

11/20/13:

The bizarre continues. Starting with week 37, we have either set or tied the record for number of different species sighted every other week. It has happened with Alan and without, under blue skies and in the rain, on cool days and in unseasonably warm weather. Twenty two ties the record for week 47 set in 2011. It is well above the minimum of 11 and median of 18. That's six records in eleven weeks, none in succession. A careful time series analysis would suggest an off-week next week (week 48) and a record the following week. However, in week 49 we will be up against one of the strongest species count records we have. Last year, we had three successive days of wall to wall rain dawning a Noah's sun on the fourth. Every bird was hungry, active, and beyond shy. We ended with the only walk in December to ever record 30+ species. Will there be rain in two weeks? We will have a true test of the series.

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

Arden and the baseball field were quiet but the oak tree outside the new Child Care Center was hopping. Usually, this tree offers no more than the odd hummingbird but this time there were yellow-rumped warblers with a sprinkling of lesser goldfinches and the call of a Nuttall's woodpecker that Vicky and Alan picked up. They weren't quite ready to call the Nuttall's based on the vocalization but we later got a clear visual to lock down the identification. A western bluebird and some house finches were soon added to the mix. It was probably a freakish event that will leave us with a sense of the desolation next week but this was easily the most productive that oak has been during my tenure on the walk.

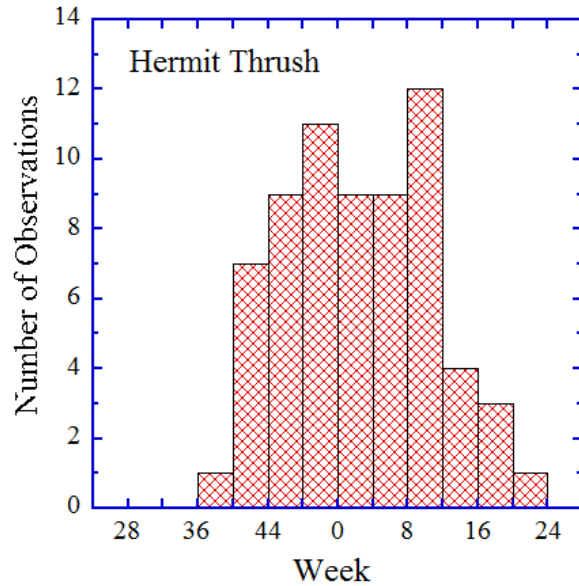
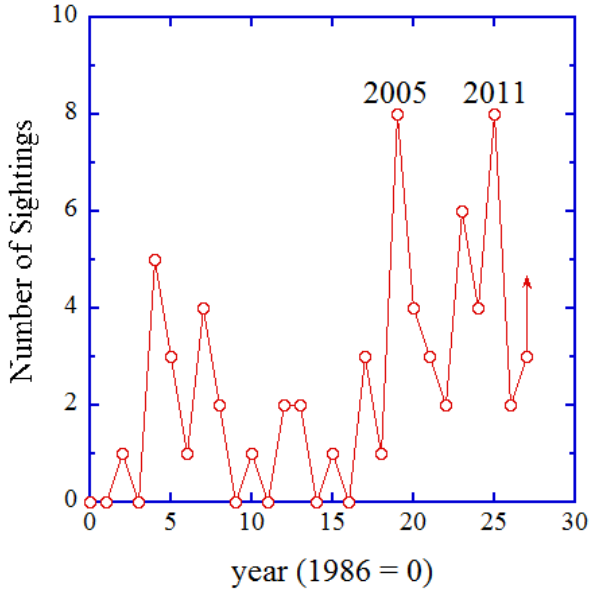
The oak was the highlight place but the highlight birds came later. We walk from the north Athletic field over to REOMY, the rump end of the old Maintenance Yard, which was left after construction of the Child Care Center. Usually, the best spot is at the end of



the yard where it abuts a neighboring property but this time there is a small tree just inside the Child Care Center that is full of American goldfinches. I think this is an easy bird of the week but then Vivica belts out "hermit thrush!" She is looking at a tree further into the Child Care Center. The thrush is sprawled like a Christmas bulb on a tree so thick with birds that you have two or three in every view. We have perhaps half a minute of observation before both trees explode in a great visual whoosh; several dozen birds fly over to the oak in front of the Child Care Center and we lose the thrush, who had probably been checking out the interlopers. A few seconds later, the trees shred another two or three dozen goldfinches and then some stragglers in progressively smaller pulses. The photo is taken from http://sdakotabirds.com/species_photos/hermit_thrush_2.

