

Howard County, Maryland

May 18, 2013, Fifteenth Unofficial Big Day

Joanne Solem

Bonnie Ott and Joe Hanfman. Recorder: Joe Hanfman. Total participants: 8. Kathy Calvert, Ralph Cullison (through landfill portion only), David Cummings, Mike Kerwin, Kurt Schwarz, and Joanne Solem. Weather: Overcast, mist and drizzle developing by late a.m. and rain by noon, tapering off by late afternoon. Time: 6:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. Total species: 98. Meeting site: MPEA (Trotter Rd). Notable species: 12 warbler species total. Swainson's Thrush, Tennessee and Kentucky warblers – MPEA; Veery – Henryton; Horned Lark, American Pipit - Alpha Ridge Landfill; Sora, BLACK RAIL, Marsh Wren, Swamp Sparrow – UMDCF.

For the second consecutive year we met at MPEA's Trotter Road lot, but limited our birding there to the upper area. Most of the previous day's migrants had departed, so nine species of warblers was a modest start with a singing Tennessee the highlight. All vehicles were moved to Alpha Ridge Park and the group carpooled from there. The first stop along the Patapsco was Henryton which produced a Veery and the expected floodplain species. Since Ralph could only stay for the a.m., Alpha Ridge Landfill rose to next on the list. (Because of the early landfill scheduling, the Little Big Day group chose to spend more time in migrant passerine habitat so did not meet the Big Day group for the landfill and UMDCF.) The landfill held a few shorebirds and the expected grassland species plus a pipit which is only occasional on Big Days. Then it was on to Marriottsville where the Yellow-throated Warbler was a no-show. At that point, we returned to Alpha Ridge Park, picked up the cars, and moved them to the UMDCF.

By the time we started along the swale, the mist had become an annoying drizzle. A check of the Bald Eagle nest in the sycamore along the river noted it no longer appeared to have three chicks, but was down to two. As we slogged through the wet grass along the swale, we stopped periodically for Joe to play rail, bittern, and Marsh Wren recordings. Those stops produced four Soras, no Virginia Rails, and one Marsh Wren which was a good haul. Just before the third pond, where the swale ends near a white pipe, we stopped to play the rail recordings one final time.

Bonnie described what happened next for *The Maryland Yellowthroats's* column "Birds of Note" 33(4):3. "As many years as I had done the Howard 'Big Day' trip, I have never had the pleasure of having such a remarkable experience [as that] with the BLACK RAIL we found. We played through SORA and VIRGINIA RAIL in hopes of getting a response. Then for fun I commented, 'play them all' as a joke. As soon as the BLACK RAIL call played we heard a vigorous answer from the grass nearby. If only you could have seen us in our astonishment! We immediately stopped the tape and listened as the bird called repeatedly for many minutes. We waited for a time and then moved closer to try to get a visual. We then played the tape one more time and the bird responded. The call at this time changed. We stopped the tape and backed off to leave the bird alone. The audio was enough to verify this as a new Howard County record."

Attempts were made to call the Little Big Day group, but were not immediately successful as they were out of cell phone reach in the Patapsco Valley. When contact was made, they said they would come as soon as possible. The group at the farm split with Joe, Kathy, and David remaining for another hour to wait for the Little Big Day group. Although the steady rain had stopped by the time they arrived, efforts to re-find the rail were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Bonnie, Mike, Kurt, and Joanne reluctantly continued. Joanne's summary of the last portion of the day captured their feelings, "We hardly knew whether to continue since we were so emotionally drained. Preparation for a Sunday bike race at Centennial meant we avoided that area. We hit Wilde Lake, the east end of Lake Elkhorn, and finally Fulton (which had nothing) and finally quit at 5:15 p.m. We were still stunned—walking around with big grins—and

spontaneously mentioning some detail every few minutes. None of us in this Big Day group will ever forget it.”

For most of those seven who shared that special moment at the farm, the memory of that event is still vivid almost a decade later. Joe recalled, “As a joke, I played Black Rail. Before the first ki-ki-kerr on the recording finished playing, the real Black Rail responded. I immediately turned off the recording. It took me a moment to mention that it was not me playing the recording. Between us leaving and before the Little Big Day folks arrived it rained and unfortunately the Little Big Day people did not get the rail.” Recently Bonnie commented, “I can recall joking about playing the Black Rail [recording] as we had done before. Since it was the end of the swale it was our last chance for rails. I remember that since we all thought it was a joke it was even more splendid when we got the response. I can still remember the awestruck feeling of hearing that bird calling from our feet. I’m so glad I have the video of the moment. It was so hard to even go on from that point since the euphoria was so intense.” David remembered, “Then, unexpectedly, he [Joe] played a recording . . . of the Black Rail. I had never heard him, or anyone in the club, play for the Black Rail. We were all dumbfounded and overjoyed when he got a response. . . . The Black Rail continued calling for several minutes. I recorded it and looked intently for the bird. . . . I wondered at the time if on prior trips to the farm we might have heard the Black Rail had we played a recording of the call.” Joanne’s notes for that day include the following, “Joe played Sora and Virginia, then King, then for fun Yellow and Black. We were shocked, thrilled, amazed when almost instantly a Black Rail answered. . . . We [spoke] in whispers to avoid disturbing the bird. People . . . crept quietly forward to record the sounds. We were astonished that the bird, which had started calling about 12:35 p.m., continued almost without taking a breath, for almost 15 minutes. . . .”

For at least a few of us who had stomped the swale for years, our hope had been to someday confirm a Yellow Rai, based on the possible one we had glimpsed years before. The desire to verify that species had, for my family, become a joke referred to as, “Mom’s quest for the Holy Rail.” A Black Rail was not even under consideration. Today, almost a decade later, one snapshot of that Big Day experience remains a favorite birding memory. At the site, the group was slightly scattered on the west side of the swale with Bonnie closest to the white pipe facing east and Joe about 10 feet behind her playing the recordings. The first response of the rail had barely receded when Bonnie whirled and extended her arm pointing to Joe—her face reflecting surprise, awe, and immense delight—one of those moments you wish had been captured by more than a memory.