

Howard County, Maryland

May 5, 2007, Ninth Unofficial Big Day

Joanne Solem

Big Day 9. May 5, 2007. Leaders: Bonnie Ott, Ralph Cullison, and Daryl Olson. Recorder: Joanne Solem. Ralph, Daryl, and Kevin Heffernan carried scopes. Ralph, Bill Hill, and Joe Byrnes drove carpools. Total participants: 12. Jeff Culler, Gayle Hill, Felicia Lovelett, Grazina McClure, Mike McClure. Weather: Sunshine early with increasing clouds during a.m.; 50 F. early rising into 60s, but dropping rapidly in mid-afternoon as a cold front arrived without the predicted rain; winds light; pollen count high. Time: 6:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. Total species: 106. Meeting site: MD 100 park-and-ride adjacent to Meadowbrook Park. Notable species: 17 warbler species total. Black-crowned Night-Heron – Meadowbrook Park, Great Egret – Centennial Park; Blue-winged Warbler - Bon Secours Spiritual Center; Yellow-throated Warbler – Marriottsville; Cerulean Warbler – Henryton; Wilson’s Snipe – Alpha Ridge Landfill; Kentucky Warbler – MPEA; Sora and Virginia Rail – UMDCF; American Woodcock – Annapolis Rock Road.

Because Meadowbrook Park is adjacent to ample parking and restrooms, we decided this year to try starting at that site hoping the wetlands and good view of the sky would be productive. A little over an hour there started the list with 45 species including a Black-crowned Night-Heron in a willow overhanging the easternmost pond; however, the expected Great Egret was nowhere to be seen. At Daniels, we stayed near the parking lot. Although we picked up 11 species in 15 minutes, our timing coincided with trucks leaving the landscaping business at the end of the road. Since warblers were not numerous, we left the truck noise and headed to Bon Secours. The mature conifers at the top of the hill can hold choice warblers, but that was not the case this morning. Leaving the spruces, we walked east downhill to the wooded floodplain and eventually reached the pipeline picking up 14 species including a flyover Common Loon and both Blue-winged and Prairie warblers. A 15-minute stop at Marriottsville produced a quiet Yellow-throated Warbler at the top of a small tree. Alas, last year’s Common Raven sighting was not repeated. What had been planned as a brief stop at the end of the road at Henryton turned into an hour’s quest for Cerulean Warbler for several people’s life list. Because we were missing some floodplain species usually found at this location, it was considered a reasonable investment of time. We heard a Cerulean at the usual spot about a mile west, but could not find the bird. A total of four species for the walk was disappointing. Our pit stop at Alpha Ridge Park was planned to include a check of the wet area south of the pavilion. To our dismay, the willows had all been cut and the small wet area was completely dry.

The next stop was Alpha Ridge Landfill. Joanne’s summary stated: “We always appreciate Ralph’s obtaining permission to visit the landfill which allows for the possibility of coming up with some of the surprises for which this site is legend. The biggest negative is having to go through the scales at the entrance. No matter what time on a Saturday one plans this segment, there is still a wait of 10 minutes or more; the line today was long, but we picked up a species while waiting: Cooper’s Hawk.” Lunch was eaten in the parking lot at MPEA; then the group walked a loop trail. As expected, this was far from an ideal time to bird this location netting only three species in almost two hours. At the west end of Centennial, we found our missing Great Egret. At 3:00 p.m. several people departed; the rest continued to Wilde Lake for the Ring-billed Gulls there. Two hours from mid to late afternoon in the swale at the UMDCF were productive. Pond 1 had attractive mudflats, but they contained no new shorebird species. “Probably the high spot for most of the group occurred at pond 2 where the tall grass growing to the water’s edge on the west and north sides always seems to attract something special. This time it was two Virginia Rails. One called and then came out allowing three of the delighted birders to add it to their life lists. It also gave us hope that maybe this year they might again nest near one of the ponds. At pond 3, the coot which had

been present for weeks was not seen, although a distant Wood Duck with ducklings mollified us somewhat. We returned slowly along the swale toward pond 2. In the last patch of soft rush, a Sora squirted out low across the water so that at least some of the alert participants glimpsed it." Almost an hour at West Friendship Park was summed up in one sentence: "Unfortunately, the walk through the tick-laden grass turned up nothing new. . . ."

After several brief unproductive stops, our final destination was Annapolis Rock Road. "Although there was little wind, it was a chilly wait for dusk. Our only Yellow-breasted Chat of the day was heard; one American Woodcock made several low-altitude passes, although it made no display flights; and a Barred Owl sounded off in the distance and then closer as we returned to the cars."

The total of 106 species was the fourth lowest total of the nine Big Days to date. "The record of 119 was never in danger." Walking in areas where there are no trails entails risks as noted in the final sentence of the day's summary: "We hope that our walking wounded (Ralph's leg and Daryl's ankle) will heal quickly so they don't miss much of migration."