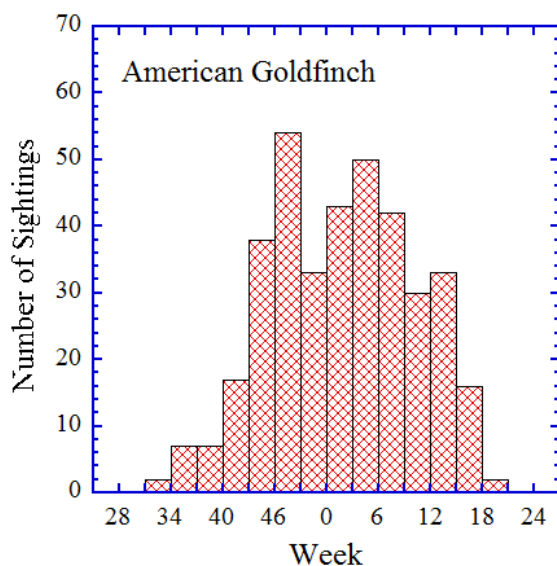
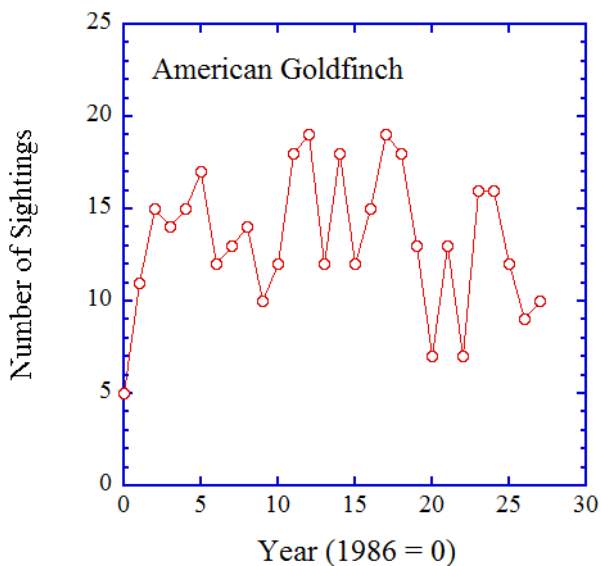
htm. Our bird had better contrast between tail and back but the pose is similar.

Hermit thrushes are winter residents in southern California and Caltech, although not providing very good habitat, is just attractive enough to make a hermit thrush sighting exciting but not shocking. Over the last decade, we have been getting at least two or



three sightings a year. If we are lucky enough to have a wintering bird establish territory that spills over onto campus, this can treble. The record number of hermit thrush sightings in a given year is only eight (2005 and 2011), so hermit thrushes are always a welcome mini-surprise.

We probably have our neighbors to thank for most of our hermit thrush sightings. We do occasionally see them well within Caltech property (e.g., trees close to the driveway by Morrisroe have yielded a few of sightings as have the foundation plantings along Holliston) but our best opportunities come within a meter or so of a property boundary with one of our neighbors where a hermit thrush's territory drifts over into Caltech (hermit thrushes have an affinity for interfaces). So, this week, we have our first hermit



thrush of the season and third of the year and, naturally, having just extolled the virtues of perimeter viewing, I am forced to the admission that this was an atypical occurrence but one I would very much like to repeat.

Hermit thrushes breed north and west of us. So, we don't see any in the summer because there aren't any to be had. The distribution of our sightings of American goldfinches is superficially similar to that of hermit thrushes (i.e., basically a winter visitor) although sightings are several times more frequent, perhaps because hermit thrushes are generally loners during the winter and American goldfinches tend to travel flocks. American goldfinches are resident in the western half of the state, so if they wanted to spend some of their summers at Caltech, they easily could. In practice, the Americans leave the Caltech lowlands to the lesser goldfinches and summer or early fall sightings are quite rare. Sightings do extend back to week 31 (early August) but all of our sightings between weeks 31 and 35 come from one of the three years 1994, 1996, and 1997. If you knocked out those three years, you would be hard pressed to tell the difference in pattern between the two species.

The date: 11/20/2013

The week number: 47

The walk number: 1222

The weather: 62 F, cloudy

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

The birds (22):

- 10 House Finch
- 2 Anna's Hummingbird
- 1 Acorn Woodpecker
- 20 American Crow
- 1 Rock Pigeon
- 1 European Starling
- 25 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 2 Common Raven
- 40 Lesser Goldfinch
- 2 Western Bluebird
- 1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
- 50 American Goldfinch
- 1 Hermit Thrush
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 5 Black Phoebe
- 35 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 30 Bushtit
- 1 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 1 Townsend's Warbler
- 1 Wren, Species
- 1 Say's Phoebe

1 Swift, Species

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
1/22/14