

# Howard County, Maryland

## May 6, 2006, Eighth Unofficial Big Day

Joanne Solem

Leaders: Bonnie Ott, Daryl Olson, Joanne Solem (also Recorder). Ralph Cullison and Kevin Heffernan carried scopes and cameras all day and also drove carpools. Total participants: 7. Karen Darcy Heffernan, Emmalyn Holdridge. Weather: Mostly sunny and breezy with low humidity, 50s early to upper 70s by early afternoon; a cold front arrived in late afternoon, skies still sunny but distinct drop in temperature accompanied by chilly 15+ mph westerly winds. Most of the day was gorgeous. Time: 6:35 a.m. – 9:10 p.m. Total species: 111. Meeting site: Middle Patuxent Environmental Area (Trotter Rd parking lot, then carpooled to South Wind Circle).

Notable species: 17 warbler species total. Common Raven – Marriottsville; Dunlin and Wilson's Snipe – UMDCF; American Wigeon – Centennial Park; Mute Swan and Ring-billed Gull – Lake Elkhorn; Semipalmated Plover and Bank Swallow – Western Regional Park; American Woodcock – Annapolis Rock Road.

This was the first time the Big Day trip had met at the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area (MPEA) in a continuing effort to find a location maximizing migrant passerines. No major flight the previous night. After MPEA, we dropped cars at River Hill Shopping Center and carpooled from there. Swung past Brighton Dam (low water for dam repair) which yielded only Cliff Swallow and Canada Goose as new species. From the dam, we headed to Henryton via MD 32 which was a major mistake. The Sheep and Wool Festival traffic was agonizingly slow. Henryton was unproductive with few new species; tantalizingly, a Prothonotary remained on the wrong side of the river.

We continued to Marriottsville. Those 20 minutes were the highlight of the day. A Yellow-throated Warbler and a Sharp-shinned Hawk were ticked from the parking lot. These species were fine additions, but the best was yet to come. As we were about to leave, Bonnie spotted a high dark speck. She remembered, "I have vivid memories of that moment. I recall being afraid to 'call it' since it was so rare. I remember the group erupting into cheers and jumping around for joy. Recall we got some odd looks from fishermen." Kevin recalled, "What I remember is the raven being chased by crows and you [Jo] and Bonnie hugging and jumping up and down with delight when you heard the raven call." Joanne's report summarized the sighting: "This hawk-like bird was in sight for 30 to 40 seconds appearing from the south moving to the northeast, mostly against a large white cloud. It glided, performed aerial maneuvers, and was finally escorted over the railroad tracks by a crow firmly establishing the desired size comparison. At this point pandemonium reigned in the parking lot." Why the spontaneous celebration? Common Raven was a county bird for everyone!

On the way to Marriottsville, Kevin's van had been stopped by the light at MD 99. While sitting there, two alert birders heard an Eastern Meadowlark. As the entire group returned from the Patapsco, both vehicles pulled over and added this singing species to the list. After leaving the landfill and heading to the UMDCF (just after the right turn onto Folly Quarter Road), Ralph spotted a soaring eagle. By pulling into the driveway Holly House Farm, everyone was able to see it. Ironically, we saw four during the rest of the day—none at the reservoir where they could be expected. The choice bird at the farm was a Dunlin; high water there meant there were no rails. After the central lakes, we headed to Western Regional Park arriving at 6:20 p.m. along with the cold front. The level of the entrance pond had been gradually dropping over the previous days so, although there were shorebirds, we already had most of them. The Semipalmated Plover and a Bank Swallow were fine additions, however. The final stop was Annapolis Rock

Road where, under a clear sky and a half moon, a Prairie Warbler and an American Woodcock completed the day. The woodcock was still performing at 8:45 p.m. when we left with no whips or owls--not surprising with the raw wind and cold temperature.

The total of 111 species was one of the better Big Day efforts, but didn't come close to cracking the record. Joanne's summary captured the bittersweet nature of the day: "Maybe some year the stars will be correctly aligned and everything will come together for a new record. Until then, we can savor the memory of a soaring raven against a large white cloud in a blue sky. . . ."