

6/11/14

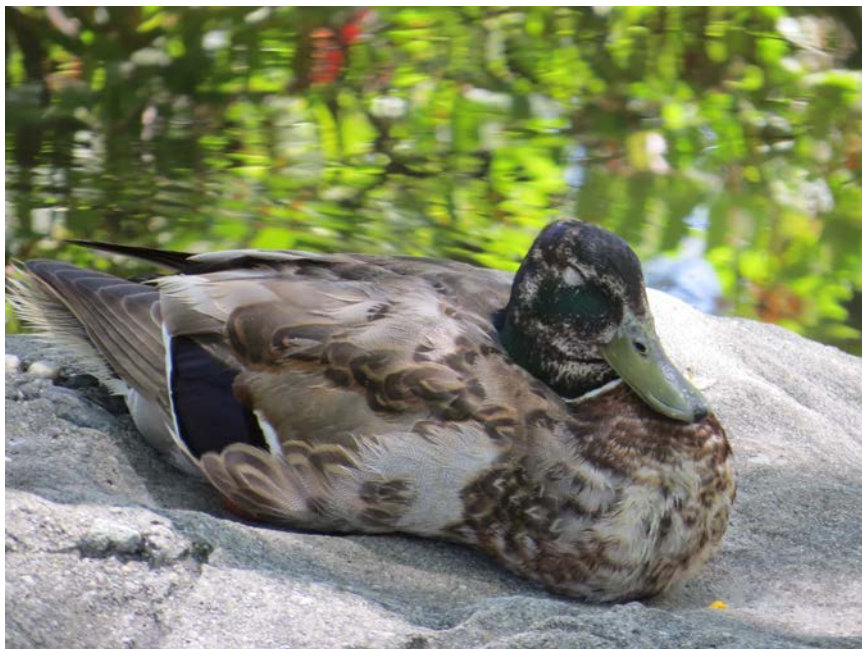
They say that records are made to be broken. They say that it's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game. They say lots of things. We say that we have a new record for number of species on a week 24 walk with 22 and that the previous record of 21, which was set in 2009 and matched in 2010, is now defunct. Records are made to be broken but walks are unique, indifferent to the thermals and downdrafts of previous years. So, I will tell you, just to be complete, that we did much better than you might have reasonably expected based on the median or record low for week 24 and leave it at that.

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

We have been seeing western bluebirds fairly consistently near the North Athletic Field this year

