

Howard County, Maryland

May 17, 2008, Tenth Unofficial Big Day

Joanne Solem

Leaders: Bonnie Ott, Ralph Cullison, Nancy Magnusson, Daryl Olson. Recorder: Joanne Solem. Total participants: 8. Bill Hill, Emmalyn Holdridge, Kurt Schwarz. Ralph and Kurt drove carpools; Ralph carried a scope much of the day, Kurt's and Nancy's scopes were valuable at several locations. Weather: Mostly clear early with increasing clouds (a few in the p.m. looked ominous), but there were no showers or storms. Temperature was in the high 50s at 6:30 a.m. to a high in the mid-70s. There was a 10-20 mph NNW wind most of the day, most pronounced in the p.m. Time: 6:30 a.m. - 7:30 p.m. Total species: 100. Meeting site: MD 100 park-and-ride adjacent to Meadowbrook Park. Notable species: a low 14 warbler species total. Great Egret – Meadowbrook Park; Kentucky and Hooded warblers – Rockburn Branch Park; Pine Siskin – Manahan Dr (Ott's house); Broad-winged Hawk and Yellow-throated Warbler – Marriottsville; Horned Lark – Alpha Ridge Landfill; Dunlin and Ring-billed Gull – Fulton Pond; Least Bittern, Sora, and Wilson's Snipe – UMDCF.

Of the 10 Big Days so far, this was the third lowest total and only the second time it had been held after the first week of May. Our morning time at Rockburn Branch Park was reduced to a little over an hour during which we limited ourselves to the west section referred to by birders as the "haunted house" trail. Although the Race Road Wetlands were almost a waste of time, the Hanover Road/Race Road marsh produced an unexpected Bobolink. A Pine Siskin had shown up at Bonnie's feeders a few days prior to the Big Day so a stop on our way to the Patapsco added that species. The Patapsco's stops were mostly unremarkable. We arrived at Marriottsville at 10:35 a.m. and decided to walk east as far as the large sycamore where Yellow-throated Warblers had nested a few years before. Our timing was impeccable. Just as we reached the vicinity of the tree, the 11:00 a.m. freight train came through. To our amazement, soon after the long string of cars passed, Bonnie spotted the desired bird calmly working atop a metal signal housing adjacent to the tracks! Ironically, the only thing Henryton produced was—you guessed it—a second Yellow-throated Warbler.

On to Alpha Ridge Landfill. Although we always appreciate Ralph's planning in getting us into the landfill, water levels were high so there were no shorebirds and overall species variety was low. Six species added there was one of the lowest totals ever. Lake Elkhorn and Forebay Pond had extensive mudflats, thanks to in-progress dredging. Even though Great Egret and Least Sandpiper were fine additions there, we managed to miss the Semipalmated Plover that was reported by other birders that day. Jim Wilkinson had phoned us a tip about the Dunlins—yes, plural—at Fulton Pond. Jim originally reported six, but we raised that number to seven which tied the county record dating to 1951! We were unable to pick out the Semipalmated Sandpiper Jim had also reported. Perhaps we should have been grateful that any of the shorebirds were still present as mowing was taking place in the immediate vicinity of the pond. A Double-crested Cormorant was the only new species at Brighton Dam (we had chalked up Cliff Swallow at Fulton), and eagles were nowhere to be seen.

The UMDCF produced two of the day's highlights. The hands-down best bird was a Least Bittern, the county's 13th record and the first in the county since 2003! Not only was everyone able to see it, but, for four people it was a county bird, for at least one a state bird. Excitement continued in the swale with two, possibly three Soras heard and two seen at pond 2. We left the farm at 5:20 p.m. with an unimpressive 98 species so made sure to drive along Centennial Lane to check Glen Webb's Purple Martin houses near the park's west entrance for number 99. At 6:15 p.m., we picked up cars at Meadowbrook Park; at this

point, three people departed. The rest went on to Clegg Meadow at MPEA where a flyover kingfisher made a nice round 100 on our list. We called it a day at 7:30 p.m.

Repeated requests to Bonnie for a physically less rigorous day moved the starting time later, the ending time earlier, and reduced the amount of walking today. Although far from a record-setting effort, it did illustrate that intense birding during migration on almost any day can turn up surprises and memorable moments.