

Howard County, Maryland

August 31, 2013 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

We scheduled our August Big Day for the last day of the month (8/31) in order to maximize our chances at fall migrants while hopefully ticking some shorebirds as well. We started the day at 5:45 a.m. at Russ' house with a projected target list of 95-100 species. The forecast called for very hot and muggy conditions, and we later found out how accurate that would be! One of the first birds of the day was a lone Common Nighthawk sailing low over our heads in the dim morning light. We spent a solid two hours surveying the Cavey Lane area and got almost halfway to our goal for the day with 45 species sighted, but only three warbler species (Black and White, American Redstart, and Northern Parula) were noted. We did glimpse one Cooper's Hawk, which can be hit or miss on a Big Day, plus one each of Hairy Woodpecker and Brown Thrasher. It is surprising how tough the latter two species can be when you really need them for a Big Day, so we were glad to get them out of the way early.

On our way to Waverly Pond, we got our only Red-shouldered Hawk of the day along Woodstock Road. The pond turned up nothing unexpected, so we made our way to MPEA with a quick stop to view the U. of M. Farm from the road. We were lucky to see a flock of Mallards flush from pond number two with a lone (and tough to find at this time of year) American Black Duck in tow. Arriving at MPEA at 8:50 a.m., we were able to add Ovenbird, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, and Cape May Warblers along with our only Yellow-throated Vireo of the day. Fulton Pond was up next, producing some needed shorebirds such as Lesser Yellowlegs and Pectoral, Least, and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Triadelphia Reservoir was next in line, and just as it did for our July Big Day, it provided one each of Ring-billed Gull and both Caspian and Forster's Terns for our enjoyment. A Common Loon was a nice surprise, and we also got our Double-crested Cormorant, Bald Eagle, Spotted Sandpiper, and Killdeer for the day here. Just up the road a bit, the Cattail Creek area of Triadelphia produced our only Great Egret and Solitary Sandpipers of the day.

By this time it was around 2:30 in the afternoon, and the sun was just blazing down on us. The temperature was in the high 90's and we quickly wilted and lost our enthusiasm for birding in those conditions. Nevertheless, we pressed on, with stops at Big Branch, Centennial Lake, Wilde Lake, Lake Kittimaqundi, GE Retention Pond, and Race Road. The latter stop netted our only Wood Ducks and Red-tailed Hawk for the day. Out of water and out of energy by this time, we agreed to make one last stop at the Howard County Conservancy with hopes of finding Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Yellow-breasted Chat, Prairie Warbler, and Eastern Meadowlark; surely we would also find a lousy Field Sparrow which we had somehow managed to miss throughout the day. Arriving at 6:15 p.m., we were successful in finding a handful of young Blue Grosbeaks and two Indigo Buntings, but everything else eluded us despite a walk of several miles around the property. We were quite miserable by this time, but it was a treat to watch two dozen Common Nighthawks cavorting over the fields at dusk.

We ended the day with 84 species but all agreed that this was easily our least enjoyable Big Day of the seven we had completed this year. The conditions were truly difficult and we had lost most of our steam by mid afternoon. Our biggest misses included Tree Swallow, Eastern Kingbird (although it is getting late for them), Wood Thrush, Prairie Warbler, Scarlet Tanager (of all species!), and the aforementioned Field Sparrow. Normally we would include Eastern Meadowlark on that list but having not seen even one Meadowlark on any of our Big Days so far, perhaps we should just downgrade that bird to a non-target. At least that might ensure that we see one the next time!

Russ Ruffing, Matt Rogosky, and Harry Fink