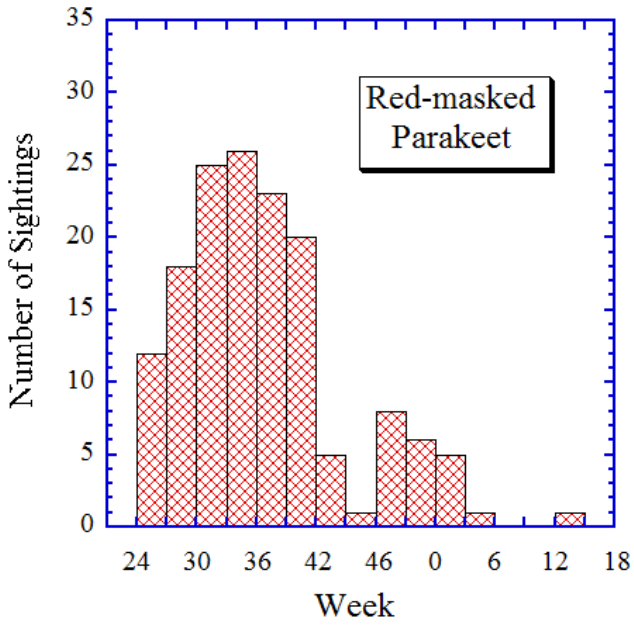
12/18/13

This was a pleasant walk with a couple of easily grasped highlights. We also did well in terms of the number of species seen with a total of 24, which was nevertheless below the record for week 51 of 27. We were, however, well above the median of 20 and the record low of 13.

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

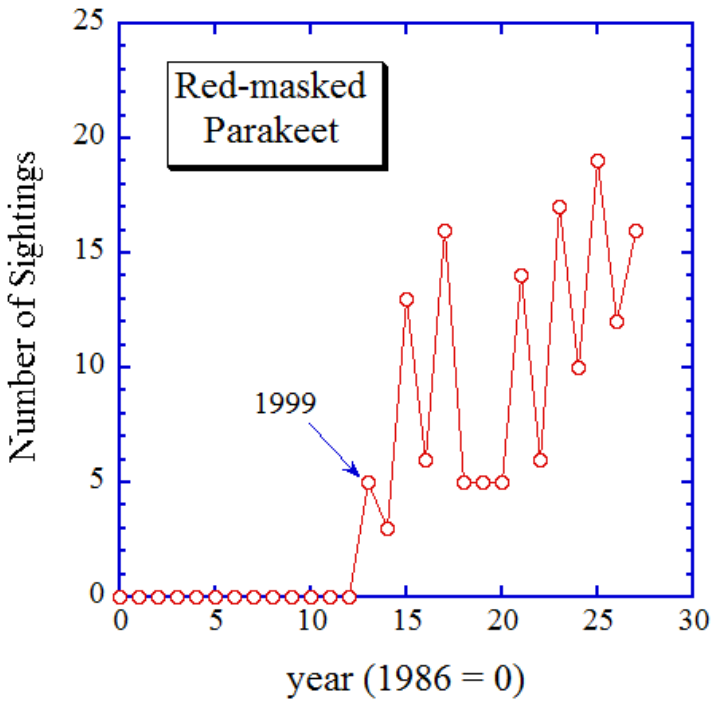
http://birdwalks.caltech.edu/bird_data/two_plots.htm

We saw a flock of American robins in REOMY (rump end of the old maintenance yard), surprisingly, a first of the year for us. It was tempting to write the robins up as our bird of the week but my best photo of these particular birds was not something I would care to share, whereas my best photo for this walk (parakeet) was acceptable. So, rather than pull up an old robin photo, I will pass them over. Besides, these robins were an odd bunch. They moved around a lot but branches were missed and twigs twirled instead of balanced. My best guess is that some or all of this flock was composed of juveniles.



We heard red-masked parakeets near the tennis courts and saw a flock of perhaps a dozen fly over to Tournament Park, so we were expecting to get a good visual. When we arrive a few minutes later, we were not disappointed and they included the cheery bird pictured on the left. This is a juvenile. Upon fledging, he would have been all green but you can see a few red feathers. Red will eventually cover the front half of the head (hence red-masked rather than something like red-headed) but these feathers are just starting to come in. Our bird has been through basic parakeet training but is probably only about four months old. The gray eyes are also consistent with a first year bird (an adult would have had brown eyes). This parakeet may provide a clue to the pattern of red-masked parakeet sightings at Caltech. Most of our sightings occur in the summer and fall, which includes the breeding season for this species. We typically begin seeing them around week 25 (mid-June) with sightings frequency peaking around week 34 and declining into the fall. However, late in the year, we get another pulse that tails off into the new year. So, why is there a divot between weeks 42-46? Is this food related? Maybe. Red-masked parakeets don't migrate per se but they do move around during the year to take advantage of food items as they become available and this is highly seasonal. If you are in a breeding area in their native Ecuador and Peru, you won't see a non-breeding flock and, if you are in a non-

