

# Howard County, Maryland

## November 23, 2013 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

We chose November 23 for our second-to-last Big Day of 2013, and the day proved to be exceptionally challenging not only in finding birds but in dealing with the weather. It was a clear, sunny day but temperatures remained in the low 40's with significant winds in the 20 mph range all day long. It made for an extremely cold day in which none of us ever felt warm, and the birding was, quite frankly, dismal.

We began at Russ' house around 6:15 a.m., with a goal of 75-80 species. We were curious to see if November would be able to top the 75 birds we got in both our January and February Big Days earlier in the year. Once again, no owls were heard in the pre-dawn darkness, which has been typical for most of our Big Days. The first bird, a mockingbird, gave an alarm "chuck" at 6:23 a.m., as if to warn us what kind of day we were going to have. A Cooper's Hawk zoomed over just as the light was coming up, and both a Red-tailed and a Red-shouldered Hawk followed soon thereafter. We added the usual yard birds over the next hour or so - 28 species in all - with a few Common Grackles at the feeder. It is surprising how difficult grackles can be on some Big Days, and so we were happy to get them out of the way early. At Waverly Pond, we ticked our geese and Mallards for the day and Harry picked out a Belted Kingfisher sitting quietly in one of the willows, low to the water. This is another species that can easily elude a team on a Big Day; so far so good!

The Howard Conservancy was next on our itinerary, but only after quickly checking Waverly Mansion Pond for Wood Ducks, to no avail. This proved to be a species we missed on the day. The Conservancy is our prime Big Day winter sparrow site, and we hoped to get tree, fox, and savannahs here. Russ spotted a lone American Tree Sparrow after hiking a short distance off the back end of the property, but both Harry and Matt failed to get on the bird. No savannahs were present but we did pick up two Fox Sparrows near the end of our hike. We were also able to add a couple Swamp Sparrows and one Yellow-rumped Warbler prior to departing for Race Road.

Race Road was empty of waterfowl save for a few American Black Ducks in with the Mallards. We added a Bald Eagle flying overhead along with a Winter Wren that flew across the road in front of our car. The Jessup gull site was good for Great Black-backed, Herring, and Ring-billed Gull, just as Russ' scouting trip there yesterday afternoon had panned out. At the GE Retention Pond, we added Hooded Merganser and Ring-necked Duck, but were starting to get the feeling that the day would prove to be slow for waterfowl in general. This was proven by visits to Wilde Lake and Centennial, where we ticked only a lone drake Bufflehead at the former, along with a single Ruddy Duck and one Double-crested Cormorant at the latter.

Kittimaqundi and Fulton Pond were essentially absent of birds other than Ring-billed Gulls and Mallards; Browns Bridge was a vacant mud flat, and Springdale Pond was completely empty. Triadelphia Dam and Pigtail were also empty save for a few gulls and Hooded Mergansers. By the time we got to the U. of M. Farm (from the road only), it was 3:00 p.m. and all of us were pretty miserable and cold. By this time, we had resigned ourselves to the fact that we were not likely to tally even 60 birds on the day. Russ saw one Horned Lark here and spotted a Northern Harrier cross through his scope while scanning Pond #2 from Folly Quarter Road, but once again neither Matt or Harry got on either of these birds and we felt that we might not make the Big Day requirement that each participant identify at least 95% of the total species observed.

We next hit Western Regional Park with hopes of Savannah Sparrow in the dry pond and larks on the soccer fields, but failed to find a single one of either species. On the way out of the park, we noticed hundreds of geese coming in to feed in the farm fields opposite the park. There were at least 500-600 birds here and so we took a few minutes to scan for a rarity tucked in among them. Russ soon picked out a small, short-necked bird in the flock closest to us, and we were able

to confirm this individual as a "Richardson's" Cackling Goose, easily our best bird of the day. This find failed to improve our mood much, as it was now a foregone conclusion that we were not going to top 60 birds. Nevertheless, we headed out to the silage pit in western county with just a few minutes of light left. After a few moments of looking for hoped-for White-crowned Sparrows, Matt found two Rusty Blackbirds a short distance out in the marsh. This was a nice way to end the day, even if we only got 58 species total. Due to the 95% ABA Big Day rule, the official total we can claim is only 57 species.

The number of common and expected birds that we missed on this day was quite high. Our misses included such "easy" birds as Killdeer, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Chipping and Savannah Sparrows, and - the worst misses - Red-winged Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird!

Russ Ruffing, Matt Rogosky, and Harry Fink