

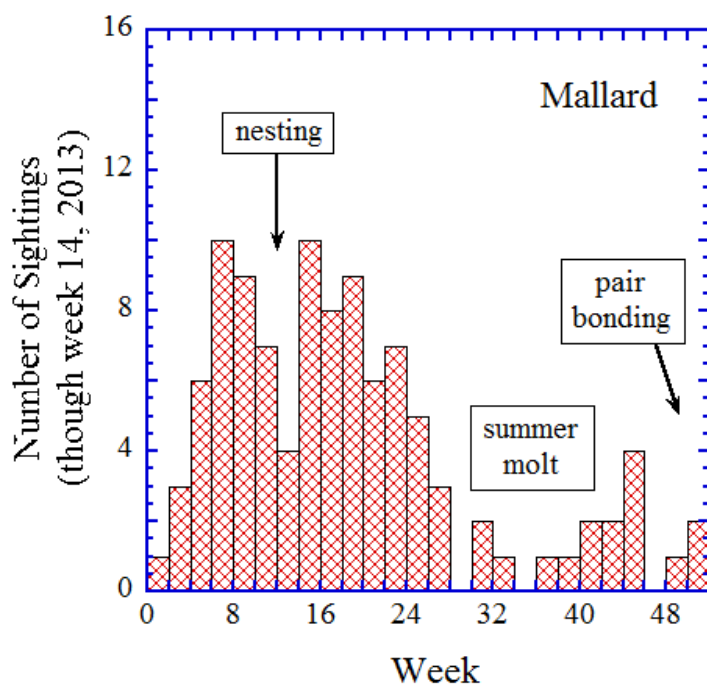
10/30/13

There is something primeval touching an owl as he flies across the disk of a moon. It is as if I had crossed the Humber on a cold night with a high tide and held only the slender hope of a glaive to bring me home again. I've twice seen an owl's disk but it is a marmorated moon that holds the sequined keening of a birding life. I am looking at a hunter's moon with binoculars, simply because it is so inviting. I have no thought to look for more but I find it wrapped in a couple seconds of nocturnal migration as a stream of birds cut across the moon. I glean uninvited some tiny fraction of a bird's life but in this hollow form is that little I absorb from a quickly scattered pulse.

Presence can be intense but I can also feel the reedy pulse of absence. Perhaps, I expected a bird but didn't see him at all. Perhaps, I saw the same bird four weeks running and then didn't see him in week five. Perhaps, I saw one on Tuesday but not on Wednesday or up in the foothills in the morning but not at Caltech. They are all gone. Some were never here. Some flitted in front of me for a day or two but now are in Tijuana or foraging in a yard full of heavenly bamboo clinging to the backside of Temple City. For the many who could have been here, I have only a general and vague sense of absence. The overall numbers drop. I am forced to confront an empirical fact because it breeds in the records. "It is what it is" but if I feel this ebbing as a loss, I have to tell myself to cheer up. A migrating bird that passed me by is a bird that survived to see me or not. It was no small feat. I should live a vicarious success and hope to see him in the spring!

In addition to posting a record last week, the walk was lathered in rare and interesting birds. This week, we seem to be on the backside of a major migratory pulse. Even though the back end of the walk brought us out of a species total duplicating the median, the overall sense of the walk was one of absence. Nevertheless, we ended with a perfectly respectable species total of 21, which is a beat above the median of 17 for week 44. We were in no serious danger of matching the record low of 11 but also no threat to the record high of 26.

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



As I hinted above, bird walks are about absence as well as presence. This is especially noticeable because we lie along a major flyway for migratory birds along the west coast but we can also see it in locally resident birds. The mallards were absent on this walk, which makes two weeks in a row. There were four mallards in the pond on Monday, a drake with a hen who seemed content with the arrangement and two wannabe males looking to steal her. Since the only job of a drake is to drive rival males away from his mate we will, eventually, stabilize at two ducks. On Tuesday, there were no ducks. On Wednesday, there were no ducks. So, I have only an absence to

describe. It was disappointing but not particularly surprising. I reproduce a previously shown plot of sightings for mallards by week and, based on this, we should expect no more than the odd sighting between now and early next year. On the other hand, one should never underestimate the drawing power of cat food.

Absence can be place as well as time. We have a tendency to alter the past to suit and alter place to suit. Birds tend to alter presence to suit. Leave Hahamonga as an oak filled wash and it becomes one of the best birding habitats in the county. That's the way it is. Dig it all out to remove sediment and you have an avian desert. That's the way it is likely to be.

