

Howard County, Maryland

October 4, 2013 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

For our October Big Day, we anticipated ticking approximately 90 species, but exceptionally warm weather put a real damper on migration movements. We planned to begin our day at West Friendship Park and walk it all the way through to the Fox Chase/Nixon Farm wetland mitigation site. Our three and a half hour sojourn here turned up six warbler species but not exceptional movements of birds as we had hoped. Only two Blue-headed and one Red-eyed Vireo were noted here, and that was all we had of those species for the day. Even the sparrow numbers were low, although we did tick all of the targeted species and were able to spot a single White-crowned Sparrow that was traveling with a small flock of White-throats. While sorting through that flock, our pulses quickened when Russ and Matt got very brief and obscured looks at a potential Connecticut Warbler that was creeping through a deep tangle of vines near the ground. This would have been a life bird for both Russ and Harry. We never got back on the bird to get diagnostic looks despite concerted efforts to re-acquire the bird, but we spotted a female Common Yellowthroat in the same spot shortly thereafter; that bird may have been what we had seen skulking through the tangle earlier. A single Blue Grosbeak was a nice surprise, and a bit of effort chasing a flock of sparrows through the brush at the mitigation site eventually turned up our only two Lincoln's Sparrows of the day. At least four American Kestrels were in the area, and a single Sharp-shinned Hawk was spotted as well.

Western Regional produced two more warbler species for us - a handful of Cape Mays of all ages and plumages and a lone Tennessee. We enjoyed exceptional looks at all of these birds at extremely close range. A search of the ball fields turned up no Horned Larks, a species that we would miss for the day. The entrance pond, which earlier in the week had produced a Clay-colored Sparrow and an Orange-crowned Warbler, did not prove to be very productive.

Triadelphia/Cattail Creek was next and it proved to be quite productive in an unexpected way. We knew the water levels were very low and hoped for a good variety of late shorebirds here. Upon arriving, we saw perhaps the largest acreage of mudflats that any of us have ever seen at one place in the county; however, save for a few Killdeer and a Great Blue Heron, the mudflats were bare of birds, with most of the shorebirds having moved through weeks ago. Almost immediately, however, Russ heard the croak of a Common Raven and we easily spotted it soaring over the lake. This was Matt's first county record and a year bird for both Russ and Harry! In the next few seconds, we added single Bald Eagle, Osprey, and Red-shouldered Hawk, all of which proved to be our only sightings on the day for each species. So, what we missed in shorebirds, we made up for in raptors. Just to be safe, we thoroughly scoped the mud and Harry eventually found a small group of Least Sandpipers totaling 13 birds way off in the distance.

At the dam, we were hopeful of spotting gulls or terns on the exposed sand in the middle of the reservoir, or perhaps a Common Loon as we had on several previous Big Days at this location, but it was not to be. We quickly checked Springdale Pond which was bereft of birds, but we did spot three Red-tailed Hawks soaring over it as we drove away. Short stops at Brown's Bridge (extraordinarily dry) and Limekiln Pond turned up nothing, but Fulton Pond produced several Pectoral Sandpipers along with one additional Least. This would be our last tick of a shorebird on the day, with only three total species to show from that group.

At this point, temperatures were approaching 90 degrees, and just like in August, our energy and enthusiasm were challenged. We decided to proceed to the GE Retention Pond with a stop in Jessup along the way for a quick look for gulls. Both locations were completely empty of birds. At 3:30 we arrived at Lake Elkhorn not hoping to add much, but instead were rewarded with an American Coot that Russ saw under the vegetation on a distant bank after carefully checking the shoreline of the lake. This bird was flagged by eBird and so Harry took a documentation picture through his scope with his iPhone. Matt found a Chestnut-sided Warbler - our 9th and final warbler species on the day - in the low vegetation along the water in the area below the spillway, and then spied our only Green Heron standing motionless along the water line. We left Elkhorn at 3:50 p.m. with 73 species to our credit.

Kittimaqundi was our next stop and we immediately spied a Great Blue Heron on the far bank in the exact same spot that we saw one on the September Big Day. We hoped for Ring-billed Gull and Fish Crow here but neither materialized.

Wilde Lake and Centennial both proved to be fruitless stops as well. At this point, we actually started to worry that we did not have even one American Robin on the day yet, but a stop at Matt's house to walk his dog produced dozens of them. Missing a robin would have been a tough pill to swallow!

We added Meadowbrook Shopping Center to our itinerary with the hopes of getting Ring-billed Gull and Fish Crow for the day, and it did not disappoint. Meadowbrook's wetlands, however, added nothing to our totals - not even a single Brown-headed Cowbird even though we carefully checked through a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds numbering several hundred birds. We got some relief on the way to MPEA though, as Harry spotted a single Brown-headed Cowbird land on the back of a sheep in a farm field along Route 108! MPEA produced a Barred Owl which was sitting right out in the open and then was mobbed by jays and crows soon thereafter. This is a species - as are all owls - that we usually manage to miss on most of our Big Days.

Our total for the day was only 79 species. Big misses on the day included Wood Duck (a species we've recorded on all but one of our Big Days this year), Ruby-throated Hummingbird (though it's getting late for these), Horned Lark, Cedar Waxwing (!), and Common Grackle (a species we've managed to miss on three Big Days this year). Overall, the low numbers of neotropical migrants, shorebirds, and waterfowl caused us to fall far short of the day's goal. The heat and unfavorable overnight winds suppressed passerine movements, and the timing seemed to fall right in the "dead zone" between the end of shorebird migration and the beginning of any noticeable waterfowl movements.

Russ Ruffing, Matt Rogosky, and Harry Fink