

11/13/13:

During the late fall and winter, we tend to think of respectable walks as those with 20 or more different species. This feeds in the merit of simplicity but it's an arbitrary number that misses the cadence of conditions and the quality of looks and sounds. This week we fell just short of numerical respectability with 19, in spite of grumbles about the walk being overly long (more than an hour and a half) and it was well short of the record of 26 set in 2011. Still, given the August-like weather, we did quite well and, from a rare bird perspective, we did exceedingly well. Perhaps the raw numbers for next week will be better. The record is a local minimum (22 versus 26 and 25 for adjacent weeks) and, more interestingly, we have matched or set a species total record every other week for the last ten weeks (i.e. five records in ten weeks). We are apparently due.

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

Often you can infer something about an individual bird based on patterns derived from other members of the species as their lives intersect your own but with a very rare bird, there is only occurrence. You have to accept it as it is, a confused bird, a lost soul, a vagrant who in this case would almost certainly prefer to be in the middle of a flock, almost any flock, but has no clue about where to find one. Our rare bird was first seen at the south end of the north athletic field by Vicky and then Alan. They got a brief look at the bird on the ground but from a considerable distance and it then flew off to the south before they could make much of it other than it seemed decidedly abnormal. Now, the route for the bird walk takes us along the baseball field, which is generally our best spot for junketing grassland and meadow loving birds, like the pipits and meadowlarks of the past few weeks. We then move over to the rump end of the old Maintenance yard and, finally, to the track, which has another large grassy area and one more opportunity to see birds that like to forage in open areas. This time, we arrive at the track and can see Vicky's bird. It has an odd form but, once again, it is too far away for easy identification. We need a closer look. Alan surveys the numerical lock guarding against unfettered vehicle access, staring for a moment, as if he could decipher the code through the shearing force of his mental will. In the old Maintenance yard, Alan was king. He had a key but he doesn't know the code for this gate and he hasn't the magic for an entry. He mumbles something about not being in the best of odors with the Athletic Department and turns away, a little downcast. Vicky's bird was a likely loss. We are, however, in luck. The gate at the corner next to the utility shed is unlocked, so I wander through the entry and out onto the track, moving towards our mystery bird while the rest of the party moves on to Tournament Park. As I get closer, the bird and I begin to dance. It is clearly aware of me. It was, after all, just me, a grounds person on a lawn mower, fortunately working on the other side of the track, and the bird, so I wasn't hard to keep track of. It keeps its back to me, foraging in a seemingly nonchalant manner but always, somehow, in the wrong direction for me to pick up a better field marking. To the extent I and my bad hearing can tell, the bird is silent. It looks familiar and yet not familiar. The foraging behavior seems familiar and yet it is not quite familiar enough. I'm sure this is a species I know but I must have had easy clean looks in the past that didn't require

working with the little this bird was willing to give me. So, we slowly dance our way around a big muddy patch in the center of grassy oval. Finally, the bird sees something new. It grabs a worm and in the excitement, turns. I have a sudden wealth of field markings. There is butter yellow throat bounded below by a dark band running almost straight across with a necklace of light brown streaks shimmering underneath and extending part way down an otherwise off white breast. There is a prominent cheek patch and a streak above the eye. We have a female horned lark! I suppose that I should have been surprised by the worm. Horned larks tend to be granivores during the winter, although they feed their young almost exclusively on insects, but there wasn't any hesitation. That worm didn't last long. I continue watching for a couple of minutes and allow her to nonchalantly gain some distance. She decides to fly back to the north field and I exit to rejoin the bird walk. We both have what we want.



This photo, taken from <http://www.featheredphotography.com/blog/2011/02/17/horned-larks-blowin-in-the-wind/> gives a rough idea of what our bird looked like.

Generally speaking, if you want to reliably see a horned lark or a lot of horned larks, you should get in a car and drive out to Antelope Valley. If the sole purpose of your Lancaster day is to see horned larks, you might well come up with a thousand (they like to flock once breeding season is over and the territorial system breaks down). It's a

different story at Caltech. Horned larks are as close to being unheard of as you can get without being unheard of. Our only other sighting came on week 45 of 1996. There is no report on how many horned larks there were in 1996 or what the circumstances of the sighting might have been (institutional memory, aka Alan, professes no recollection) but the fact that it came on nearly the same week (45 versus 46) hints at a commonality in cause.

There are 121 named species on the Caltech bird walk along with an assortment of "X, species" entries (Ashish's oak titmouse seen in the old Maintenance yard back in March was our most recent first ever sighting of a new species) but just as nobody, including massively active birders like Darren Dowell or Mark Scheel, can hope to see every species ever reported for California, Los Angeles County, or Pasadena in any given year or even in any given lifetime, we can never see more than a fraction of the Caltech total in any given year. Our horned lark is named species number 70 for 2013, so we have seen 58% of the species on our integrated list. This may not sound overly impressive but 70 species is easily the best we've ever done and there still remains another half dozen weeks to run across some additional new species for the year. Who knows? Maybe a reddish egret will get confused and decide to fly over the campus. Previous years of note include 2011 with 66 species, 2006, 2007, and 2012 with 67 species each and the Feenstra special of 2002 (68 species and 62% of the named species on the bird list at the time). So, we are a lock for the record of most different named species in a calendar year. We are also still in the running for most total species sightings (including "X, species" entries). We are currently at 953, which is fifth best all time. The most prolific years, all post Station fire, are 2013 (953 and counting), 2009 (969), 2012 (1032), 2010 (1046) and 2011 (1088). If we averaged the same as last year for weeks 47 to 52, which is a tall order, we would end up at 1079.

The date: 11/13/2013

The week number: 46

The walk number: 1221

The weather: 91 F, sunny

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

The birds (19):

- 3 Rock Pigeon
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 1 House Sparrow
- 4 House Finch
- 3 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 2 Common Raven
- 25 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 15 Bushtit
- 3 European Starling

- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 25 Cedar Waxwing
- 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 6 Red-masked Parakeet
- 2 Black Phoebe
- 1 Horned Lark
- 5 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 1 Band-tailed Pigeon

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
11/21/13