

9/4/13

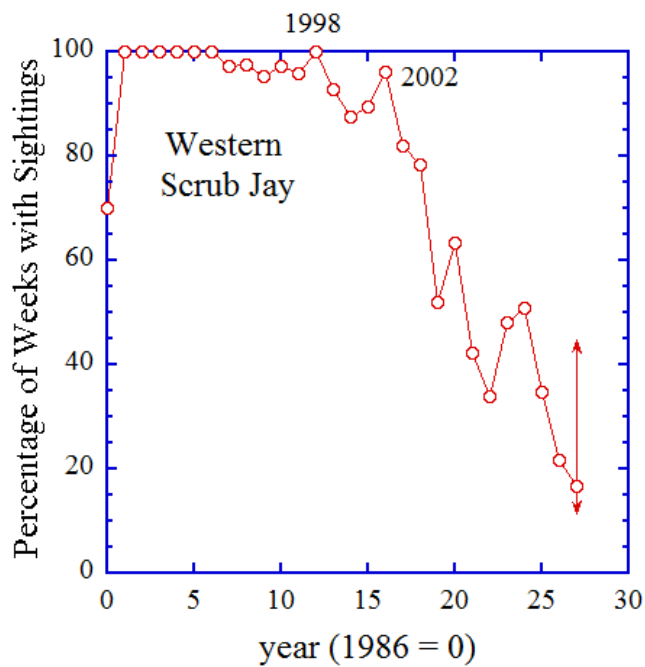
We had an unusually blue day with two western bluebirds and a pair of scrub jays but technically, the most numerous birds with blue feathers were the red masked parakeets. No doubt you think of red masked parakeets as green birds with red heads but there is also some blue (I'll leave it to you to find out where). In the end, we had a 17 species day, which is more than respectable for week 36. We just missed the record of 18 set in 2009 but doubled up on the record low of 8.

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

The magic of this walk came in spasmodic hops. In the "old" days, The Maintenance yard (soon to be the new Child Care Center) and Tournament Park brought the best birding. Now, I would have to say that the most diverse avian assemblage comes from the Arden side of the Health Center. Part of this may be a residual bound of interference from construction in the Maintenance yard, which does appear to infect Tournament Park, but the habitat bones of this spot are quite good and I think we just blew it by staying in the back parking lot for so many years. So, what was Arden's trinket for this walk? Alan catches sight of a black and white bird across the street, generally close to the trunk. Alan is thinking mountain chickadee but there is no chick-a-dee-dee-dee in support and no chips or songs to indicate something else. This was apparently going to have to be a visual capture. Vicky and I cross the street to try for a different angle while the rest of the party stays on the Caltech side of the street. Both groups get enough of a look to conclude that we had our first black throated gray warblers of the season and, at week 36, the earliest ever. With the orange crowned warbler and Hutton's vireo of the last couple of weeks and the black throated gray and Wilson's warblers of this week it is clear that the great migration is coming through. The Wilson's warblers will keep going (they winter in Central America) but some of the black throated grays may take up a campus residence for the winter.

I thought I would spend a bit of time discussing magic. There are two basic forms, the magic of transformation in which you change an object or being that already exists in your presence into something else and the magic of incarnation in which you bring something that didn't exist, at least within visual range of the point of incarnation, into being. Alan attempted both feats over the baseball field. We have a standard viewing station at the entrance to the underground parking structure. It is shaded, which makes it very attractive for the walkers, and it has relatively unobstructed views of the entire field. It is a good place to pick up phoebes who like to post up on the chain link fencing (Say's in the winter and black throughout the year). On rare occasions we will also see a sparrow or meadowlark in the grass. This time, we arrive and Alan almost immediately picks up a bird and says, "I think that might be a bluebird." Now, this is a key part of the incantation. You have to be careful. If you immediately assert that it is a bluebird and it isn't, you will have no chance of transformation. If you say it is, say a phoebe, when it's a bluebird, you run the risk of accidentally transforming a relatively uncommon western bluebird into a relatively common black phoebe. I happen to like black phoebes but transforming a western bluebird into one would be an undesirable result. So, Alan sets off properly for a bluebird transformation spell but he either gets the incantation wrong or, I think more likely, he is dealing with a strong willed phoebe who doesn't like the idea of turning into a bluebird. It becomes clear through an abundance of tail flicking and hawking forays that this is a black phoebe and he is going to stay that way. He finally gets tired of Alan's efforts, perches on the fence facing directly us, and flaunts his tuxedo black and white, dissolving the fragile tissue of incantation. It slowly drifts to the grass like sprinkled dew. Perhaps, this was the wrong spell. We notice a bird on the scoreboard at the north end of the field. He slashes to the ground in a flurry of sunlit blue, grabs some delectable and flies

