

8/7/13

August walks are a difficult sell but I will try to extol the virtues of an off-season peregrination. The weather was reasonably pleasant, even cool for an August lunch. I had hopes, as I walked to the starting point that this might translate into an unusually high scoring walk. However, the birds were generally sessile and sparse and birders in short supply. We did manage a total of 12 species. This is a tick above the median of 11 for week 32 walks and safely above the record low of 8. The record high of 15 (2008 and 2010) was just too much for us.

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

Peter Mao showed up again for his second walk of the year. Even better, he brought a camera and wasn't afraid to use it. I include a couple of his photos below. If he makes it to the walk again before January, we will have three Peter Mao sightings for the calendar year and this would tie the poorly known but keenly cherished Peter Mao sightings record.

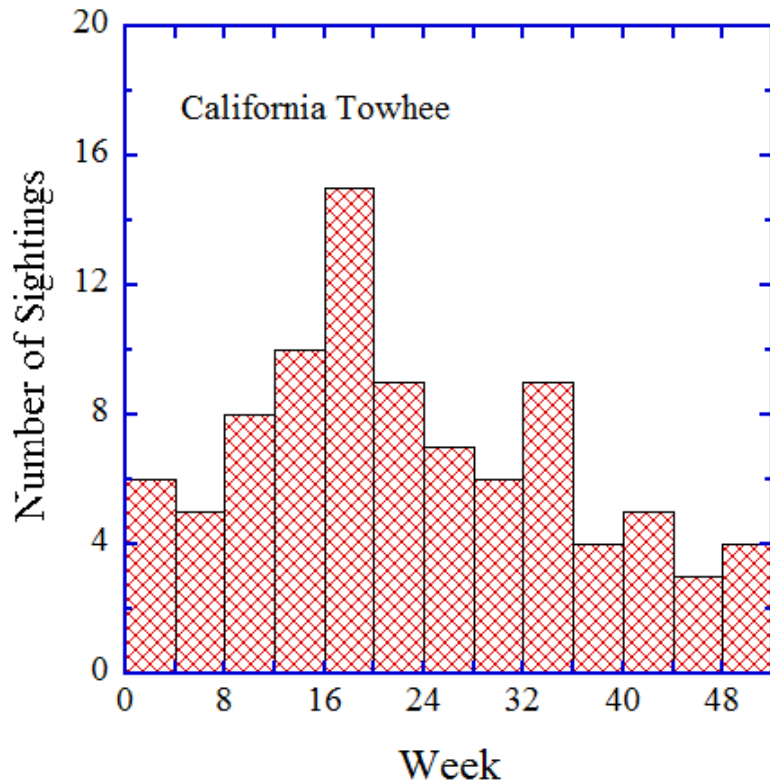
Those of you with a classical education may think without thinking that "April is the cruellest month" but this is a sentiment born of an eastern sensibility. It comes from frozen ground and dormant roots ripped from the winter and launched in a tortured sprawl to the summer or, having opened tender green shoots, life is destroyed in the pulsing indecision that comes between winter and spring. Here, I would say that August is the cruellest month. It is a nexus from which the seasons flow. It is hot. It is dry, or worse, humid. Plants that have managed to survive into August find no relief. They die in August, scattering weevils from their desiccated husks like overripe seeds. Even in the gutters, it is the gods that condense in a stream of water thinned from air. They would scream if they could fathom the transformation but instead they smear their way down and dance to the sun, that most unmerciful of gods, except where they find a druid's runnel and, becoming blood, flow into a wizened root that writhes in the August winter and awakes at 6 PM. The bus is on time and the city's herbicide will be too late to stop the MTA's sowing.



So, what does this have to do with birds? Plenty. The key to birds is always water. Blessed or cursed, it's all the same, whether you drink from a birdbath or eat insects and never drink. If you are a southern California bird, you need water and there is little to be had in August. This is also a time for dispersal. Mountain chickadees disperse in August. Some of the early migrants begin to pass through campus. It is the subtle tangent to a minimum. You barely notice a change in slope but it portends the more obvious signs of transition that will come to us in September.

We had a recently fledged suite of California towhees a couple of weeks ago.

This time, we encounter one on a wooden fence near the Child Care Center (see photo) and another on Holliston, also near Avery. Peter was unsuccessful in getting an in-focus photo of the second bird. Although it was seemingly compliant, it had an intuition for when Peter was about to establish a line of sight. A hop or a short flight would end the opportunity in a blurred pastiche of swirling color. Finally, the bird tired of Peter's attention and flew across the street. We turned back to our own little migration down Holliston.



It is possible, though unlikely, that both sightings were of the same bird (we counted them as two individuals). It seems likely, to me at least, that these are two sibling juveniles attempting to stake out personal territories next to their natal territory but this could also be a pair of adults. They probably won't be able to make a go of it here and will leave within a week or two but we could get lucky.

I'm sure that an adult California towhee can instantly distinguish between a juvenile and an adult but I find age (or sex) typing of this species to be impossible unless very recently fledged (stubby tail, occasional begging, and poor foraging technique) or, for adults, observed mating/courting. I will

spare you a full reproduction of California towhee sighting frequency diagrams since I presented them a couple of months ago but I will show you an updated histogram by week to emphasize the point that there is a pulse in the late summer, probably associated with juvenile dispersal. So, a couple of juvenile Caltech Cal towhees in August is not out of place and we were in the right place at the right time to take advantage of their presence.

I end with a rather wild shot of a red-masked parakeet taken by Peter Mao from the back parking lot of the Health center. This bird was the northernmost of a flock scattered in the trees bounding the tennis courts and, before somebody asks, I'm not sure what the gray patination on the beak means. You normally expect the entire beak to be a more or less solid horn color but this bird has large patches of gray. A quick look at symptoms for popular diseases of red masked parakeets (cherry or cherry-headed conures in pet trade parlance) didn't yield anything that looks like this. So, perhaps this is a discoloration caused by yesterday's breakfast and our bird has only managed to rub it off in irregular swatches. The dark side could be problematic for the species as any sick bird in a small population is a matter of concern. The entire San Gabriel Valley only boasts a couple hundred red masked parakeets. They appear to be feral success story but the local population is still perched on a thin bladed edge. Survival can fall away to extirpation in a few bad seasons as has been seen for many apparently successful escapee species (Eurasian spotted doves come immediately to mind). Although red masked

parakeets are a little raucous for my taste, I have grown fond of them. They appear on campus just as the bird situation is starting to become dire and they are not shy.

The date: 8/7/2013

The week number: 32

The walk number: 1207

The weather: 76 F, sunny

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Peter Mao, John Beckett

The birds (12):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 2 House Finch
- 7 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 11 Red-masked Parakeet
- 2 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 1 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 7 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 1 Lesser Goldfinch
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 2 California Towhee



--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
9/5/13