

Howard County, Maryland

May 11, 2013 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

Saturday, May 11, 2013 was a day of great anticipation for the three of us (Russ, Harry, and Matt). This was the day we were going to make our best try to break the unofficial Howard County Big Day record of 119. We had originally scheduled this day for the previous Saturday but had to reschedule...and it was a good thing we did because the neotropical migrants had been thin or even absent for the month of May so far. Would this day prove to be different? We would soon find out! A forecast of intermittent rain in the morning with thunderstorms in the afternoon did not dampen our enthusiasm.

As with all of our Big Days so far, we began the day birding Russ' yard and the Cavey Lane area. While it was still basically dark and we were listening to the first birds of the day from Russ' driveway, Matt suddenly called out "White-crowned Sparrow!" In the dim light, we could make out a beautiful specimen in a bush about 10 feet away from us. This was not a bird we expected to get, as it was clearly in our "maybe" category, so this was a good start to the day. As the light came up, we soon heard a Northern Waterthrush singing from the low area of Russ' yard...would this be a sign of a migrant fallout ahead of the rain? We soon discovered the answer was a resounding yes!

The recently-discovered and probable breeding pair of Black-billed Cuckoos in the area called soon thereafter; this species would normally not be on an expected list for a Howard County Big Day, but we were hopeful we would get them this morning, seeing that they had been present daily for a solid week. We were happy they obliged. We spent the next two hours birding Russ' yard and along Cavey Lane, and quickly ticked off a high number of warblers and others. A feeding flock at the top of Cavey Lane produced a nice array including Black-and-White, Magnolia, American Redstart, Blackburnian, Worm-eating, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped, an unexpected Tennessee, and an unheard-of Hooded for this location. Clearly, we were in the midst of a fallout condition. It couldn't have happened on a better day!

Our foray down into the Patapsco proved short-lived, as a train moved in and occupied the sideling track, thus cutting off our access to the floodplain and preventing us from walking on the one open track due to multiple other trains passing by. This caused a shuffling of our plans for the morning, and we ended up missing out on Yellow-throated Warbler and Yellow-throated Vireo – both near locks for this location – as we did not encounter either species throughout the day. We added Louisiana Waterthrush and a sometimes-difficult-to-find Belted Kingfisher here before walking back to Russ' yard, and on the way were treated to our only Veery of the day as it kept a Swainson's Thrush company along the horse trail. A major miss to this point was Brown Thrasher, of which Russ had multiple singing individuals in his yard for weeks prior but none on this morning. It was a species that would elude us all day.

Our next stop was the Conservancy, but as usual we checked Waverly Pond for shorebirds first. Expecting at least Spotted and Solitary Sandpiper here, we were disappointed to find a landscape crew mowing the shoreline of the pond. Needless to say, the place was absent of birds. Our targets for the Conservancy were Blue Grosbeak, Prairie Warbler, both Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrows, and a hoped-for chat or a Lincoln's Sparrow. Prairies were everywhere here, and Harry picked out a very shy Lincoln's along the stone wall behind the main building. We also ticked a singing chat here, and though behind schedule we decided to make a try for Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrows in the west field. We felt we would get both at the U of M Farm, but fortunately we made the effort at the Conservancy because it was the only place we encountered either species the entire day. Back at the parking lot, Matt heard a Cape May Warbler singing in one of the cedar tree near the old farmhouse, and a five-minute search finally netted this bird for all three of us. We also had three White-crowned Sparrows feeding under the same tree! Our only miss here was Blue Grosbeak.

Next, the U of M Farm, which gave us our only Bald Eagle, Cooper's Hawk, and American Kestrel of the day, plus hundreds of Bobolinks. We also had a single Lesser Yellowlegs fly over the marsh, our only one of the day, and a Marsh Wren that had been seen the day before by others made a short appearance in the swale. We then heard and saw one Sora at the second pond, and then had a Sora and Virginia Rail perform an auditory duel at the third pond. On the way back down the swale, we encountered our one and only Swamp Sparrow and Wilson's Snipe of the day, and got a bonus with a calling Willow Flycatcher. (**NOTE:** the U of M Farm was still open to occasional birding in 2013 but is not any longer)

We then headed to west county, stopping first at Annapolis Rock to tick Pine Warbler. Moving quickly now, we watched a Barred Owl fly across the road in front of us on the way out, and Matt "Radar" Rogosky pulled a Rose-breasted Grosbeak's harsh "sneaker squeek" chip note out of the treetops along Annapolis Rock Road. A rapid stop at Hipsley Mill produced our primary target there, Kentucky Warbler. This stop, planned for about 1:30 hours in duration, was limited to ten minutes due to our wonderful success with warblers and thrushes earlier in the day combined with being behind schedule.

