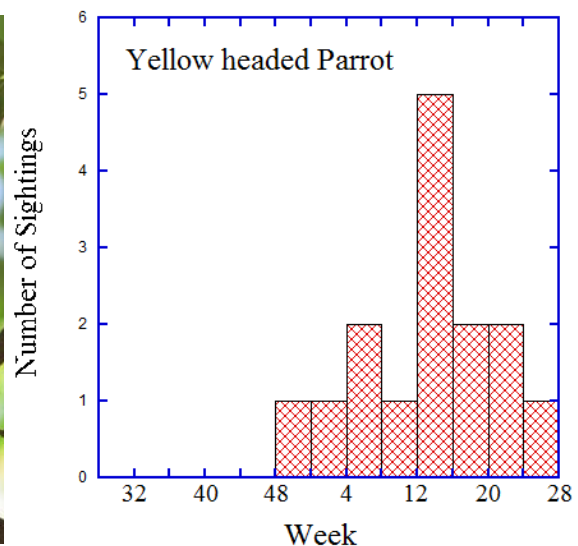


4/9/14

The winds of almost and nowhere near have been sweeping through our walks of late. Today, we had an excellent walk with 28 species, just missing a tie with the record high for week 15 of 29 set in 2006. Still, it molds with the tone. We dashed off six new species count records in the first nine weeks of the year and have nary a one to show for our wanderings since. Nevertheless, we were well ahead of the median (18) and doubling up on a record low (14) is usually a hint of a birdy walk. For those not overly concerned with the numerical visage, we can report on encounters with two new species for the year, a yellow-headed parrot and Wilson's warbler, both at the south end of Tournament Park.

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

We are pretty much in yellow-headed parrot central for timing. We've seen them as late as week 25 but a third of our sightings (5 out of 15) are in weeks 15 or 17. As far as we could tell there was only one individual and this is an adult (note the red eyes and full head of yellow feathers - juveniles will have less yellow on the head (basically a crown only), pale yellow tinges to the wing coverts (although I have to admit that I couldn't see this in a juvenile I saw a couple of years ago - maybe it was a lighting problem), and dark brown eyes (I did see those). Since the odds are probably against our seeing another yellow-headed parrot this year, I also add a shot to the end of the report that I took a couple of weeks ago of a bird that was frequenting the north end of campus early in the morning (i.e., gone by the time the bird walk passed by the area). That bird was probably roosting with or near the twenty or so red-crowned parrots that seemed to appear around the same time. Why our Tournament Park bird happened to be available for a showing today is less clear. Perhaps he is scouting for suitable nesting holes in advance of the breeding season. Yellow-headed parrots can breed at any time of the year but breeding for most of the southern Californians is a summer affair.



Yellow-headed parrots are in deep and double trouble. In their native Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras (our guy probably has a Mexican heritage, if not origin), the populations have dropped by ~90% since the 1970s due largely but not entirely to pet trade deprecations, mostly in the form of nest poaching (habitat loss is important too). The great maw of naive avian pet lovers draws the young prematurely from their nesting holes. So, we look north for inspiration and find none. In southern

California, yellow-headed parrots are in decline. Although they are breeding in the area, they have not, thus far, managed to stabilize the population and that's a recipe for long-term extirpation. Without the replenishing flux of parrots smuggled out of Mexico and points south, the number of escapees and freed birds will decline with time, efforts of domestic breeders notwithstanding. Yellow-headed parrots are not for the faint of heart bird owner; they are smart and among the best wordsmiths of the parrot world, which makes them conceptually attractive pets, but they are also loud, feisty, moody, and not afraid to slash open an offending finger.

The other obvious highlight was a male Wilson's warbler foraging along the fence at the southern end of Tournament Park, our first of the season. He provided several minutes of chase until being booted out of the area by a yellow-rumped warbler. I did get a photo but, rather than show that one simply because he was the first of the season for us, I think I will see if I can get something better later this year. Wilson's warblers are strictly migration birds for us. This is a relatively early sighting, although we have encountered them as early as week 13 (there was also a week 6 sighting in 2008, but I'm not entirely sure I believe in it). Our Wilson's warblers mostly winter in Mexico, although a few find themselves just north of the border. They breed from portions of the central Californian coast north to southern Alaska and they pass by, over, and around us both coming and going. Our most common sightings of Wilson's warblers are in the jacarandas over the Millikan ponds but we do get occasional sightings in Tournament Park, as today's experience demonstrates.



He was not a new species for the year but he was certainly a highlight. This bird was caught singing from a fencepost near Morrisroe. Western bluebirds take their singing very seriously and there is, in general, only one reason for a western bluebird to sing. A male will sing to advertize his ownership of a prime nesting hole. The north Athletic field and environs are certainly capable of supporting an enterprising family of western bluebirds but the

campus lacks a decent collection of suitable nesting holes. However, there is apparently at least one viable nesting hole somewhere near Morrisroe. If the quality of this bird's singing and plumage are any indication of the quality of his proposed nesting hole, I think we will be seeing some juveniles in July and August.

Finally, I show a photo of an American crow, not because of anything special about the bird. I just like the composition. This crow was sighted near the entrance of REOMY (rump end of the old Maintenance Yard). If you set aside the recent corvid scourge brought by the West Nile virus, crows have been big winners of human slob syndrome and a contributing factor to the decline of other birds in urban areas (they like eggs and chicks). I expect that their exalted status is likely to continue as long as we do.



The date: 4/9/2014
The week number: 15
The walk number: 1242
The weather: 86 F, partly cloudy

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

The birds (28):

- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 4 House Sparrow
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 12 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 4 Acorn Woodpecker
- 6 American Crow
- 1 White-throated Swift
- 12 Lesser Goldfinch
- 13 Bushtit
- 3 Black Phoebe
- 3 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 3 European Starling
- 2 Killdeer
- 4 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 2 Mallard
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 1 Yellow-headed Parrot
- 1 Wilson's Warbler
- 2 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 3 Dark-eyed Junco
- 20 Cedar Waxwing
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 1 Western Bluebird
- 4 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 1 House Wren
- 1 Common Raven

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
8/21/14