

12/24/13

During the winter, 20 or more total species is the defining characteristic of a respectable day. If it's 19, we are bemoaning our fate. The arbitrary addition of just one bird leaves us feeling a sense of accomplishment. So, this week brings a walk of 20 species, much lower than the record of 28 set in 2007 but it was above the median of 19, meaning a positive score in Alan's quality scheme, and well above the standard of frustration (13) set in 1998. We feel good. It was a respectable walk.

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

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



Christmas birder count: from left to right, Jane Williams, Alan Cummings, Roy Williams, George Rossman, Jeff Carlblom, Chip O'Connor, and Vivica Sapin-Areeda

All things come to an end that sees a ghosting image and an accounting of our time. I will come to the images shortly but here is a basic accounting. We end the year with 1075 total species, second best all-time after the 1088 of 2011, and 72 named species, best all-time. It is also worth noting that we met 13 new walkers during the year (tied for best all-time with 1999 and 2006).

According to Alan's birding pad, which he constructed in the late 1980s, the nine most common birds of the time were rock pigeon, scrub jay, northern mocking bird, house sparrow, mourning dove, house finch, Anna's hummingbird, acorn woodpecker, and American crow, where I am using the term "common" as an indicator of the fraction of walks showing at least one representative of a given species (i.e., one bird seen 52 weeks in a row would be common but 52 birds seen in one week would not). By number of weeks seen in 2013, the nine most common birds are now **black phoebe** (52 of 52 weeks), Anna's hummingbird and American crow (50), **lesser goldfinch** (49), house finch (45), **bushy tit** (44), **common raven** (41), mourning dove and **Selasphorus hummingbird** (38). So, four of the nine original "common" birds are still top nine birds but times have changed for the others. Mockingbirds (34 weeks) and acorn woodpecker (37) are still common enough to justify the term common but house sparrows (16) and scrub jays (13) are not and a rock pigeon (8) is a far less likely capture than a band-tailed pigeon (35). In 2013, our eight rock pigeon sightings was good enough for 39th most common species (tied with turkey vultures). I don't know how the ravens are going to do if they are defeated by the anti-nesting spikes lining window boxes on the second floor of Parsons-Gates, which must seem like cliff cavities (there must be something about administrative types that doesn't appreciate nature), but I expect they will persevere somewhere on campus, if not at Parsons-Gates.

The last walk of the year seems to attract an unusual crowd. George Rossman came on his annual bird walk, Chip O'Connor came for his second walk all-time, although he has a bigger presence, and Jim Carlblom showed up. Our favorite juvenile birder, Jane, and her father, Roy, also made the trip. One advantage of lugging a camera around is that you can photograph the birders along with the birds. Birders are usually a fractious bunch when it comes to photographing them but they all lined up for the semi-formal portrait I show above.



Well, we must discuss an actual Christmas eve highlight with feathers. I suppose in certain circles, ones that I don't happen to know personally, the bird of the week might have been a tough call but, here, there is no standing on order or even an issue of order. I'm quite sure that a poll of the birders on this bird walk would yield a unanimous decision about who the avian highlight was. In Tournament Park, we always carefully check the sapsucker tree and its immediate neighbors for a possible sapsucker. Both red-naped and red-

breasted sapsuckers have been seen in this tree, so if you see some sort of woodpecker, you need to establish (a) that it is a sapsucker and (b) the type of sapsucker. Now, I am going to give you a Caltech incomplete key to separating a sapsucker from our more common woodpeckers by concentrating solely on the back. A glance should be enough. I grabbed four images from the web (from upper left corner, moving clockwise: <http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/red-breasted-sapsucker-sphyrapicus-ruber/daggetti-subspecies>; <http://www.goldrushcam.com/2007/Linda%20Gast/birds.htm>;

http://www.lilibirds.com/gallery2/v/Owls+and+Woodpeckers/downy+woodpecker/downy_woodpecker_2.jpg.html; http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/acorn_woodpecker/id). So let's follow the circle and see where it takes us. The upper left hand corner shows a red-breasted sapsucker. The back shows a white textured oval pattern on a surrounding solid black matrix. There is usually but not always a distinct black core within the oval. So, if you see that oval, you are dealing with a sapsucker. Compare this with the Nuttall's to the right. He has solid white bars running across the back. There is no confusion. Compare it with the downy in the lower right. She has a big starkly white patch in the middle of the back. It's not splotchy at all. There is no confusion. Compare with the acorn woodpecker at the lower left. He has a solid black back. No confusion. If you see a Caltech sapsucker from the back, a glance should be enough to unambiguously frame it as a sapsucker. As for type, our sapsucker (photo above) shows a very clean white strap across the face (no bleeding of red across it), no red on the breast and the red throat patch was surrounded by black. In particular, there was no red in or below the black collar. We were looking at a red-naped sapsucker.

Now, I want to emphasize that I have just given you a local cheat sheet based on sapsuckers and woodpeckers that appear on the Caltech bird list. This will work for 99.99%+ of the cases we are going to run into on the Caltech walk but it will fail if you try to make it too general [the white wing-bar, which you can see with a good view from the side, including the one for our bird as shown above) is actually more definitive for sapsuckers]. For example, a Williamson sapsucker, which does occasionally show up locally (my neighbor in Sierra Madre once had to take down his hummingbird feeder because a "big black bird with a yellow belly" was bashing the feeder petals), doesn't have the oval on the back.



The date: 12/24/2013

The week number: 52

The walk number: 1227

The weather: 78 F, sunny

The walkers: Alan Cummings, Viveca Sapin-Areeda, Jim Carlblom, Chip O'Connor, John Beckett, George Rossman, Roy Williams, Jane Williams

The birds (20):

- 1 Northern Mockingbird
- 6 House Finch
- 1 Anna's Hummingbird
- 3 Acorn Woodpecker
- 5 American Crow
- 3 Mallard
- 20 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 7 Lesser Goldfinch
- 1 Say's Phoebe
- 1 Turkey Vulture
- 4 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 10 Bushtit
- 1 Red-tailed Hawk
- 3 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 1 Cedar Waxwing
- 3 American Goldfinch
- 1 Red-naped Sapsucker
- 8 Red-masked Parakeet
- 2 Black Phoebe
- 1 Dark-eyed Junco

--- John Beckett

Respectfully submitted,
Alan Cummings,
1/29/14