

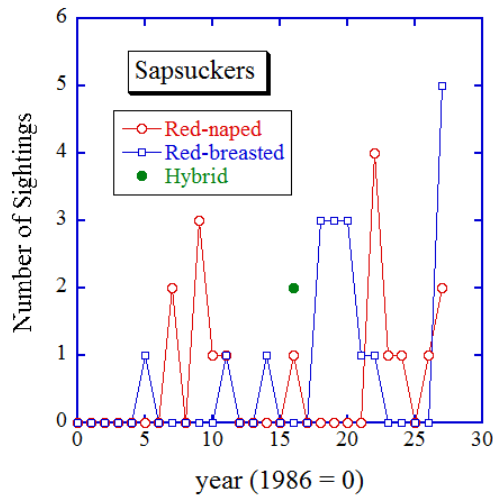
12/11/13

Alan was out of town, so as keeper of the pad responsible for taking down sightings, I decided that bringing a camera would be too much of a distraction for me. This was a big mistake. We had a five woodpecker species day and some of them were highly photogenic. So, with no photos, I have only memories. The numbers were consistent with a mid-December walk. We ended the walk with 20 species, just above the median of 19 for a week 50 walk. The record of 28 set in 2007 was completely out of reach but we were far above the record low of nine (2003).

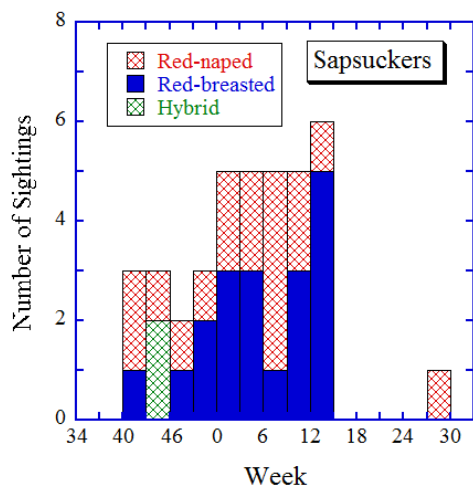
See the plots at http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/species_time.html and

http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

Other than the usual large number of yellow-rumped warblers, it was a very bad warbler day. We didn't see or hear any. Bad sparrow days are not uncommon anymore but it is always a disappointment to find a complete vacuum. Woodpeckers were a different matter. We picked up a downy woodpecker at Arden, a red-naped sapsucker in REOMY (rump end of the old Maintenance yard), a Nuttall's woodpecker by Morrisroe, acorn woodpeckers at the north end of campus, and a red-breasted sapsucker in one of the big cedars by the old ticket office. This is the first time we have seen both types of sapsucker on the same walk and, although I haven't checked, it also seems likely that this is also the first five woodpecker day. We were just a flicker away from a six woodpecker day. Too bad, northern flickers are rare captures around week 50 (they are more likely to be seen in January or November).

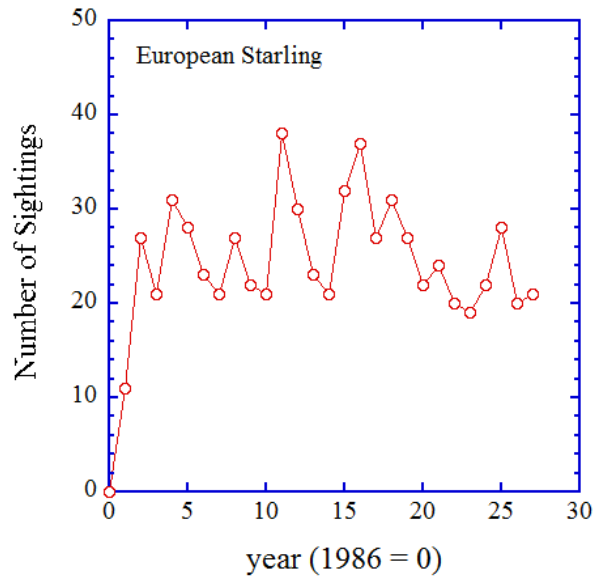


There are a number of reasons why we don't tend to see red-naped and red-breasted sapsuckers together. The most important is that both species are fairly rare for Caltech with a 1-2% sightings frequency for each species (17-19 sightings in 1225 walks). Moreover, from the sightings by year plot, it is apparent that we are much more likely to see one of the species in a given year than the other. We can expect to see the odd bird on migration and that individual can be of either species but there is really only one good sapsucker territory to be encountered on our walk and, therefore, only one sapsucker a season is likely to winter on campus. The prime territory extends from the sapsucker tree in Tournament Park north to the Maintenance yard, or what is left of it. Last winter, a red-breasted sapsucker owned this territory and we got four sightings of this bird between weeks 3 and 13. This winter, a red-naped sapsucker appears to have taken possession. We have a decent chance of acquiring several red-naped sightings this winter but I expect that we will be lucky to see another red-breasted sapsucker.



