

Birds of a Feather

When Voyager scientist Alan Cummings isn't thinking about space and crunching numbers related to the mission (see page 10), you might find him scanning the skies and crunching numbers related to another of his passions: bird-watching. Since 1986, he has led a casual group of Caltech birders on weekly walks around campus, keeping a tally of the feathered friends they observe along the way. Cummings posts data and reports from the walks on a Caltech birding website (birdwalks.caltech.edu) and has many plots related to the group's observations pinned up on the walls of his office.

"You see, you can almost set the calendar by yellow-rumped warblers," he says, pointing to one plot that shows the likelihood, by week, of observing the species. "They depart pretty much around week 16 of the year, and they reappear around week 40."

But it's not just seasonal variations that have caught the birders' attention.

They've also noticed long-term trends—both dips and bumps—in some of the bird populations. Take the spotted dove; once seen regularly on campus, the species hasn't been spotted at Caltech since 1996.

"Also, we used to see rock pigeons, scrub jays, mockingbirds, and house sparrows without fail," Cummings says. "A lot of these more common birds are declining on campus, but we're seeing some other species more frequently as well." For example, the group sees many more black phoebes and parakeets than it used to, he says.

All told, Caltech's bird enthusiasts have spotted 123 species on campus, ranging from birds like the rock wren and the golden-crowned sparrow, which each have only been seen once, to the American crow, which has been tallied more than 1,100 times. "Occasionally, we still find a new species," Cummings says. In fact, he marked a major milestone on his "life list" of birds seen around the world, spotting his 1,000th species—a red-lored parrot—on campus in October. —*KF*