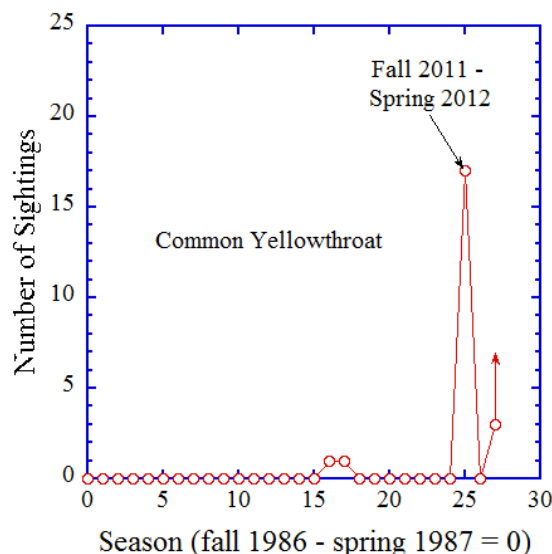
Northern flickers are in town. I had a couple of them camped out in my yard over the weekend but we have yet to see one on the walk this season (they were last seen on week 11). Our chances of seeing one over the next two or three of walks are fairly good, as relatively rare birds go, but if that doesn't happen, we will probably have to wait until deep winter when bad weather in the mountains will drive some of them down to us.

We have been getting lazy when it comes to hummingbirds because of the high concentration of these birds the hummingbird lady's feeders have been supporting. This week, we come to the end of Tournament Park and find no feeders. Hopefully, this reflects a global cleaning exercise or a desire to convince hummingbirds that should be migrating to do so. The hummingbird lady brought us no hummingbirds. We had to work for them. As we turned onto Holliston, we had only a "hummingbird, species" but the silk floss trees are still in flower and we easily collected Anna's and Allen's hummingbirds glossing pink.

I mentioned that the totals rose sharply in the last part of the walk, moving us from less than mediocre to respectable. We netted one additional species by picking up Selasphorus and Anna's hummingbirds on Holliston (thereby expunging a hummingbird, species). The Red Door yielded a house sparrow grubbing for coffee cake and another Nuttall's (in the sycamore just outside Chandler). As we continued walking towards Dabney, we heard the baritone bubbles of a raven and were eventually able to red shift him to his perch on the antenna on top of Spalding. We were happy to get all of these birds but the overture's crescendo came in a play of three actors near the Throop ponds. The Greek chorus is brought to you by one bird who needs no introduction. He is a great entertainer and a great communicator. He also has a wonderful singing voice. When things are not going a house wren's way, he will rise above the bushes to properly curse the source. Our house wren had a lot to say, none of it complimentary. He did not bring a new species as we had seen a house wren along the driveway between Tournament Park and Morrisroe but he defined the theater, worked the lighting, and set the stage. Our second player was a Bewick's wren foraging in the Indian hawthorn, slowly working his way north. He appeared to

ignore the house wren and at first we thought that this was the end of a two-act play. There was, however, another. On the ground in all his black-cowled glory is an adult male common yellowthroat.

This is our third common yellowthroat sighting of the year. The other two (weeks 37 and 38) were likely migration birds and might have ended up as far south as northern South America. However, this week's bird is different. Common yellowthroat migration through Caltech is pretty much done by mid-October. So, this guy



is looking for a winter home. He may decide he likes somebody else's bushes better than ours but he isn't going to Cancun.

We have 22 sightings of common yellowthroats on the Caltech bird walk, 17 of them from week 46 of 2011 through week 25 of 2012, when we had a wintering male. We also saw a juvenile/female at various times but we never saw them together. Nor did we see any juveniles, but the fact that we had yellowthroat sightings well into June suggests that we had a breeding pair. I have high hopes.

The date: 10/30/2013

The week number: 44

The walk number: 1219

The weather: 66 F, sunny

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

The birds (21):

- 1 House Sparrow
- 1 Mourning Dove
- 3 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 2 Acorn Woodpecker
- 1 American Crow
- 1 European Starling
- 15 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 2 Townsend's Warbler
- 2 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 5 Black Phoebe
- 2 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 2 House Wren
- 2 Red-tailed Hawk
- 1 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 2 Hummingbird, Selasphorus
- 1 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 1 Common Raven
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Common Yellowthroat

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
11/7/13