

9/25/13

We set an Alanated record for week 39. We saw 25 species, which is the best we've done since week 17 and it bests by one the previous record of 24 for week 39 set in 2004. The record low of 7 fell behind before we had even left Arden, although we didn't know it. By the time we had turned up Wilson, we were matching the median of 18 but the record high had to wait for the last moment. A house wren was working the Indian hawthorns on the south side of the Throop ponds and the record was ours, although we didn't know it.

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

The mallard was sighted on the way to the walk on the south shore of the middle Throop pond. By the end of the walk, he had shifted to the eastern shore and presented a profile. He is now in full breeding plumage, which was nice but expected. The shock was in seeing the most distended breast on a mallard I have ever seen. It was huge. He looks like he ate an entire tub of cat food, making up for missing the easy food fix he could only fantasize about over the last three months. Normally, birds regulate their weight. Offer an infinite quantity of food and they will stop eating absent a compelling reason well before getting stuffed. You have to balance food availability and your chances of starving or being so weak that you can't escape the local Cooper's hawk with being so chubby that you can't escape the local Cooper's hawk. Passerines fatten up before migrating but that takes a lot of energy and, if you burn all your fat, you will be burning your muscle, and then you will die. I don't know how our duck fits into this scheme because he probably doesn't migrate and probably doesn't travel far to find a molting hideout but he is playing with fire. Hopefully, there will be one bad case of indigestion and a lesson learned. A fat duck is just a meal waiting to happen.

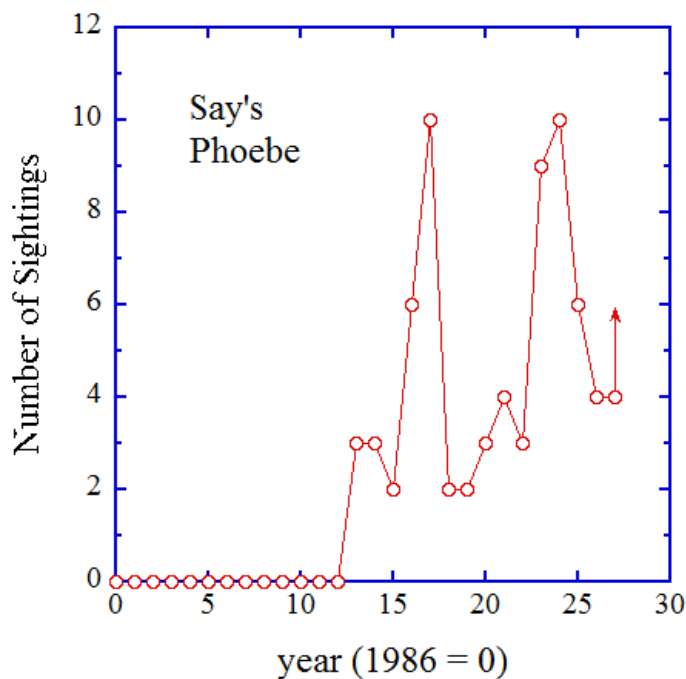
It has been a very good year for warbling vireos. This week, we intersected one foraging with a pair of Townsend's warblers in a jacaranda at the corner of the parking lot in front of the Health Center. He was very active and easily identified. This gives us three warbling vireos for the year, all single individuals (and don't forget our Hutton's of a few weeks ago). Only 2002 with five warbling vireo sightings is a more impressive vireo year.

Warbling vireos are classy looking birds guaranteed to make you pleased with a walk they grace even if there is nothing else of unusual interest. So, we walk towards our station at the entrance to the underground parking structure, arriving in good order and fine fettle. The black phoebe is in his normal spot on the soccer goal, which we took to mean that the juvenile western bluebirds were a forgotten nuisance. However, on the chain link fence just south of the viewing station, we get a brief view of a sparrow. He has a striped side, fairly white between bars. There is no brown blush (so not a Lincoln's - also the head was wrong) and the stripes are cleanly delineated, so not a fox sparrow. The head is all wrong for a lark sparrow. We are thinking song or Savannah sparrow. Unfortunately, our bird gives only a side view and decides not to give us much time for contemplation. He flies over to the soccer goal before we can resolve identity and joins three other sparrows hopping around in the shade provided by the cross bars. We need a closer look. We all exit the viewing station. Viveca and I go over the wall surrounding the patio behind Cahill and over to the grassy area behind the baseball field. Vicky and Alan take a more elegant and easier route through Cahill to end up in the same place. We slowly approach the sparrows, who are now working out into the field, and after much deliberation decide that we are looking at four song sparrows. This is only our second song sparrow sighting on the Caltech bird walk,

the other occurring on week 40 of 1992 (i.e., over 20 years ago). We have no word on how many birds were involved in that first sighting but the timing is consistent with a similar style of occurrence.

