

6/25/14

There's nowhere to go from a Shakespeare high except into the depths of a sour world that knows without remembering that a blessing has been lost. It is a sometime puzzle to me that England escaped a major depression after he stopped writing but the English of the day lived in interesting times. They had a lot to think about and we've had a few centuries to pass the loss. Nevertheless, our walks remain, our birds still fly, and salients are to be found in the intercourse of a sight with a song, or a lucky step. This week, we rise on the numbers to 23 observed species. This is a new record high that supplants the previous record high of 22 set just last year. Naturally, we also exceeded the median of 13 and the record low of 9.

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



We had a downy day. The photos weren't very good but they are good enough to illustrate the basic point that you don't need to see the white patch on the back to distinguish a downy from a Nuttall's woodpecker. All you need is a quick view of the head from the side. In the Caltech photo taken from the Prufrock tree, which is shown above, you will notice that the woodpecker has a white stripe below the beak that cuts all the way across the head (also, no red cap, so this is a female). If this were a Nuttall's, the white would have been truncated by black and the pattern of black that would give a

swirling rather than straight-line appearance. Try it sometime with a known downy (or Nuttall's). If you pick up that trick, you will add 50% to your visual options for identification. I note as an aside that this is



a campus scheme where you don't have to worry about things like hairy and ladderback woodpeckers but, if you ever happen to run across a giant "downy" on campus, don't stop to e-mail or text. Call Alan immediately and look up hairy woodpeckers. The downy in the second photo has better detail (this is a Massachusetts, not a Caltech bird - note the light brown tuft above the beak) but the essential field marks, which are just as apparent in the walk photo, are the same.

The Tournament Park house wren appears to be working on a new clutch. We caught him mid-prey, holding a spider(?). I like this photo because it shows chevrons of the under-tail coverts and tail feathers from underneath. This won't help you distinguish a Bewick's from a house wren but it certainly says wren versus anything else we have.

We also had a very nice view of a spotted towhee near the old ticket office. Alan, who walks to his office in the morning from this end of campus, says that this towhee has taken up residence in this area and that he sees it frequently on his morning walk into campus. This bird buttressed a vocalization-only I.D. obtained in what is left of the Maintenance yard. We also saw a red-shouldered hawk in the big gum tree at the corner of Wilson and Colorado. We were first attracted to this tree by a pair of perching corvids that we eventually assigned to juvenile ravens but, lower down was a hawk with a well-defined

russet breast and a profusion of white spots on the wings. There were no ducks, which to me says that summer is here. Not even cheap cat food can keep a duck on campus if it can't fly better than your average chicken. There was, however, a positive presence in the Viveca-spotted dark-eyed junco at the top of a redwood near Holliston and San Pasqual. He was the last new species of the day. He sings a song and checks for a response. There is nothing, so he hops a turn on the mizzaren and calls again to the unfaithful, to the summer, to the living.

We saw a suite of scrawny looking black phoebes on Holliston. These are probably juveniles and they reminded me of an interaction I saw some time ago in a Ralph's between a teenage boy and what I interpreted to be an uncle. Now, the boy had probably been ordered to accompany his uncle to the supermarket and, being a good-natured boy, he went along with a minimum of snarky surliness. When I encountered them, they were working their way through the produce section. The uncle is busy babbling away about how you look for cracks on radishes and hints of rotting leaves to help pick out the best bunch. The boy is broadcasting polite disinterest. They move on to cucumbers and the uncle is talking about how to select a fresh cucumber. "You pinch it on both ends to see how firm it is," he says



to polite indifference, "and this is an especially good technique because it shows anybody who is looking that you know what you're doing and I've found that girls really like a guy who knows his way around a supermarket". It was a laser flash! The boy leans slightly and cocks his head as the implications flow in. "You can impress a girl with a cucumber. Who'd have thought"? I doubt that he missed or forgot a

single word coming out of his uncle's mouth for the rest of the shopping trip. Certainly, it looked like master and acolyte in the dairy section and not an uncle and nephew. After black phoebes fledge, their father (always the father) takes them around the neighborhood and teaches them how to be successful black phoebes. This is done by demonstration and the fledglings know intuitively that they must pay attention to every detail and each moment because, after a few days, Dad will lead each of them to a good foraging spot and leave.

I end with a subtle eye-play between a camera and the red-masked parakeet shown below. This bird was foraging for berries at Morrisroe but well disguised by foliage. At first, he ignored me and I had little to show as I took a few desultory photos claiming hints of bird but, whether by chance or curiosity about the clicking camera, he decides to sneak a slow look in my direction. I apparently do not impress because he soon turns like a breaching whale and disappears behind a variegated tracery of green leaves. We continue our walk up Wilson.



The date: 6/25/2014
The week number: 26
The walk number: 1253
The weather: 77 F, sunny

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

The birds (23):

- 2 Western Scrub Jay
- 2 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Sparrow
- 6 Mourning Dove
- 8 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 5 Acorn Woodpecker
- 7 American Crow
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 4 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 3 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 17 Bushtit
- 1 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 2 Spotted Towhee
- 3 House Wren
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 2 Red-masked Parakeet
- 1 Red-shouldered Hawk
- 4 Common Raven
- 2 Downy Woodpecker
- 1 Dark-eyed Junco

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
11/6/14