

Howard County, Maryland

December 21, 2013 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

It was a lot of fun embarking on our mission of doing a Howard County Big Day in every month of the year! The three of us thoroughly enjoyed "setting the bar" in each month, the only exception being June when we could not find a weekend day that worked for all three of us. Our final Big Day of the year was set for December 21st, and we appreciated that the forecast was for warm and dry weather. Compared to the bone-chilling day we had in November, temps in the 60's were a welcome change. Also, a number of different waterfowl species had been present in the county over the past week, so we were confident we would improve upon our dismal total of only 58 birds in November. We were hopeful of at least 70 species. Secretly though, all of us were hoping to encounter a Snowy Owl somewhere in the county today. Over the past few weeks, they had been spotted in many of the counties surrounding Howard County, so perhaps a long day afield would turn one up in Howard?

We began at Russ' house around 6:30 a.m., and once again we did not hear any owls before dawn. Once the flight of crows began passing over the house around 7:00 a.m., Matt pointed out a distant adult Bald Eagle, a species which can be easily missed on a Big Day. A primary reason for starting at this location was that Russ had three American Tree Sparrows the day before; today, they were nowhere to be found. We also were hoping to tick the three expected blackbird species (Common Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird, and Brown-headed Cowbird) on the feeders, but were disappointed to only get the latter even though all three had been around all week. Unless you've tried a winter Big Day, you'd never guess how difficult it can be to find a blackbird when you really need one! Amazingly, we had missed both red-wingeds and cowbirds on our November count!

Russ had done quite a bit of scouting the day before, and Centennial Lake had held a good number of waterfowl, so we decided to explore that location before the large crowds of walkers and joggers arrived and stirred up the birds on the water. We got off to a slow start here as it seemed many of the ducks had moved on, but eventually we were able to turn up six species including the single Greater Scaup that had been present throughout the week. Unfortunately, the two drake Canvasbacks and three drake Redheads from the day before were nowhere to be found. The "Cans" had moved over to Wilde Lake, as our next stop discovered, and we got our only Ruddy Duck for the day at that location as well. Kittimaquindi had nothing of note except we heard the distinctive "chip" note of a Yellow-rumped Warbler as it flew over the lake and then landed in a lakeside thicket right in front of us. This was a bonus bird and not one we were counting on getting today at this late date.

Next it was on to the Howard Conservancy for sparrows and other passerines. We walked a little over a mile and added Hairy Woodpecker - another species that you can easily whiff on when doing Big Days - plus two Horned Larks, three Tree Sparrows, and one Fox Sparrow, all of which were specific targets. We saw no Savannah Sparrows here, our most likely location for this species on the day's agenda. From Russ' scouting, we knew that the Race Road wetlands were ice-free and were holding a nice flock of Gadwall. We headed there expecting to tick that species and hopefully some other waterfowl. Nothing new from the previous day was present but while we scoped, a drake Northern Shoveler dropped out of the sky and landed amongst the Gadwall. On the way out of this area, Matt spotted some blackbirds in a low marshy area adjacent to the road. They proved to be three Red-winged Blackbirds. We weren't going to miss that species again! Next we added Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls near the Jessup transfer station, which is a lock for those species in winter months.

We were a little behind schedule at this point so we departed from our agenda by scratching the GE Retention Pond from our list and going straight to Lake Elkhorn. There was nothing of note or new at this location, but on a tip from Allen Lewis the previous day, we had a bead on an Eastern Phoebe that he had seen a quarter mile down the Patuxent Branch Trail. We gave it a try and Harry spotted the bird literally within the first few steps we took. That was probably

the easiest chase we've had on any of our Big Days. Fulton Pond was next on our list, and it offered up one solitary bird - a lone Killdeer - which we were beginning to think we would miss on the day. A quick stop at Browns Bridge in hopes of Wood Duck were futile, as no waterfowl of any kind were present. Springdale Pond followed and provided our first American Black Ducks for the day. One of the homeowners was kind enough to invite us to view the lake from her back deck! We got amazing views of the water but unfortunately it was on a day when not much was present.

Triadelphia Reservoir dam was quite fun. Immediately upon exiting the vehicle, Russ spotted a Bonaparte's Gull wheeling below the dam with a flock of Ring-billed Gulls. This was quite unexpected and was the first and only "Bony" we've had on a Big Day. As we combed through the massive (> 1,000) flock of Common Mergansers, we eventually picked out a hen Red-breasted Merganser. Interestingly, there were at least 20 Bald Eagles of varying ages sitting on a sand bar way out in the middle of the reservoir. At this point, we were once again falling behind schedule - agendas are very tough to stick to on Big Days for some reason! - and so we decided to just do a drive-through of the West Friendship Park entrance road in hopes of Savannah Sparrows or an American Kestrel...to no avail. On the way to our next stop at Alpha Ridge Park, Russ thought he heard the plaintive call of a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker along the road near the intersection of Route 144 and Route 32. Thankfully it was warm and we had our windows down! We turned around, parked at the Shell Station, and within seconds had one just a few feet off the road. This bird gave us an excellent photo-op and Russ and Harry were able to take exceptional photos of this hard-to-photograph species from a mere 20 feet or so.

We included Alpha Ridge Park for the express purpose of scanning the northern section of the landfill for Snowy Owls. Nothing doing though. Still needing House Finch at this point, we decided to deviate from plan and make a quick stop back at Russ' house, where we ticked at least six of them on his feeders. Then it was off to Underwood Road in hopes of a Snowy and American Pipits. No Snowies there either, not surprisingly, but we did get one pipit flyover. Daisy Road produced our expected American Wigeon for the day, and we then made a stop at Waterford Farm, the first time this location was included on one of our Big Days. We entered the farm sitting at 65 species with only about 35 minutes of good light left. Within two minutes, we had 68 species. Two Savannah Sparrows, a lone kestrel, and a Northern Harrier all appeared within seconds of one another along the drive in. We hustled on to the Florence Road silage pit further west, and by the time we got there it was essentially dead. No sparrows were moving at all by this time, nor were any Rusty Blackbirds present. We were able to entice a Winter Wren into brief view though - #69 for the day.

Our last stop was Annapolis Rock, where we hoped for owls and possibly - given the warm temperatures - some displaying early American Woodcock. No dice on the woodcock but we spotted a very small goose in with one of two large flocks of Canada Geese that flew overhead in the darkening sky. Russ took a quick photo and the bird looked to be about half the size of the Canadas it was with - a Cackling Goose! Heading back to the car in the darkness around 5:50 p.m, we got our last and 71st species of the day - a calling Barred Owl. The day had turned out better than expected overall, and very well for waterfowl, as we had 15 species of that group which bested our previous high of 14 back in January.

All in all, it was a satisfying way to end our "Big Day Year." We could have had a few more birds - misses such as Wood Duck, Pied-billed Grebe, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cedar Waxwing, Chipping Sparrow, and Common Grackle among them - and that would have made the day more successful, but we weren't complaining. Looking back over the past year, we had set the baseline for Big Days in the county in every month but June, broken the unofficial Howard County Big Day record with 122 species in May, made some nice seasonal discoveries along the way, and had a boatload of fun doing it. With Matt's wife due to give birth to their first child in January, our team may not be as active in 2014 but we hope to be able to do a couple next year, with our biggest goals being to break the record of 122 in May, fill in the missing month of June, and perhaps extend our numbers in a couple of the other months!

Russ Ruffing, Matt Rogosky, and Harry Fink