over to the back, shaded side of the scoreboard. We had an adult male western bluebird. A second bird is perched quietly on the other corner. This bird was much duller than the male, suggesting an adult female or juvenile. It seems likely that we saw this same pair a couple of weeks ago, although we could only credit one of them at the time. This time, the second bird was just as sessile but we had an open line of sight. So, my interpretation is that either Alan accidentally muttered an incantation of incarnation, which produced the bluebirds from the hot air, or the black phoebe, in shaking off Alan's incantation of transformation, inadvertently sloughed together an incantation of incarnation of his own. I'm reasonably sure that it was accidental because you would not expect a black phoebe to purposely introduce a partial competitor into his territory. If the phoebe had been acting on purpose, he would most likely have transformed Alan into something like a mathematician (the best magicians work with the underlying substrate). However, we left with Alan talking about Voyager and not the latest wrinkle in Heegaard Floer homology, so if the phoebe did try to reflect the transformation spell back to Alan, it didn't work.



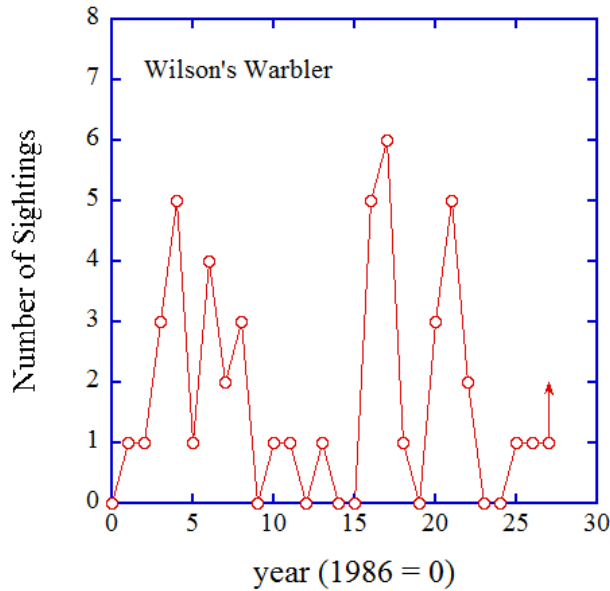
We were hoping to see California towhees in Avery garden or near the Public Events Office. We were disappointed in the lack of towhees but we did pick up a pair of scrub jays, our first sighting in more than three months. Scrub jays used to be something you would see on virtually every walk, as shown in the figure, and, if you look at one of Alan's bird list pads, you will notice that they have their own entry as one of the nine most common Caltech birds. Starting in 1999, however, the species has experienced a more or less steady decline on campus and there is little hint in the data for this year to suggest the bottom has been reached, much less the onset of a resurgence. The cause is unclear but the beginning of the slide predates the local introduction of West Nile virus in 2003 (scrub jays, like all members of the crow family, are unusually susceptible).

Perhaps, the crow population had risen to some critical mass in the late 90s that bent too many eyes looking for scrub jays servicing their nests. If you kill off all the young, you can expect local extirpation in a small number of years because the mean life span of an adult scrub jay is only a few years and because consistently unsuccessful breeding pairs may move out of the area.

