

Howard County, Maryland

September 14, 2013 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

Next to the May Big Day, on which we had set our sights on breaking the unofficial Big Day record for Howard County (and succeeded!), our most anticipated Big Day was September's, which we scheduled for the 14th of the month. Much like in May, our timing was impeccable; we couldn't have picked a better day forecast-wise, as a major cold front had passed through the day before and temperatures were expected to start out in the low 50's with 9 mph winds out of the northwest overnight and all throughout the day. The day proved to be spectacular, with a clear sky and low humidity throughout.

We decided to get started at Russ' house at 5:45 a.m. to listen for owls and migrants. However, we didn't hear a thing until precisely 6:11 a.m., when a Wood Thrush called from the bottom of the yard - and it proved to be our only Wood Thrush of the day! Things started slowly and didn't really pick up until 6:45 a.m., but when it did, the sky literally burst with warblers. In just over two hours, we estimated that at least 100 individual warblers passed through or over the yard, many going unidentified. Nevertheless, we tallied a healthy 15 species, including rare-in-fall Yellow-throated and very-hard-to-get-in-the-county Wilson's - and two individuals at that! We also had a flyover Osprey, both expected accipiter species (Cooper's and Sharp-shinned), and a single Least Flycatcher.

Waverly Pond, which had been exceptionally low for weeks, was our next stop and it yielded up four shorebird species that had been camping here for weeks - Killdeer, Spotted, Least, and Pectoral Sandpipers - along with Great Blue and Green Heron. A Belted Kingfisher - which can prove difficult on any Big Day - was also present here. Just up the road, we quickly checked Waverly Mansion Pond for Wood Ducks and were not disappointed, as seven were resting on the submerged logs. We then quickly scanned the University of Maryland Farm from Folly Quarter Road - the Farm is now off limits to birders thanks in part to meddling from out-of-county birders - and heard a surprising Marsh Wren out in the marsh and added three Horned Larks in the fields.

MPEA was next on the schedule, and Harry pulled five Broad-winged Hawks out of the sky here plus we had our only Acadian Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush and Veery on the day. Next, a tour of the Columbia Lakes produced nothing exceptional at Wilde Lake but a lone Great Egret was found at Lake Kittimaqundi. At Fulton Pond, the Merlin that had been hanging around for weeks was present, as was a Lesser Yellowlegs to add to our shorebird checkmarks. At Triadelphia Reservoir, we added our only Common Loon and Ring-billed Gulls of the day. At the Cattail Creek portion of the reservoir, which had extensive mud flats present, we also spotted nine species of shorebirds, with Semipalmated Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, and Greater Yellowlegs all new for the day. A lone Bald Eagle also was spotted here.

The Fox Chase/West Friendship wetland mitigation site did not hold any shorebirds whatsoever, but our time here produced a singing Warbling Vireo and a shy Yellow-billed Cuckoo, our only ones of the day. We left this site with a total of 98 species, already exceeding our goal. Could we top 100 for only the second time in our Big Day efforts? We headed to the Howard County Conservancy needing three new species, with perhaps a 17th warbler species, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, flyover Common Nighthawk, or a lingering Tree Swallow as our top candidates. Eastern Meadowlark was also a possibility, but since we have whiffed on this species on every single Big Day so far, we didn't have high hopes for it.

Things were slow at the Conservancy at first. We walked all through the west field looking to spring a meadowlark without success. However, Matt spotted a low-flying Northern Harrier, a bird we did not expect here - #99! Then, while walking along the stream below the main building, we added both Indigo Bunting and a single Blue Grosbeak in the same bush - #101! As we walked back to the car in the dim light, we finally spotted three Common Nighthawks over the fields at 7:11 p.m. - #102 and a great way to end our second-highest Big Day of 2013!

The day could have been even better if several big misses hadn't eluded us - Hairy Woodpecker and Common Grackle the most prominent - but just about everything went well for us on this day, so we really had nothing to complain about!

Russ Ruffing, Matt Rogosky, and Harry Fink