

Howard County, Maryland

May 8, 2016 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

The excitement for Sunday, May 8, 2016 had begun to build for about a week. The weather had been downright dismal, with cold, rain, and generally northerly winds for the previous two weeks. Although some migrants had been filtering through in the week prior, movements had seemed to be depressed for this time of year. However, the forecast for Sunday was looking like it could be an epic day - just the right conditions for Russ Ruffing and Steve Collins to make an attempt at Howard County's Big Day record of 122 species set by Ruffing, Rogosky, and Fink in May 2013! As early as Monday of this week, the forecast called for week-long rain and northerly winds to cease around 7:00 p.m. on Saturday evening, shift to the south, and then turn back to the northwest near the dawn hours. This had the makings of unleashing a wave of pent-up migration energy and dumping it on us just as our Big Day would begin in the pre-dawn hours of Sunday, May 8. Day after day we watched the forecast throughout the week, expecting it to shift, but it never changed.

On Saturday, we finally had a day free of steady rain in the county. This brought a lot of birds down in our region, and good numbers of migrants, such as warblers, thrushes, and vireos, were reported across the county. For example, Russ' morning scouting in the Patapsco near his house produced 18 warbler species in about 90 minutes. Would this heavy movement of migrants just one day before be the undoing of our Sunday attempt? We would see!

At around 4:00 a.m., while loading the car in Russ' driveway, Steve heard a distant Black-billed Cuckoo vocalize in the darkness. This would be our one and only Black-billed on the day! Steve and I had planned to begin our day by listening for rails from the road along the U of M Farm. At precisely 4:15 a.m., we parked our car along Folly Quarter Road, got out, and immediately heard a Grasshopper Sparrow sing from the field in front of us. Listening conditions were just about perfect as there was no wind and obviously no car traffic at that hour. Playing first Sora and then Virginia Rail tapes elicited nothing from the distant marsh, but then Steve tried the clapping technique and immediately a Sora responded. Over the next hour and ten minutes, from different locations along the road, we tried hard to elicit a Virginia Rail response but to no avail, although at least three Soras obliged. Among the 14 other species we tallied here in the darkness were a vocalizing Pied-billed Grebe, Great Horned Owl, and Horned Lark; the latter two both were misses on the 2013 record Big Day attempt, and the grebe was our only one of the day.

We then headed to Patapsco/Henryton to listen for owls but not before making rapid stops at a pond along MD 144 and at the Marriottsville Road wetland mitigation site as dawn rapidly approached. The former site gave us our only Killdeer of the day. The owl search at Henryton proved fruitless but we decided to stay on into the early dawn to tick as many interior forest breeders and, hopefully, migrants as we could before heading to Russ' yard by 7:00 a.m. Henryton produced a number of good warblers for us - Cerulean, Worm-eating, Hooded, Magnolia, Yellow-throated, Blackburnian, Black-throated Blue, and Black-throated Green among them. In some cases, this was the only location we would have these species today. The early candidate for bird of the day was a *vocalizing* Broad-winged Hawk which Steve picked up over the din of the dawn chorus. Quite a surprise for both of us and not a bird we had expected today!

A fast stop at Waverly Pond netted Solitary Sandpiper before we pulled down Russ' driveway at 7:28 a.m., a little later than we had planned. A 37-minute effort here netted the common yard species but we were very happy to see that Russ' feeders were still hosting a number of Pine Siskins and also a couple Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. We kept checking the sky and were rewarded with a flyover Double-crested Cormorant. We walked down into the Patapsco from here and spent a good 90 minutes trying to add to our migrant list. This was productive but not nearly as much as it had been for Russ on Saturday morning's scouting effort. Numbers of migrants were probably only a fourth of what he had seen a day earlier, but we only needed one of each species for this day, and that was our focus. A late-ish Blue-headed Vireo was a good get, as well as two Canada Warblers. You'd never guess it, but Hairy Woodpecker can be a mighty tough bird to find on a Big Day, so we were happy to get one here. A flyover Common Loon and a Barred Owl with fledged young on the way back up to Russ' house were also valuable ticks.

From here, we decided to "stay in the woods" so to speak and headed to MPEA, but only after a second stop on Folly Quarter Road to scan the farm again. This 20-minute scan produced the nesting pair of Bald Eagles, a few Bobolinks, a

late-ish Sharp-shinned Hawk, and best of all, two Bank Swallows coursing over the wetland with all the other swallows. We left this site by 10:15 sitting at 105 species and feeling pretty good about our chances at the record. However, each new bird becomes more difficult as a Big Day wears on.

