

4/30/14

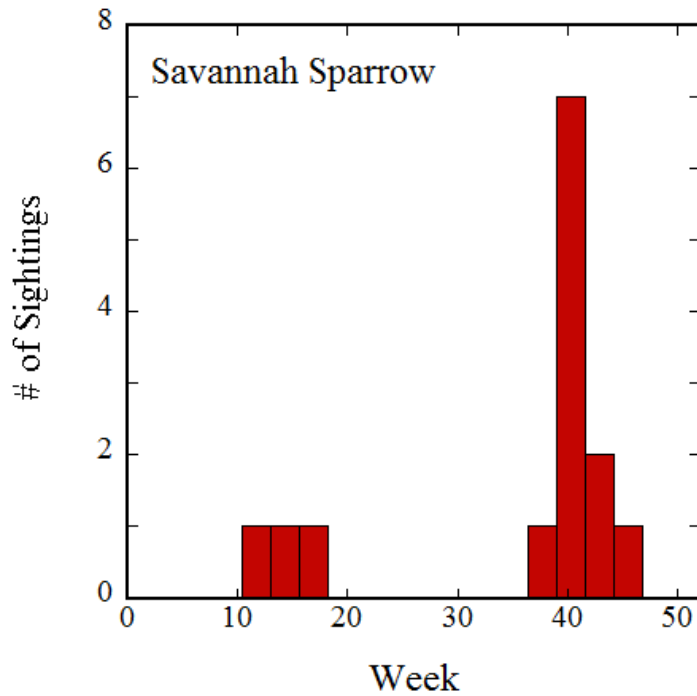
This was a week of highlights, both large and diminutive. The Savannah sparrow was our first sighting in more than a decade, last seen in week 39 of 2003. The American robin was not a first of the decade or year bird for us (it was the fourth sighting of the year, the other three coming in January) but, although robins deign to grace our winters, particularly in January, a nearly May bird is rare for us. You can see robins in our general area, even in summer, but we obviously don't have what it takes to provide a decent breeding territory for a robin. On the large size, the pair of Canada geese we saw last week was back for an encore and we can hope they find the Millikan reflecting pool to be attractive for a few more weeks. I show photos of the robin and the geese at the end of the report.

All of this unusual activity interspersed with the odd "common" bird summed to a record high. We tied the previous species count record of 25 for week 18, set in 2012. Naturally, we surpassed the median of 18 and almost doubled up on the record low of 13.

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



Sometimes a highlight is a decided abstraction but it can also be a clarion's call in dissonance. This week, we find a sparrow on the fencing for the North Athletic field. He poses long enough for everybody to get a good look but not so long that I can get a better shot than the one I give on the left. At least you can see some yellow on the head. The yellow supercilium is definitive for a Savannah sparrow but the juveniles don't show it (i.e., presence proves but absence doesn't). In this case, presence proves. You can see the yellow streak over the eye that says adult Savannah sparrow but one could have hoped for a better view of the breast. The photo on the right is taken from a Bolsa Chica trip. These guys are the dominant sparrow in the rocks near the water at Bolsa Chica and quite reliable (song sparrows are almost always further away from the water). The feature I wanted to point out in this photo is that the streaks on the breast don't come to a bundle like they do on a song sparrow. Naturally, knotting does occur in some Savannahs, so this field mark is another example of a consistency exercise.



Savannahs are partially migratory and those are the only birds of this species that we are likely to see on campus. There's a weak spring pulse that we are sampling here and a much stronger fall pulse. It looks systematic and you might expect to see one once every small number of years but we haven't seen a Savannah sparrow of any description since the fall of 2003. So, something has changed. Perhaps, an old flyway was blocked or a new one has opened up. Based on old patterns, we have a decent shot at another sighting over the next week or two as most of our previous sightings occupy clusters. Perhaps, this reflects sensitization. Once you see one Savannah sparrow, you are certainly attuned to finding another the following week. Perhaps, in those years that Savannah sparrows choose to cross

our campus, a lot of them do over the course of two or three weeks. Hopefully, we have a new paradigm and, if so, we should be extra vigilant around week 40. That's a long time frame to wait out the breeding season but we don't get to see a lot of Savannah sparrows on the walk, so we shouldn't ignore any potential opportunity unless we want to take an extended field trip in the context of the walk.



In other news, the Parsons-Gates ravens continue to grow and they are now large enough to see in the nest, even if an adult is not present. I show a poor lighting photo of the more sessile pair of the day's four common ravens (there are actually three in the nest but we didn't see the third). For now, we have a captive audience but they will be fledging in two or three weeks. The newly fledged birds tend to hang around the general area of the old nesting site for another week or so with localized

on-the-job training for another week or two. After that, the ravens will start to become much less common captures.



The Pacific-slope flycatcher was our second sighting of the year but a capture of perhaps greater significance for the general ambiance of the walk lies in the western bluebirds. I show a photo of one of them, a female, to the left. Given that the other bluebird in this tree was a male, it seems likely that we have a breeding pair with a territory that includes the North Athletic field and this carries the enervating possibility of fairly consistent bluebird sightings into the fall. The parents will forage, often in the open, for themselves and their chicks and, after they

fledge, there is a good chance that the juveniles will stay in their natal territory into the fall. It's like seeing Pacific waters warming to El Nino. This could be the harbinger of a fantastic bluebird year. To give you a sense of scale, we already have seven bluebird weeks, which puts 2014 into a tie for fifth most bluebird sightings in a calendar year. That doesn't sound too impressive until you consider that the second most bluebird sightings in a single year is only eleven (2010). I'm fairly confident that we will at least do as well as we did in 2010. The greatest Caltech bluebird year on record was 1997 with 26 weeks of bluebird sightings and, I suspect, the same type of driver, a breeding pair making a living on campus. Bluebirds are hole nesters and this means that our male found a hole, defended it against wrens, starlings, and other bluebirds, advertised his coup and prestige, attracted a female and convinced her of the quality of his hole and himself. I think we should be helping. Having hole nesters on campus during the breeding season is a "simple" matter of having suitable holes; a handful of box nests scattered around campus would be a major attractor.

The date: 4/30/2014

The week number: 18

The walk number: 1245

The weather: 85 F, partly cloudy

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

The birds (25):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Sparrow
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 4 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 3 Acorn Woodpecker
- 4 American Crow
- 4 European Starling

- 1 American Robin
- 3 Black Phoebe
- 1 Mallard
- 2 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 3 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Spotted Towhee
- 2 Western Bluebird
- 1 Savannah Sparrow
- 1 Pacific-slope Flycatcher
- 2 Canada Goose
- 2 House Wren
- 5 Bushtit
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 2 White-throated Swift
- 1 California Towhee
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 4 Common Raven



--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
9/15/14

