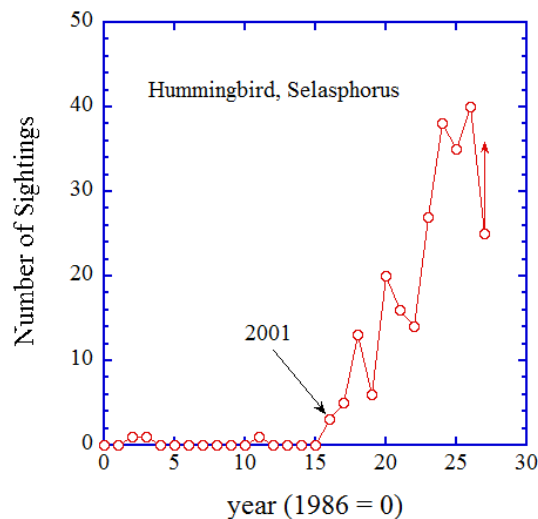


7/31/13

Sometimes, a congruent thought is the winnowing dream of a walk and it need not be in a feathered scheme although this one arrived in the late walk Parsons -Gates form of a juvenile raven. For this week we have a foundered curiosity begun with a record setting 21 species from last week. Is there another record? Unfortunately, no. We were neither great nor terrible. We were a numerical mediocrity landing precisely on the median of 12 for week 31. There, you have it. You have the key. Do you see? This is the first time in the history of the Caltech bird walk in which we had a 21 bird species walk followed by a 12 bird day (or visa versa). There have been worse, even much worse, declines in the number of species from week to week but we have never had digits of the species count reverse from one week to the next. That may not sound interesting, and I suppose from an avian perspective it isn't, but consider the difference between 21 and 12. It's nine. So what? Well, try $31 - 13 = 18 = 2*9$, or $73 - 37 = 36 = 4*9$, or $6413 - 3146 = 363*9$. Every time you take an ordinal number and reverse the digits, the difference is some multiple of nine. We've never had an adjacent pair of bird walks congruent in modulo nine. I thought it was rather nifty. This is, after all, a Caltech bird walk. Not impressed? That's unfortunate. It was a twelve bird walk and you have to find the little joys where you can. Last week, the low probability sightings all seemed to break our way and we somehow ended up with a record in conditions where all reasonable expectations would have suggested a less than stellar day. This week we didn't even hear the sneers. There were no finches of any description, no hawks of any description, and no mourning doves but perhaps I complain too much. We did meet the median of 12 for a week 31 walk and we were safely above the record low of 8, which was set in 2001 and matched in 2005. Still, the walk had to contend with the memories of a recent past and mediocrity can be deflating.

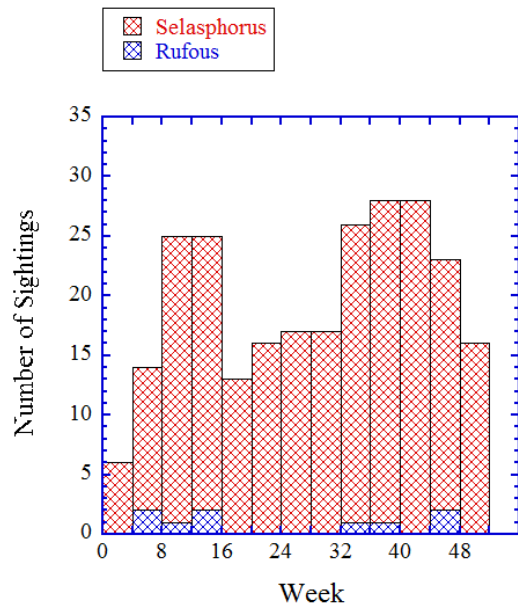
See the plots at http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html and http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

Since there were no stellar sightings to mark the day, I thought that I would instead focus on a special spot and say something about Selasphorus hummingbirds. The special spot is the hummingbird lady's house just west of Tournament Park. She maintains three to, usually, five feeders in front of a window overlooking the garden and this draws a large number of hummingbirds, at least ten this week. It is a classic example of a food supply that can't be defended by any one hummingbird and it must lead to superb close-up views for the owner. It would be nice for us if the window were closer to our position in the driveway between Wilson and Tournament Park but that distance is what also yields privacy to the owner. Our hummers are reasonably distinct and, even at a considerable distance, amenable to identification. We can work with these birds and, frankly, we are very happy that the hummingbird lady is kind enough to allow us a line of sight to her feeders.



There are four hummingbird species on the Caltech bird list: Allen's, Anna's, black-chinned, and rufous. It is likely that Costa's hummingbirds are on campus at least occasionally, although I've never seen one here (they are seen in Huntington Gardens), but we have yet to capture one during the walk. Two of the official four, Allen's and rufous can display a mixture of green and brown and the mature females and juveniles are virtually indistinguishable by eye (yes, there is that notch in one of the rufous tail feathers but how often do you get to see that?). A mature rufous male generally has no green

showing on either front or back (there are exceptions), whereas an Allen's male will always have some green. So, when we see a no green on what otherwise looks like an Allen's (good front and back views required), we call it a rufous hummingbird. If you see some green with the brown, the official Caltech policy is to list the hummingbird under the general rubric of Selasphorus. We could do better. The rufous hummingbird is strictly migratory for us and Alan has, at various times, been persuaded that a particular bird was an Allen's due to timing of the sighting. However, even this requires that you catch him in a weak moment. In a strong moment he will claim, if challenged, that the ambiguity is more definitive and more readily defended.



Selasphorus hummingbirds are a relatively recent phenomenon at Caltech. Before 2001, these birds were quite rare for us with just three sightings in fifteen years. In 2001, we had four sightings and probabilities continued to rise until reaching the mid to upper 30s per year, starting in 2010. We are on track to do at least as well this year and, even if we didn't see another of these hummingbirds, 2013 would still be the fifth best Selasphorus year on record. By way of comparison, Anna's hummingbirds were one of the "common" birds when we started in the 1980s and they continue to be (Anna's were reported in 51 of 52 weeks in 2012 and have been seen on every walk so far this year).

There is a seasonal component to Selasphorus sightings with peaks during spring and fall reflecting the migration of Allen's hummingbirds passing through the area, although some of this is probably due to rufous

hummingbirds being called as Selasphorus. So, I return to the center of this week's walk. In general, we can expect that our hummingbird potential will continue to be enhanced as long as the hummingbird lady doesn't run out of sugar or an appreciation of the great beauty of hummingbirds. All four of this week's Selasphorus hummingbirds were observed at the feeders outside her window (along with four of our five Anna's and both of our black-chinned hummingbirds). This is something you can emulate at your own home but it takes dedication (you need multiple feeders and they must be kept scrupulously clean or you will be killing your hummingbirds) and massive quantities of sugar. Still, they are a great show and we are lucky to see a small piece of it in the middle of our work week.

The date: 7/31/2013

The week number: 31

The walk number: 1206

The weather: 72 F, hazy sunshine

The walkers: Alan Cummings, John Beckett, Vicky Brennan

The birds (12):

3 Rock Pigeon

1 Northern Mockingbird

- 2 House Sparrow
- 5 Anna's Hummingbird
- 4 Acorn Woodpecker
- 9 American Crow
- 5 Bushtit
- 2 Black Phoebe
- 2 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 4 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 3 Red-masked Parakeet
- 1 Common Raven

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
8/22/13