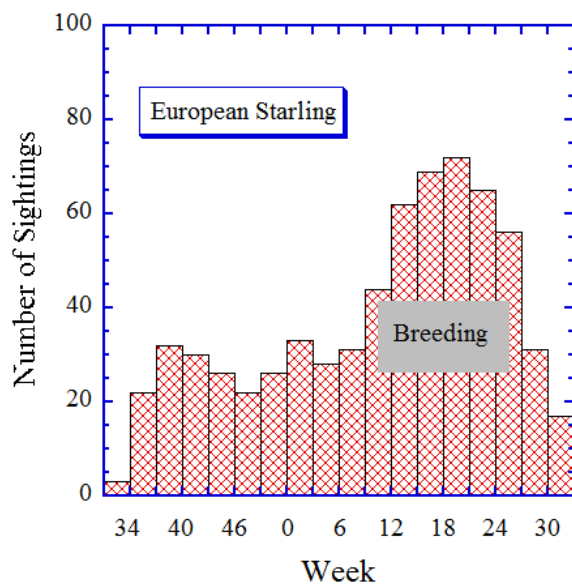
Setting aside the strange occurrence of a San Gabriel Valley sapsucker in week 27 of 2009, all of our sightings have come between week 40 and week 13 the following spring, as shown in the histogram to the left. We seem to capture some birds on migration but sightings between weeks 48 or

so and week 13 appear to be dominated by winter residents. This is when the sapsucker tree can bear a bloom of sapsuckers.



As a counterpoint to the sapsuckers, I thought I would look at a much more common but equally idiosyncratic species that we also encountered on this walk. Overall, we are about twenty times more likely to see a European starling on the walk than we are a sapsucker, although, as we will see, this is mildly misleading because the sightings frequency for both of these species has a significant seasonal component.

European starlings are permanent residents at Caltech and among the more common captures on our walk but the frequency belies a geographically restricted provenance. The vast majority of our starlings are seen or heard along a strip parallel to California Boulevard, including the three we reported for this walk (hanging out in palm trees along California). It also belies a strong seasonal component and, yet, at 7 AM or 5 PM the seasonality would be far more muted. So, why is noon such a tough venue for our starlings and why do we see as many starlings between weeks 10 and 25 as we do the rest of the year combined? The answer lies in the tendency for starlings to roost in a favored area. They will forage nearby if food is available, particularly during the breeding season, but they are more likely to travel to a high density concentration of food that could be a dozen miles away. So, most of our starlings fly onto campus around dusk, roost here, and then fly out in the morning. In effect, we are a starling bedroom community. When the commuters leave, it becomes a ghost town. Things change during the breeding season. Some of the



starlings nest on campus and they are here during the day. Now, a Caltech female (mostly) who is incubating eggs cannot be zipping over to Glendale for breakfast. She incubates in bouts of less than an hour and then leaves the nest to forage locally or at least get a respite in a palm tree. We see her and Alan marks it down. She ignores us. After the eggs hatch, both parents generally feed the chicks and we can see them as the conveyer belt wends back and forth to and from the nest. Alan marks them down. They ignore us. We move on.

The date: 12/11/2013

The week number: 50

The walk number: 1225

The weather: 70 F, sunny

The walkers: John Beckett, Kent Potter, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Vicky Brennan,
The birds (20):

- 3 Scrub Jay
- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 11 House Finch
- 3 Acorn Woodpecker
- 1 American Crow
- 3 European Starling
- 35 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 1 Downy Woodpecker
- 3 Western Bluebird
- 4 Common Raven
- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 4 Black Phoebe
- 1 Red-naped Sapsucker
- 1 Bewick's Wren
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 1 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 3 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 5 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 20 Cedar Waxwing
- 1 Red-breasted Sapsucker

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
1/27/14