

Howard County, Maryland

May 3, 2003, Fifth Unofficial Big Day

Joanne Solem

Leaders: Bonnie Ott, Nancy Magnusson, and Joanne Solem (also Recorder). Ralph Cullison carried a scope and a digital camera. Total participants: 9. Karen Darcy Heffernan, Kevin Heffernan, Emmalyn Holdridge, Daryl Olson, Helen Zeichner. Weather: Partly cloudy early, becoming overcast and remaining cool most of the morning, clearing by afternoon with highs in the 70s; little wind. Meeting site: Rockburn Elementary School. Time: 6:00 a.m. – 9:50 p.m. **Total species: 119. This was the single day record until an official Big Day team of Russ Ruffing, Harry Fink, and Matt Rogosky notched 122 in 2013.**

Notable species: 21 warbler species total. There had not been a major overnight movement of migrants, but by covering Rockburn Branch Park thoroughly (four hours) we made a great start with 69 species. These included a Cooper's Hawk on a nest spotted by Ralph, a Swainson's Thrush, and 16 species of warblers including Nashville, Kentucky, and Hooded. Northern Waterthrush and Yellow Warbler were picked up at Race Road Wetlands; however, Prothonotary eluded us there as well as at the Furnace Inn a mile away. We returned to Rockburn to pick up vehicles and move them to the park-and-ride lot adjacent to Meadowbrook Park. At that point, everyone fit in Kevin's van and Ralph's car so it was on to the Patapsco Valley. Henryton came through with Yellow-throated, Cerulean (3), and Prothonotary warblers plus one Broad-winged Hawk, all on the walk west about a mile to a favored Cerulean spot. A lunch break in early afternoon at Alpha Ridge Park netted four species including a Sharp-shinned Hawk. Two hours in mid-afternoon were spent along the swale at the UMDCF where we picked up 14 species including a fourth-year Bald Eagle, half a dozen species of shorebirds, American Pipits, and grassland birds. Most memorable was the squawking American Bittern that rose out of foot-tall grass between Bonnie and Joanne, barely five feet from either of them. Several people had already passed the bird, although not quite as close. Amazing how a bird that large could be overlooked in grass of that height.

A quick stop at Font Hill Wetland Park did not produce the hoped-for Great Egret so we pushed on by 5:00 p.m. to the west end of Centennial Park hoping to notch the female Greater Scaup that had been there recently. She was nowhere in sight. The stop did, however, produce both a Green Heron and number 113 for the day, a Mute Swan, to tie the previous record. With a long evening ahead of us, the question was how many more species would we be able to add. We swung over to Gwynn Acres Path to check the short trail on the left near the street for Rusty Blackbirds, but there were none to be seen. Before continuing to Lake Elkhorn, we stopped at Wilde Lake to catch the Double-crested Cormorant: number 114. (After all our walking, we broke the unofficial record without getting out of the vehicles.) From the dam at Elkhorn, Ralph scoped a Pied-billed Grebe for 115. Ninety Cliff Swallows at Brighton Dam were a decisive 116. Now it was time to head to Patuxent River State Park and wait for sundown.

The evening at Annapolis Rock was described in Joanne's summary of the day: "7:35-9:00 p.m. We parked in the horse trailer area and walked south to the woodcock field where we positioned ourselves facing west. While waiting for the night birds, we listened to a towhee, Prairie Warbler, Brown Thrasher, and Field Sparrow as they settled in for the night. Two and perhaps three Barred Owls called in the distance. The sunset was far from spectacular but the sliver of moon, dome of almost clear sky, and quiet hilltop made for a meditative half hour before a woodcock sailed in to peent and strut, periodically flinging himself high into the night sky. Those with good eyes could follow his twitterings overhead until he shot past us to the ground. Half an hour after dark a few of us heard a few tentative calls from a whip-poor-will. Fortunately, about the time we thought we'd have to give up, several whips found their voices and began to call so everyone had the chance to hear the night music and tally both 117 and 118."

From Annapolis Rock, we headed to Meadowbrook to pick up vehicles. On that return trip, Nancy encouraged us to make a stop at Dorsey Mill Road for Eastern Screech-Owl. One gave a distant half-hearted answer to recorded calls for number 119, our final species. Although we stopped at Big Branch and tried for Great Horned Owl, there was no response. A happy, albeit exhausted, group of birders called it a day at 9:50 p.m.

The 119 species became the record high total for the 15 unofficial Big Days (1999-2013).