

Howard County, Maryland

May 6, 2000, Second Unofficial Big Day

Joanne Solem

Leaders: Bonnie Ott, Nancy Magnusson, and Joanne Solem. Total participants: 18. Ralph Cullison, Chuck Stirrat, Mary-Jo Betts, Daryl Olson, Joe Harber, Karen Darcy Heffernan, Kevin Heffernan, Susan Polniaszek, Craig Sholley, Lisa Stevens, Jeremy Pierce, Linda Holley, Lynn Holley, Doug Odermatt, Dave Holyoke. Weather: Cool early a.m. to mid-80s p.m., little wind. Time: 6:00 a.m. – 8:40 p.m. Total species: 111. Meeting site: Schooley Mill Park (with Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks coordination to be sure gates were open). Notable species. 19 warbler species total. Lincoln's Sparrow – Schooley Mill Park; Yellow-throated and Cerulean warblers – Marriottsville; Rusty Blackbird - Gwynn Acres Path; American Coot – Centennial Park; Mute Swan – Lake Elkhorn; American Pipit – UMDCF; American Woodcock - Gateway Business Park.

By the time the group reached the west end of Centennial Park at 1:40 p.m., it was well above 80 F. with little breeze and many birders were suffering. Most people spent time on benches in the light shade while a few enthusiasts checked the wildlife end of the park. Next stop was UMDCF. There was no way we were going to thrash through the tall vegetation in the swale in that heat in mid-afternoon. Instead, we drove to the farm, crammed those still with the group into two vehicles, and parked at a spot along Folly Quarter Road overlooking ponds 2 and 3. By standing at the road edge for half an hour scanning and listening, we picked up most of the anticipated species. At 7:30 p.m., we checked off the Mute Swan at Lake Elkhorn and finished the day at Gateway Business Park. Fortunately, there was still sufficient light for everyone to see a perched Grasshopper Sparrow in Ralph's scope. A woodcock started peenting at 8:32 p.m. for the final species of the day. The total of 111 species was a distinct improvement over the first year's 97!

Big Day 1. May 1, 1999. Initial planner: Darius Ecker. Leaders: Bonnie Ott, Ralph Cullison, Nancy Magnusson, and Joanne Solem. Total participants: 12 (names not available). Weather: Cold early (40s the previous night), high in 60s. Time: 7:00 a.m. – 8:30 p.m. Total species: 97. Meeting site: Alpha Ridge Park. Notable species: A low 11 species of warblers for the day. Yellow-throated Warbler - Marriottsville; Rusty Blackbird – Gwynn Acres Path; Mute Swan – Centennial Park; American Black Duck, Pectoral Sandpiper, American Pipit – UMDCF; Sora - Meadowbrook Park; American Woodcock – Gateway Business Park. The list contained no Bald Eagle and no boreal species.

This type of field trip was attempted at the suggestion of Darius Ecker, an avid county birder. The initial aim was to see if a HCBC field trip could tally 100 species in the county in a single day. Looking back at how the day developed, it was a minor miracle that the group came as close to that goal as it did. Darius planned the itinerary and was the designated leader. Participants reserved with him and were given the time and meeting location. Because sites along the Patapsco River were among his favorites and most had limited parking, he chose to meet to carpool at Alpha Ridge Park at 7:00 a.m. knowing the gate would be open by that time. Unfortunately, either the night before or the morning of the trip, Darius contacted Field Trip Chair Bonnie Ott and told her he would be unable to participate, so the first Big Day developed "on the fly."

Although the day was chilly early, it would have been beneficial to have started earlier. When 12 people showed up, it was apparent that multiple leaders would be necessary. Bonnie named Ralph, Nancy, and Joanne as co-leaders. The group, in two vans, headed to Henryton, followed by Marriottsville, and then Daniels. Those locations were singularly unproductive or barely so. For a date as early as May 1st the northern part of the county is not the place to be on a chilly morning. Eventually, Bonnie suggested we

try Rockburn Branch Park where she had recently had success with migrants, so we headed to the west section of that park. After several hours at Rockburn, the group moved to Race Road Wetlands and then zigzagged to the central lakes covering sites in the southern and central parts of the county. The trip worked as far west as the UMDCF by late afternoon, picked up vehicles at Alpha Ridge Park before sunset, and finished at Gateway Business Park. Two American Woodcock cooperated as soon as we arrived at that last site, so shortly after 8:30 p.m. the initial Big Day field trip came to an end.

Considering the amount of wasted time during the day shuttling cars and crisscrossing portions of the county, 97 species seemed an acceptable total, though hardly one worth celebrating. The success of the effort, however, could be gauged by participants' enthusiasm. As people departed from Gateway, plans were already being made for a May 2000 Big Day.