breeding area, the parakeets will disappear during the breeding season (the rainy season of the first quarter of the year for them). In the San Gabriel Valley, it's a little fuzzier. Breeding season is in the summer but let's count backward for our bird. It's week 51 and our bird is about 16 weeks old. He would have fledged about eight weeks ago, around week 43 and his egg would have been laid in a tree cavity about eight weeks before that, around week 35 (red-masked parakeets are secondary tree hole nesters in southern California; in Ecuador and Hawaii, they are generally secondary cliff hole nesters). After fledging (i.e., week 43), our bird's parents would have begun training by slowly introducing him to the local cuisine, foraging techniques, and hazard avoidance. So, one possibility is that the fall divot reflects juvenile training and that these birds have now graduated to a non-breeding flock. It could, of course, also be that there is better food to be had elsewhere during divot time. Regardless, our bird is almost certainly still being fed by his parents and will continue to get food from them for another month or so. Initially, we thought there might be a dozen or so parakeets in Tournament Park based on the flock we saw fly into the park and visuals we picked up once we got there, including our friend shown above. However, as we approach Morrisroe, we hear a great raucous disturbance from behind and, turning, we see about fifty parakeets swirl up into the sky and fly off to the northeast. The unusually large flock (we usually see ten or so) may reflect an unusually large number of juvenile birds.



Red-masked parakeets are a relatively new phenomenon on the Caltech bird walk. We first saw one in 1999 and we have been encountering them with more or less increasing frequency ever since. I want to emphasize that this is not a subtle species. The absence of red-masked parakeets on the Caltech bird list is equivalent to the absence of red-masked parakeets at Caltech. They were first reported in the San Gabriel Valley in the late 80s. As far as I know, they are not official ABA birds but they are clearly increasing in abundance in our area through a successful feral breeding program. This is probably a good thing because they are "near threatened" in Ecuador.

When we arrive at the Throop ponds near the end of the walk, I realize that I haven't taken any pictures of our resident mallards. So, first I offer portraits of the happy couple (drake on the left and hen on the right). Very well fed, they are fat and sassy. However, this is not an Eden. In the fall, the female chooses a mate. He has to fight other mallards for her attention but, once gained, his primary job becomes a season long fending off of all the other drakes. If he is not good enough for this, the hen may trade him in. Every species has its own way of determining fitness for breeding purposes and this is how the mallards do it. The trade-off is that the males put a great deal of effort into demonstrating fitness and none into raising chicks. This is not a point for denigration. The male is not good for much other than driving off new suitors but the species has decided that this is the best way on average to make the best ducks. We can see a microcosm of this reality in the third photo where there are three ducks. The

two closest to the bottom are the current couple. You will notice that the male next to the hen has a splotchy breast compared to the second male. When two drakes square off, one may decide to turn tail without a fight but if both are determined, you get a confrontation in which each tries to bite the breast of the other, leading to splotchy breasts in dominant ducks. The second drake has a bright and smooth colored breast. He is not one of the fighters but he would like to be a lover. How does that work? The odds are against him but he is hoping to pick up a mate by outlasting the current male or taking advantage of a lapse in concentration. Who knows? Maybe, the male will drop dead or be hurt badly enough to defeat. It does happen. Maybe the hen will then accept him as a mate without testing further against rival males. Patience is the only option. For now, he tests the tolerance distance of the current mate, turns tail against any direct confrontation, and lives for disaster.

The date: 12/18/2013
The week number: 51
The walk number: 1226
The weather: 71 F, partly cloudy

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Vicky Brennan, John Beckett, Kent Potter, Viveca Sapin-Areeda,
The birds (24):

2 Scrub Jay
3 Northern Mockingbird
2 Mourning Dove
1 Anna's Hummingbird
3 Acorn Woodpecker
13 American Crow
25 Yellow-rumped Warbler
3 Mallard
2 Yellow-chevroned Parakeet
25 Bushtit
3 Band-tailed Pigeon
1 Say's Phoebe
22 Lesser Goldfinch
10 American Robin
6 Cedar Waxwing
1 Red-whiskered Bulbul
50 Red-masked Parakeet
4 Red-tailed Hawk
2 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
3 Black Phoebe
1 Red-shouldered Hawk
1 Wren, species
6 White-throated Swift
1 Spotted Towhee

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
1/28/14