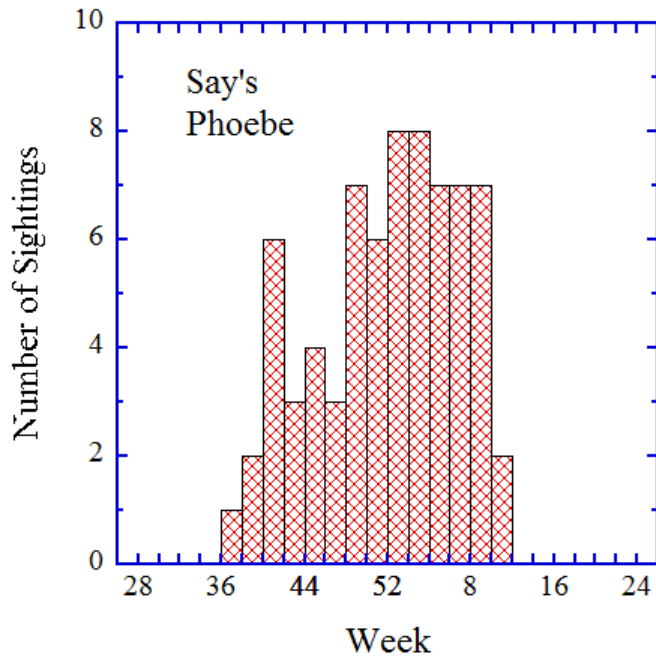
Apparently, the birding gods decided that we hadn't had enough mystery birds, so we met another one on the grassy center of the track. We saw it immediately as we approached the track but it kept his back towards us. Usually, the gate is closed and you have to go all the way around to Wilson to gain access, which is another way of saying that it wouldn't happen. However, today the gate is open and we take full advantage. Alan and I walk towards the bird along the access road and then cross over the track to the oval. We were still only getting views from the back. Alan thinks he sees a flash of russet from the front and starts to think in terms of a robin but it's not a very satisfying thought. The bird appeared to be making hawking forays and forced flushes caused by the lawn mower. He wasn't acting like a robin. He is gradually moving towards the south side of the track without giving any more useful hints to identity. Finally, whether annoyed by the tractor or wary of our slow approach or the slapping slog of joggers, it is all too much. He takes off towards the buildings bounding the west side of the track. I hear Alan pronounce judgment with a "Say's phoebe!" He pulls out his list to write down the species while I follow the bird's flight. There, fortuitously, as he crosses open sky between buildings is a soaring bird in the distance. I drop the Say's for the moment and focus in on the raptor. It's an easy id, an adult red-tailed hawk. I only mention this because soaring specks are the usual purview of Viveca. Clearly, I have the talent too. All I need is to see 7 or 8 x better than I can and have a knack for looking in the right 0.1% of the sky at just the right moment. Piece of cake. So, I steal a speck from Viveca. This goes into my cup of birding triumphs, which currently contains my great and only auditory victory over Darren Dowell (a woodpecker drumming = woodpecker, species), which he completely missed while his ears were primed for high frequency vocalizations. It doesn't matter that my woodpecker, species was later expunged by a nice visual on a Nuttall's, just as it doesn't matter that Viveca wasn't out on the track with us. Victory, like a life list, bends to any definition.

Say's phoebes have been a few to several time per year type of visitor to Caltech since the late nineties. The periodic spike in sightings for a given year is almost certainly the result of an individual deciding to stay on campus for an extended period of time (2003, 2009, and 2010 all have at least one stretch of five or more successive weeks with a Say's phoebe). Our Say's will be wintering in the area, although



probably not on campus and he will be the first wintering bird to leave. We have no winter sightings of a Say's phoebe later than week 10, which is just about the time that serious blooming with attendant insects begins in our local deserts. Say's phoebes are aridity experts but you still want to time breeding to maximize the available protein load for your chicks. I leave you with a shot of a Say's phoebe taken some time ago at Upper Newport Bay.

The date: 9/25/2013
 The week number: 39
 The walk number: 1214
 The weather: 75 F, partly cloudy



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

The birds (25):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 7 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 2 Acorn Woodpecker
- 4 American Crow
- 5 Lesser Goldfinch
- 3 Black Phoebe
- 1 Mallard
- 16 Bushtit
- 3 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 Warbling Vireo
- 4 Song Sparrow
- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 1 Black-chinned Hummingbird
- 2 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 2 Common Raven
- 1 Swift, Species
- 1 Turkey Vulture
- 1 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 3 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 4 Parrot, Species
- 1 House Wren



--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
 Alan Cummings,
 10/21/13