

6/4/14

We failed to master the twenty that divides an easy statement of spring success and an abysmal failure but this walk was not without amenities and it started producing them from before the beginning. I generally check the Throop ponds for mallards on the way to the starting point for the walk, although ducks are a very tough capture in June because they head off for large bodies of water to hide in, while they undergo an annual molt that makes them essentially flightless. I'm not sure what I am hoping for as the ponds and canopy tends to be weakly attended in the summer, unless you can count turtles. Well, I see no ducks but I am nevertheless fortunate. As I scan the canopy in vain, a Cooper's hawk sails overhead, heading towards Parsons-Gates. This draws me down to where Kent is approaching the ponds and I reach him just as the Cooper's decides to fly over us heading in the opposite direction towards Arden. He was apparently having as little luck with the Throop canopy as I had. Viveca also got a look at this bird but none of us saw it come to a perch. It was the beginning of a fine walk. The 19 species was well below the best of the week at 27, set in 2012, but that walk was quite anomalous. The median for week 23 is only 14 and the record low is 11. It was a fine walk based on the numbers, when posed properly for a week 23, and an excellent walk based on the non-numbers.

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



I am inclined to begin with the end. This is usually not a crescendo but more the slow oozing of joints up the path. This time, I lag the main group as we approach the Throop ponds and, by the time I catch up, Yoshi and Alan are sitting on the bench near the middle pond. I take nothing in Yoshi looking perky as Yoshi always looks perky but Alan is a serious oddity. He looks like a well-fed cat sprawled out on a favored warm lap. As I come up, he says, "There's a red-shouldered hawk in the tree" and so there was. Normally, if you look directly at a perched red-shouldered hawk, he will get nervous and fly away. This guy apparently realizes that the Throop pond comes with a lot of people. He turns at the sound of my clicking camera and gives us a good stare. Are we evil? I thought this a prelude to departure but he turns away, satisfied that our threat potential doesn't reach too high and turns back to a calm survey of the slope for careless squirrels and small birds. He sees none and, finally, after another couple of minutes, he caps the walk by flying off towards Arden.

One highlight of the walk was something most of didn't see. At Avery gardens, we usually split into two groups, one taking a northerly route near the road, which is lined with small oaks and bushes. The job of the southerly group is to check the bushes near the driveway and to identify anything the northerly group happens to flush that heads south. This time, Kent is the northern legion and he flushes a couple of birds, probably, he thinks, towhees. They head south where the southern group will capture them, except that they don't. We have prematurely moved on, leaving Kent to track them down himself. It's two Cal towhees for the list.



The western bluebirds continue to entertain. This male greeted us from the fence along the North Athletic Field. Insects are often partial to interfaces, between sun and shade, between a well-mowed lawn and a lip of thicker grass that hasn't been eviscerated with a weedwhacker. So, bluebirds are partial to interfaces, between sun and shade, between a well-mowed lawn and a lip of thicker grass that hasn't been eviscerated with a weedwhacker. They find

perches that maximize view and provide a good gliding path for a midges wake.

We sometimes see the Bewick's wren that owns the picnic area near the restrooms at the southern end of Tournament Park and a couple of the neighbors' yards. We usually see him on or near the fencing but, this time, he flies over to the grilling/sink area and proceeds to inspect on, over, under, and through the installation. He flutters his way up a crack and, suddenly hovering, he pulls out a spider and flicks it down onto the pavement below. The spider is stunned but not dead and the wren flits in and out with sharp attacks until he gets an angle that allows him to crush the spider's thorax. He again tosses the

spider down, this time on its back. The spider doesn't move and, after an intent twenty second stare, the wren picks up the spider and flies off with it. Based on the coloring, this was a sowbug killer and, given the care with which the wren attacked, I would suggest that the bite of a sowbug killer, which is obviously lethal to a sowbug, would also be a serious matter for the Bewick's or, at least, the chicks of the Bewick's.



Finally, I leave you with a silent chorale. There is not much that can compete with a house wren for music and this bird produces constantly. The bird in the photo is the wren owner of the north end of Tournament Park and the best nesting hole in the area.

The date: 6/4/2014
The week number: 23
The walk number: 1250
The weather: 80 F, sunny

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

The birds (19):

- 1 Western Scrub Jay
- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Sparrow
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 5 House Finch
- 2 Acorn Woodpecker
- 6 American Crow
- 1 Cooper's Hawk
- 9 Lesser Goldfinch
- 2 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 1 Western Bluebird
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 1 House Wren
- 1 Spotted Towhee
- 4 White-throated Swift



- 2 Bushtit
- 1 Black Phoebe
- 2 California Towhee
- 1 Red-shouldered Hawk

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
10/20/14