MPEA, for what seems to be a pattern by now, once again was fairly non-productive on this Big Day. No matter when Russ has visited this site during any Big Day itinerary, it has tended to underwhelm. To be fair, it has never been a dawn site on a Big Day, but with the two-hour time and energy commitment that it takes to cover the site adequately, it should produce more. It did produce the requisite Kentucky Warbler but no Hoodeds, both of which breed here. We felt fortunate to have gotten a Hooded earlier at Henryton. Near the end of our tiring hike back up from the river, we picked out our only Blue-winged Warbler of the day as well as a singing Cerulean – certainly an unexpected bird for the park!

Next on our itinerary was the Howard County Conservancy for field birds. A one-hour trek here produced our Prairie Warbler and Yellow-breasted Chat ticks, but we were quite surprised to miss on Warbling Vireo, a bird that would take a lot of effort to find the rest of the day. No Brown Thrasher here as well, and this was a species that would elude us all day. Thrasher is another species that can be maddening to find on a Big Day and this species was also missed on the 2013 record day! We left the Conservancy a little after 2:00 p.m. sitting at 111 species.

We then headed to west county, taking the back roads to Western Regional Park to stop at some spots along Route 99 and Underwood Road. After finding nothing at the old Green Manor Turf Farm on Route 32, Steve spotted a Common Nighthawk over the West Friendship Fire Dept. while we sat at the red light at the intersection of 32 and 99! This was definitely one of our better birds of the day as it is about a week earlier than the main nighthawk push through the county. Western Regional disappointed with no new shorebirds even though yellowlegs had been there all week prior. Waterford Farm at 3:30 in the afternoon took a lot of energy out of us to walk over a mile roundtrip down to the lower pond in the hopes of shorebirds. We were "rewarded" with only a few Least Sandpipers as our only new bird of the day.

Next, a quick walk around Annapolis Rock did not produce the targeted breeder, Pine Warbler, but we were happy to see one Ruby-crowned Kinglet, our only one of the day. Otherwise, this area was very quiet. Triadelphia was next up, and Cliff Swallow was the only new bird for the day, though a stunning Common Loon was on the water. It would have been nice to add a Ring-billed Gull or late Caspian Tern at this location, but it was not to be. Springdale Pond was bereft of birds, but Fulton Pond had good numbers of shorebirds including four Lesser Yellowlegs but no Greater Yellowlegs. This location had been spectacular back on 2013's Big Day, when it produced both Cattle Egret and Semipalmated Plover.

By this time it was now 6:00 p.m. and extreme fatigue was setting in coupled with the realization that 122 species was probably not going to happen. Those two things can combine rather easily to dampen one's enthusiasm for continuing on until dark! We were sitting at 117 species and had only a couple birds left that we considered attainable - primarily herons, Brown Thrasher, and Warbling Vireo. We headed first to Lake Kittamaqundi; it was overrun with people but not birds. Oh, the folly of a weekend Big Day! Wilde Lake held promise for Green Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Great Egret, but instead produced only a lonely American Coot for us after we had walked all the way up to the inlet. This was easily one of our best birds of the day given that coots in May are not normally expected in the county. But no herons or egrets? That was a shock.

Lake Elkhorn was equally slow, but Steve had indicated that Warbling Vireos had bred below the dam in the past. We checked that area and sure enough, one alit in a tree right above our heads for species number 118. We were in no position physically or time-wise to walk the entire lake, but we later found out that Elkhorn had hosted at least one Bufflehead earlier in the day, a holdover from earlier in the week. With little time to spare now, we decided to try Meadowbrook for herons and thrasher, finding neither but wasting the precious little light we had left. We then sped over to Race Road and after searching *hard* in the darkening gloom, we finally spotted two Green Herons fly across the swamp and perch on a dead snag. We then made a desperate decision to drive over to the GE Retention Pond off Route 175 to see if we would be able to spot a Great Egret or perhaps a Greater Yellowlegs in the dark, but halfway there we thought better of it and officially brought our Big Day to a close with a tally of 120 species. Two off the record, but still a good tally despite some easy misses.

The story of the day was undoubtedly that we couldn't turn up a thrasher, