

5/28/14

This was one of those occasional walks that seems to have a good vibe belying the lack of numbers. We acquired 19 species, which is good but not stellar for a week 22 walk but we were lucky to get to 19. The flycatcher is a rare capture for us (14 sightings in 28 years) and the white throated swift was a last second bird that Viveca spotted on the way back to her office from the walk. The median is admittedly lower at 15, even absent our last two birds and we certainly did better than the record low of 9 but the record high, set in 2010, was far away and we didn't make 20, which is by definition respectable.

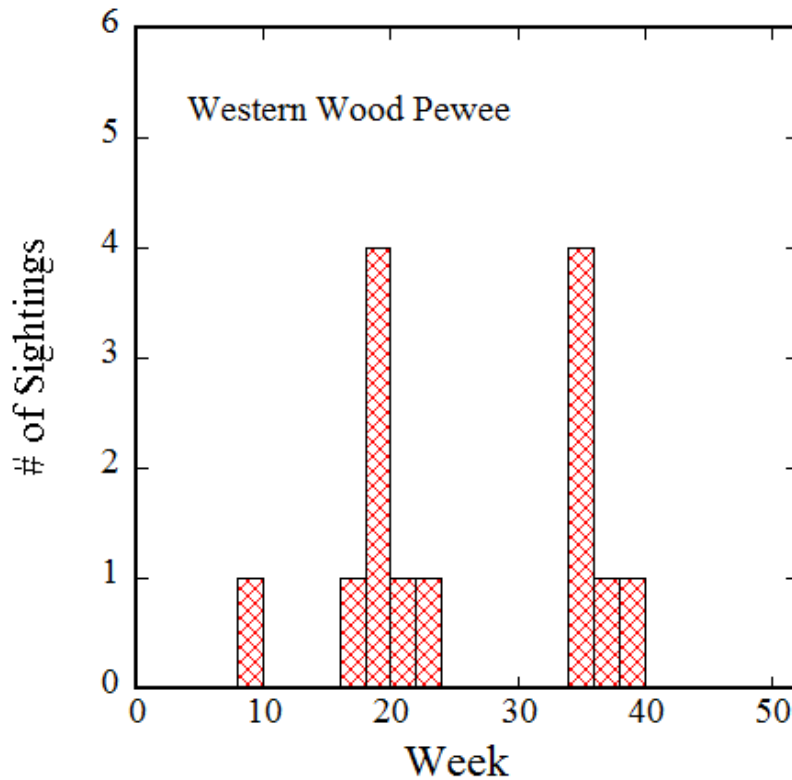
See the plots at [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/species\\_time.html](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html) and [http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird\\_data/two\\_plots.htm](http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm)

So, what made it a pleasant walk? I really can't say. The weather was nice and the walkers pleasant. We certainly had a highlight but most weeks have one or more. It's a mystery.

The obvious highlight was a flycatcher we saw near the Red Door. He was high up on a bare branch of a eucalyptus on the other side of the building. The best we could do from our initial distance was flycatcher species. He is very high up but it seems like we ought to be able to do better. So we wander off the normally designated walk route (we are allowed to chase a bird off route), move over to the construction fencing around Thomas, which is being gutted, and plaster ourselves up against it. We are now practically under the bird and dodging Chesire cats in the smiling construction workers. We must have fit their preconceived notions of what a Techer is likely to do. The best we could do left us with a tough angle and there aren't many lines of sight but we convince ourselves that we have a western wood pewee. This would be the second western wood pewee of the year for us but, unlike the previous bird, I manage to acquire a few shots of this one. When I pull the photos up at home, however, I am suddenly seeing an orange bill. "Oh, that's just terrific," I think. "It's a greater pewee and we're all



doomed! Nobody is going to believe us, even with a photo." Here's the problem. Greater pewees and their bicolored orange-black bills don't really belong here. They breed in eastern Arizona and western New Mexico and winter in Mexico and Central America. Now, they are admittedly very rare winter visitors in southern California (some of them apparently get confused and fly west, not south) but a sighting would be seriously strange. Fortunately, common sense prevails when I look at one of the long distance photos. This shows a nicely rounded head (a greater pewee would have been crested, or at least on the pointy side) and a thin dark bill. That orange bill reflects a similar phenomenon interacting with what I suspect was a dark-eyed junco a



while back; in which a bright light penetrating through a bill viewed from almost directly underneath changed the natural coloring scheme and left us totally confused about species.

We average a western wood pewee every other year (14 sightings in 28 years) and have never seen more than two in a single calendar year (1999, 2011, and 2014). So you have to count your blessings, as my mother would say, and revel in your pewees when you can. Western wood-pewees are almost invariably migration birds on campus with most sightings in spring (weeks 17-21) and fall (weeks 34-38).



I enclose a western scrub jay photo because it is one of the scruffiest examples I've encountered. Usually a scrub jay looks pretty well put together, even elegant, but this bird goes well beyond a bad feather day. This is at the early end of molting for scrub jays (it's mostly a summer phenomenon) but most likely that's what's occurring. Maybe he will bring his scruffiness back next week so we can count him again.

The date: 5/28/2014

The week number: 22

The walk number: 1249

The weather: 77 F, sunny

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

The birds (19):

- 1 Western Scrub Jay
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 Mourning Dove
- 4 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 2 Acorn Woodpecker
- 4 American Crow
- 52 Bushtit
- 3 Black Phoebe
- 1 Common Yellowthroat
- 3 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 3 Dark-eyed Junco
- 3 Common Raven
- 10 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 1 Western Wood Pewee
- 1 White-throated Swift

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,  
Alan Cummings,  
10/1/14