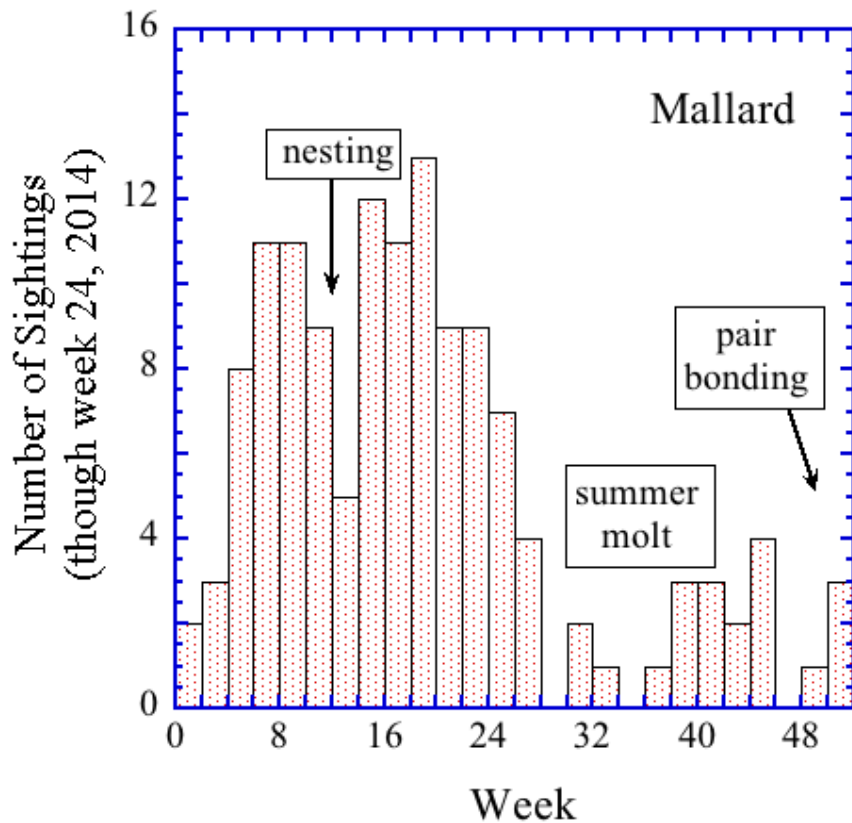


because there is a breeding pair on campus. Last week, we saw one adult male western bluebird. This week we see a bunch of them, including this adult female, who is likely the mate of the bird we saw last week. She was on the fence in the usual place. Both sexes display eye rings but, here, you see a lot of creams and grays with a bit of blue. She blends in with just enough blue to make the point. Last week, a breeding brilliant reddish brown breast dominates with a lot of blue. This week has more subtlety. As is usual, the bluebird is looking away. The fence bluebirds do look over the



vegetation between the fence and sidewalk but, for the vast majority of their time, orientation is trending west. I assume this to be a simple matter of greater food resources on the field side of the fence and a desire to swoop into an unfettered open area rather than into an unruly cover that might hide a predator, but it is also possible that they are preserving a high quality hunting strip for their progeny, just as some owls and hawks will do no hunting in the immediate vicinity of

their nest.



The pond mallards disappear in June because they undergo a massive molt in which flight feathers all drop out over a short period of time. If you aren't on a large body of water when this happens, you are going to be in serious trouble. Your average coyote is a sensitive guy, and always looking for a tasty duck dinner. He could jump across any of the Throop ponds, so, they don't qualify as molting refuges for a duck, and neither does the Millikan reflecting pool.

If you look at the histogram of mallard sightings by week, you will notice a sharp drop-off in frequency around week 20 that shows the departure

of our Throop pond male(s). There is a shoulder in the late week 20s that partly reflects visiting mallards who are on their way to that big body of water. Today, we saw four of them. None of these birds was our standard Throop mallard but one of them decided to snooze on mallard rock, which is where the photo was taken (the other three were on Ramo pond). His tail feathers are spiky and his head is a mess. It's going to be a long duck-poor summer.

Our black phoebes are scattered around campus so that we have a very good chance of seeing at least one of them at some point on the walk and we often see several. So, today's five sightings was not an anomaly. Two of the phoebes were from a nesting pair that has taken up residence behind the old ticket office and one of them has just



acquired a (soldier?) beetle. Usually, you won't see an insect once a phoebe has caught it because their typical prey is small but this soon to be a glorious repast is a bill full and probably not happy about it.

Caltech has a June burst of small passerines fledging and the dark-eyed juncos, which appear to be the up and coming sparrow representative on campus, are in that process now. One of the junco juveniles was perched in a small bush along Holliston, where Alan had detected some small movements. He is a recent fledgling, perhaps even today's, and hard wired to trust to camouflage before flight, for good reason. He is looking a bit askance at me because his ability to escape, should I prove to be a junco predator, is not very good. Fortunately, for him, neither Alan nor I like the taste of dark eyed junco on the stem and the danger passes. In general, however, fledging is a time of great risk for a bird. He has survived the nest where he could have starved to death or been the victim of nest depredation and he has flown, sort of, but the act of flight is also an act of exposure. After fledging, one of his parents led him to this hidden fortress but it is inherently less protected than the original nest. For this bird, the foliage is insufficiently dense to provide full cover (or Alan would never have seen him and I would never have gotten a photo). Death can come from any predator who follows your parent's food delivery system or is a motion detector, as all of the campus felines are, that sees the way you move. However, this is the way it has to be. Roll the dice. Strengthen your wings. Eat the proffered food. Live.



The date: 6/11/2014
The week number: 24
The walk number: 1251
The weather: 77 F, sunny
John Beckett, Vicky Brennan,
Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Yoshi
Tuttle

The birds (22):

- 1 Western Scrub Jay
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 House Sparrow
- 6 Mourning Dove
- 6 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 5 Acorn Woodpecker
- 2 American Crow
- 2 Common Raven
- 4 Mallard
- 3 House Wren
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 5 Black Phoebe
- 6 Lesser Goldfinch
- 5 Western Bluebird
- 2 Spotted Towhee
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 4 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 3 Dark-eyed Junco
- 2 Downy Woodpecker

3 California Towhee
20 Bushtit

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
10/21/14