A quick stop at Triadelphia Dam got us our expected Cliff Swallows, Double-crested Cormorants, and one Common Loon but no Osprey, gulls, or other waterfowl. Springdale Pond was completely desolate. Our next scheduled stop was Fulton Pond, and what a stop it proved to be. As we approached the pond from the west, we could see a half-dozen birders lined up along the sidewalk and we instantly knew that something good had to be present. A small white heron walking in the grass was easily seen with our naked eyes from the car as we passed by – Cattle Egret! Definitely not a species on our target list for the day! The pond also produced Least, Solitary, and Spotted Sandpipers, and while we were scanning, Russ had two Semipalmated Plovers land in his scope view. The only real misses here were recent Semipalmated Sandpipers and Purple Martins that had been here just days prior.

Because we were now almost three hours behind schedule, we nixed a trip to the Rocky Gorge dam for nesting ravens and went straight to Lake Elkhorn. No continuing Pine Siskins at Allen Lewis' feeders, but we did add a late Pied-billed Grebe here. As dark storm clouds gathered over west Columbia, at Harry's urging we made two unscheduled stops at the GE Retention Pond and the field along Columbia Gateway, hoping for Blue Grosbeak at the latter. We were delighted to find our only Greater Yellowlegs of the day at the retention pond, making that stop worthwhile, but no Grosbeaks showed for us.

At this point, it was now after 5:00 p.m. and we stood at 113 species, needing seven to break the record. Then the storm began. A colossal downpour complete with lightning drenched the whole of Columbia, and we still needed Centennial Lake to provide a handful of our target birds, especially Great Egret, Green Heron, Osprey, and our best remaining chance at Brown Thrasher. Every bird was important at this stage. After much discussion and disagreement as to what to do during the heavy rain, we decided to make a non-unanimous try at Centennial in the heavy downpour. We walked in from the west end, soaked to the bone within about 30 seconds, but we did see our only Great Egret of the day - #114. Amazingly through the sheets of rain, Matt spotted a dark blob high up in a tree on a small island...Black-crowned Night Heron - another species not on our expected list for the day! As the rain lightened a bit, we drove to the boat ramp and added a Palm Warbler (our 24th warbler species for the day) along the walking path, a flyover Green Heron, and a very wet Purple Martin (#118). We also got seconds of Pied-billed Grebe and Common Loon on the day, both resting on the lake. Needing two birds to break the record and with the time now 6:00 p.m., we decided to spend the rest of the day at MPEA with many possible remaining targets including Wood Duck, Hairy Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Brown Thrasher, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Yellow-throated Vireo, and any remaining warblers. MPEA had other plans, however.

Since the rain had now let up, we felt sure the place would be buzzing with activity. We couldn't have been more wrong. Virtually nothing was singing until we got to the river, and then it was only a parula here, a gnatcatcher there. Our collective mood darkened with the dimming light, but eventually a Wood Duck pair (#119) flew past us over the river and raised our hopes of breaking the record. As darkness was rapidly falling, Russ finally heard the harsh "pick" note of a Hairy Woodpecker twice, but neither Harry nor Matt picked it up as they were further behind on the trail. Nevertheless, we were now in record territory. A Yellow-billed Cuckoo finally sang once way off in the distance, putting us at #121.

After being soaked from either wet grass or downpours for most of the day, we were tired but elated to have broken the record. We decided to make a desperate attempt in the dim light at Harry's feeders for one last bird - perhaps a lingering Red-breasted Nuthatch? – instead, an Eastern Screech Owl called from close range and popped up in a tree not 40 feet from the end of Harry's driveway as we casually chatted about our day. It was accompanied by one other, perhaps it's mate, and gave us great scope looks just as darkness set in.

122 species and a new county Big Day record – what a great but tiring day!

Our biggest misses for the day were Osprey, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Yellow-throated Vireo, Yellow-throated Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Brown Thrasher, and Eastern Meadowlark.

Russ Ruffing, Matt Rogosky, and Harry Fink

