

4/23/14

In week 33, we look for double digits. In late April, there is the seemingly eternal quest for 30. We almost grazed the sky in 2010 and 2011 with 29 but this year we could barely see the horizon with 21 species. We were still above the median of 18 and the record low of 12. Ashish was with us. Ashish has a knack for choosing interesting walks, so I get an anticipatory thrill when I see him. There were several highlights but I will mention the last one first and let you wait for the others. Two Canada geese lounging around the Millikan reflecting pool were our first geese of the year but, hopefully, not the last.

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)



Babies have big heads and bounce. With juvenile birds, it's stubby wings and the odd frilly suits but they still can fly, sort of. Yoshi encountered this juvenile California towhee in Avery garden along with two adults. This bird was unafraid of the paparazzi and it was the only juvenile we saw. Cal towhees generally have a clutch of several eggs and most usually make it to fledging. There was probably another, more retiring, sibling or two lurking

somewhere in the garden. In the photo, you can see the classic apricot undertail coverts (or panties) on our bird and a subtle orange eye ring, features that he will also have as adult if he makes it. You can also see the glimmering of a cheek patch but the wings are stubby and there is, overall, a rather lightly colored disheveled and speckled look. Our bird already knows lunch when he sees it, particularly if it's something a parent brings over, but he hasn't quite figured out how to see it for himself.

The north end of Tournament Park is a busy place in the spring. It has an immediate focus just west of the entrance where there is a high quality hole in a low-lying branch on a gum. Every spring, a male house wren invariably takes possession and advertizes in a lyrical song that bathes under, over, and around the hole. He is also loud. Even I can often hear him before entering the Park. Those with real hearing can sometimes hear him from the track. Our male will find the hole, add a few twigs for aesthetic titillation and to build a foundation for a nest. Soon a female comes over to investigate for quality. If she likes what she sees, she will take over construction of the nest, line the nest hole with soft materials like grass, and lay several eggs.



Our house wren was singing last week, too, so I would hazard a guess that there are already eggs and that, sometime next month, we will have bedlam. One of the beauties of house wrens is that the males sing long after they have successfully woo'd a female. We will have to wait for a juvenile but this hole has produced one or two broods of house wrens a year for the last several years. We

will have joy in the house.

The Tournament Park house wren levitates the low level entertainment, usually below four meters or so from the ground. The high canopy is the purview of other species and, in April and May, that means



flycatchers. The bird shown in the photo is the best I could manage of a small flitting body and a tendency to be on the wrong side of the foliage. Where is Alec and his gun when you need him? The bird wasn't talking, so identification was a visual matter and that's a difficult arena. The logical candidates are Pacific slope and Hammond's flycatchers. The lean is to Hammond's, from my perspective, because of the wing extension but we had

to leave it at flycatcher species. I am confident that his or her soon to be mate will have no uncertainty about the correct species.

The dark-eyed juncos were very active on the walk. We saw eight of them, which is probably a record for us. They were all actively foraging, two on Arden, four on Wilson, and two on Holliston. The activity



is consistent with active nests full of hungry chicks. The pictured bird was on Holliston sporting a beak full of what I think are Harvester ants, small beetles and, perhaps a spider. It was like seeing a Bosch view of insect hell, the bodies a nightmare lamentation of death and life. You may have a visceral response

to sparrows as seed eaters but dark-eyed juncos play well to local resources and they do take spiders and a variety of insects, including ants. It's a quarter of their diet, which means they have a higher protein consumption rate on average than our local black bears. The acidity of an ant argues against a steady diet if you aren't a flicker but the chicks are always hungry and they need protein.



Continuing along a theme of young birds, I offer the common raven. Each spring, one or two pairs of ravens build nests in the sealed off window boxes under the eaves of Parsons-Gates. They are the closest Caltech comes to the large cliff holes that the country cousins of our birds use for nests. So, each spring,

Maintenance cleans out barrels of rejected twigs and branches strewn about the ground along the north and east perimeters of the building and, after fledging, Maintenance fires up its lift and cleans out the nests. If you have an anti-nature regime in power, you put in spikes. The ravens drape sticks on the spikes. Maintenance wipes out the nests. The ravens rebuild. Fortunately, the rule is that once there are eggs, Maintenance has to stop trying to stop the ravens. Finally, there are eggs and everybody rests, incubates, or forages. There were no ravens in residence on the nest when we went by but I took this photo on Friday and you can see that there are three chicks (one behind the adult).

Finally, I feel compelled to add a few words about our last visitors, mostly because I like the photo. This bird is taking a snooze on the sill above the Millikan reflecting pond, which is itself reflected in the window (the darker shading comes from the walkway over the pool). Geese are hard to miss. There were no geese here when some of us passed by on the way to the starting point for the walk, so this bird and its companion (who was on the coping) flew in during lunch.



The date: 4/23/2014  
 The week number: 17  
 The walk number: 1244  
 The weather: 68 F, partly cloudy  
 The walkers: Alan Cummings, Kent Potter, John Beckett, Yoshi Tuttle, Vicky Brennan, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Ashish Maharbal

The birds (21):

2 Northern Mockingbird  
 6 House Finch  
 3 Anna's Hummingbird

- 5 American Crow
- 2 Common Raven
- 3 European Starling
- 4 White-throated Swift
- 1 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 5 Lesser Goldfinch
- 12 Bushtit
- 8 Dark-eyed Junco
- 4 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 3 Black Phoebe
- 2 Western Bluebird
- 1 Spotted Towhee
- 2 House Wren

- 1 Flycatcher, Species
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 3 California Towhee
- 1 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 2 Canada Goose

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
9/3/14