I include it because I couldn't resist the impulse. Usually, black phoebes are taking small insects like midges, making a bird with prey photo a relatively non-photogenic affair. This guy had a bee. He wacked it against the wire a couple of times and, before I could zoom in to snap another photo, it was gone. The Cooper's hawk (upper left) is an Arden bird. There is what appears to be a nest in the tree this bird is perching in. We have yet to see a hawk fly into it but, perhaps, we are being outmaneuvered. We are currently in the middle of the primary peak in Cooper's sightings for the walk. In the "old" days, we could expect sightings to drop off sharply in the spring as the hawks migrated north. However, there is now a viable stock of birds for the eating throughout the



year, fueled by our gardens and parks (unlike red-tailed hawks who eat primarily rodents, Cooper's hawks like to have feathers on their food, although they eat rodents, too). So, many Cooper's hawks in southern California no longer migrate and we can have sightings throughout the year, although the rate does decline fairly steadily until about week 40. The yellow-rumped warbler (upper right) is from Tournament Park. This is an unusually dark bird that I tend to associate with migration through Caltech rather than winter residence at Caltech. He is telling us that the spring migration is beginning. The hordes of yellow-rumped warblers, now scattered around campus, will be an echoing memory in another month and we will be left to chase after straggling migrants, who will look a lot like this bird. The last of the photos (lower left) is a northern mockingbird I encountered near Braun after the walk (I needed to go to Beckman to pick up an order). Mockingbirds are a resident species for us. They are a very easy capture during the breeding season as males defend territory and woo potential and actual mates with song but we can encounter them at any time of the year with a frequency of sightings that becomes gradually lower in the summer as vocalization declines. We generally end up with about 40 mockingbird sightings (and/or hearings) a year.

The date: 3/19/2014

The week number: 12

The walk number: 1239

The weather: 76 F, sunny

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

The birds (22):

- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 Mourning Dove
- 14 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 3 Acorn Woodpecker
- 3 American Crow
- 27 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 1 White-throated Swift
- 1 Turkey Vulture
- 5 Bushtit
- 1 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Spotted Towhee
- 2 Black Phoebe
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 3 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 1 Dark-eyed Junco
- 3 Common Raven
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 8 Cedar Waxwing
- 2 Common Yellowthroat

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
7/2/14