

6/18/14

Sometimes a fair wind will bring a lot of birds. In 2010, a fair wind brought us 24 species, which is the current record for week 25 and something our 19 didn't even graze the horizon of. Still, we well above the record low of 9 and the median of 13. We also had a new walker, Krishnan Thyagarajan and official Caltech bird walker number 150.

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

Inspiration can come from obvious places, a petty fight that leads to a murder and then another, the last vibrantly orange afterglow of the sun setting the day before an execution, a dream of unrequited love cast across a century, repeated mistakes leading to environmental havoc. It is Alec and the last disaster that I would speak to here. Alec and Krishnan were walking up Wilson when Alec mentions that many of the birds we had seen so far were intentionally released into the United States and, in particular, that there was a man in New York City way back in the nineteenth century who had wanted to establish all the birds mentioned in the works of Shakespeare. That's a tall order because there are more than five-dozen different species mentioned and about fifty can be pinned down to individual or one of two species. The concept is enervating if you take out the potential for ecological horrors. Shakespeare awakes to allusion and metaphor, even in banter, and there is something to be said for the natural complement of bird and bard. So, I thought it appropriate to say a few words about the nineteenth century introduction of foreign species into the new world.

If you ignore rock pigeons, which were brought over as food items very early in the European colonization of North America, the first major release of old world birds into the new appears to have been in New York City in 1850. Eight pairs of house sparrows were released but all died over the winter. The big apple saw further releases in 1851 and 1852 with sporadic releases over the following two decades in New York City, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco, enough to establish house sparrows locally in widely separated locations and these were sufficient for the eventual conquest of the country. In 1864, the commissioners of New York City's Central Park were apparently moving off a war footing and they began a systematic sponsoring of European bird releases in Central Park. In the 1860s, they released Java and house sparrows, chaffinches, and blackbirds. In the 1870s, it was European starlings, English skylarks, Japanese finches and pheasants that stroked the park and these birds, finally, bring us to Eugene Sheffelin. Mr. Sheffelin was a pharmacist in nineteenth century New York City and lives as the poster boy for the illegitimate introduction of nonnative birds into this country. He was also a serious scholar of Shakespeare and it is said that he wanted to bring in every bird mentioned in the bard's works. I'm not sure I buy it. He tends to get blamed for bringing the starling but he didn't become the chairman of the Central Park committee until 1876 and the first starling releases predated him. Yes, he tried very hard to establish starlings and he presided over the attempted introductions of skylarks, nightingales, and chaffinches but he also brought in bullfinches, which aren't even mentioned in Shakespeare. So, let's check the record. Starlings are mentioned exactly once, although it is admittedly a good citation. In Henry IV, Hotspur is beyond livid when the king not only refuses to ransom Hotspur's brother-in-law, Mortimer, but also asserts possession of the prisoners that Hotspur had taken in the same battle so that he can't construct a deal of his own. He says, among a flood of imprudent foaming that, "I will find him when he lies asleep and in his ear, I'll holler "Mortimer". Nay, I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but "Mortimer" and give it to him to keep his anger still in motion". Ok That's pretty hot stuff and maybe it's enough to justify bringing in some starlings but there are a lot of birds mentioned more often. For example, consider this construction featuring two

different species: “the hedge sparrow fed the cuckoo so long that it had its head bit off by its young”. If you think about it, you will probably correctly guess that this is from Lear. Cuckoos are nest parasites like brown-headed cowbirds and a hedge sparrow sometimes develops bald spots from repeatedly reaching down into a cuckoo chick’s mouth to feed it (Incidentally, I have seen a bald dark-eyed junco on campus and I suspect it has the same cause). Hedge sparrows are mentioned three times by Shakespeare (not a mere once) and cuckoos 22 times. Yet, Sheffelin made no attempt to introduce either species, even though he probably knew Lear by heart. Or, take my favorite avian put-down, though not from one of my favorite plays (*All’s Well that Ends Well*), “Then my dial goes not true. I took this lark for a bunting”. Sheffelin did try to introduce skylarks (then larks), but where are his corn buntings? Incidentally, the quote draws from the then common practice of trapping larks, which were a favored game bird in sixteenth century England. If you caught a bunting in your trap, dinner was on hold. Or let’s try a luscious coquette from Shakespeare’s poem *Venus and Adonis*:

Look how he can, she cannot choose but love;
And by her fair immortal hand she swears,
From his soft bosom never to remove,
Till he take truce with her contending tears,
Which long have rain’d, making her cheeks all wet
And one sweet kiss shall pay this countless debt.

Upon this promise did he raise his chin
Like a dive-dapper peering through a wave
Who, being look’d on, ducks as quickly in;
So offers he to give what she did crave;
But when her lips were ready for his pay,
He winks and turns his lips another way

A dive-dapper is the Elizabethan common name for a little grebe, which is a rather pretty bird when in breeding colors, and the passage relies upon the behavior of a grebe to illuminate that of the humans referred to in the poem. Shakespeare was probably not a birder, although it is likely that he would have observed little grebes personally. He clearly drew from a broad range of nature, history, myth, and



literature on behavior. Sheffelin never tried to bring in a grebe, much less two. He never tried to bring in a hawk or an eagle, a magpie or a snipe, a rook or a jackdaw. Overall, Shakespeare uses about fifty bird species that can be pinned down to an individual species and Sheffelin worked on just four. He was either not the Shakespearean scholar he is reputed to be or he was not serious about bringing the avian

world of Shakespeare to the new world, if indeed he ever stated that he was. I vote for the latter.

I was quite taken by Alec's anecdote but I suppose that I should at least mention some of the birds beyond the conversation. I tend to be sloppy about photos when Alec is present but this time I neglected to get any of his images. So, I toss in a female house finch just because she was willing to pose in front of me so that I had to take a photo. It also reminds me of tragedy. A young house finch makes his first flight, about twenty feet, landing in the open on a brick patio where a scrub jay sees him. In moments, he is dead. It is a tragedy for the house finches but the making of a healthy brood for the jay. The next day, I come to a cluster of blue feathers in the back yard, the remains of a Cooper's kill. It is a tragedy for the jays and the making of a healthy brood for the Cooper's. We saw red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks on the walk but no Cooper's and I didn't take a shot of a scrub jay. So, I show photos of a juvenile Cooper's hawk who was moving around a tree along with a sibling. These were taken in Sierra Madre on my way home but they illustrate the field markings of a juvenile Cooper's hawk. Google a comparison between Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks and see if you can talk yourself into a confident id based on these photos.



The date: 6/18/2014
The week number: 25
The walk number: 1252
The weather: 74 F, sunny
The walkers: Alan Cummings, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Yoshi Tuttle, John Beckett, Krishnan Thyagarajan, Alec Brenner, Vicky Brennan

The birds (19):

- 1 Western Scrub Jay
- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 House Sparrow

- 5 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 8 Acorn Woodpecker
- 2 American Crow
- 5 Black Phoebe
- 3 Common Raven
- 2 White-throated Swift
- 1 Red-shouldered Hawk
- 2 Red-tailed Hawk
- 4 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 5 Bushtit
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird



- 4 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 California Towhee
- 2 House Wren
- 1 Downy Woodpecker

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
10/22/14