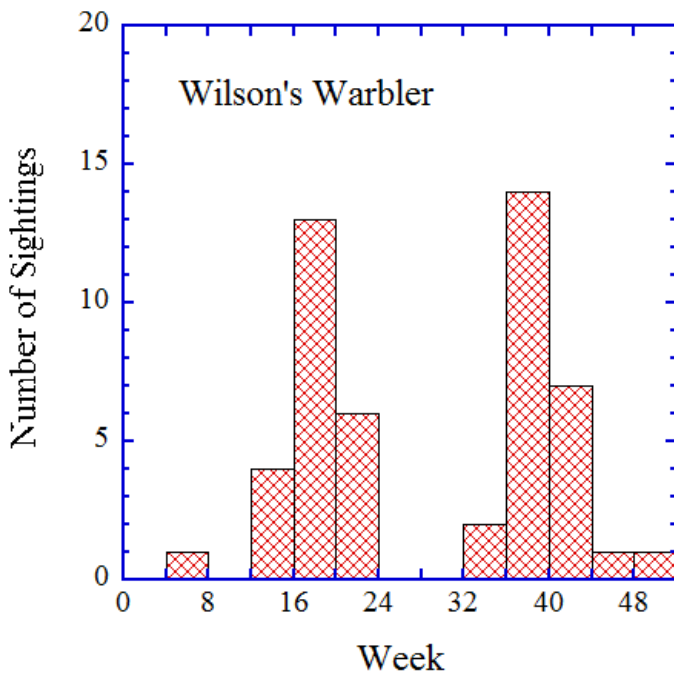
The key to the day lay in warblers. I discussed Arden's black throated gray warblers above and I should also mention the orange crowned warbler, at least in passing. This bird was gleaming while upside down in Tournament Park and was at first mistaken for one of the lesser goldfinches higher up in the canopy. However, this bird had a clear eye streak, no wing bars, and, of course, a warbler style beak.

By the time we exited Tournament Park, we seem to have run out of warbler magic. The Prufrock tree had nothing, not even a bushtit, and Holliston was empty. On the bird walk, the final leg comes at the northeast corner of Dabney garden. We either proceed towards Parsons-Gates and then over to the Throop ponds or we turn south and walk directly to the ponds. This time, we chose the former in the forlorn hope of seeing a visiting raven. No raven shows up but, as we skirt the edge of the Millikan

reflecting pool, we see activity in the trees around the Throop ponds. The birds are moving fast and not inclined to good views but I do get one clear view of a black throated gray. My announcement elicits



only a grimace from Alan. His birds are much more yellow than a dab at the eye and he is thinking in terms of a Wilson's or yellow warbler. The Prufrock tree and the upper story of the canopy over the Throop ponds are the best spots on campus for both species, so either was plausible. If you get a good view from the bottom or side it is fairly easy to tell the difference (e.g., (all yellow undertail for the yellow warbler versus grayish tail for a Wilson's). Naturally, our views were fleeting and it took several minutes of anxious ambulance chasing for us to pick up enough cues to confidently assign species. Our Wilson's warblers brought us to a three warbler and seventeen species day.



We occasionally have a good year with several Wilson's warblers sightings but it's not something you can count on in any given year. The last big year for Wilson's warblers was 2007, which contained sightings in five weeks. The reason for the anemic rates is that Wilson's warblers are strictly migratory for us, so you have to be receptive at the right time of year and the migration has to line up with the bird walk. If we catch them coming and going, we have a good year. If not, well, it's not so good. You can see this in the histogram, which shows sharp peaks in the northerly spring and southerly fall migrations. The distribution is actually tighter than you might think based on the figure as it is predominately weeks 17-20 (none after week 20) in the spring and weeks 37-40 in the fall. A week 36 sighting is unusually early (but not the earliest as we had a week 35 sighting in 2007). So, next week has some serious potential for our second Wilson's capture of the year.

The date: 9/04/2013
 The week number: 36
 The walk number: 1211
 The weather: 95 F, sunny

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Vicky Brennan, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Kent Potter, John Beckett

The birds (17):

- 2 Scrub Jay
- 5 Mourning Dove
- 1 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 6 American Crow
- 3 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 1 Black Phoebe
- 2 Western Bluebird
- 2 Lesser Goldfinch
- 7 Red-masked Parakeet
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 4 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 30 Bushtit
- 1 House Wren
- 3 Wilson's Warbler

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
9/26/13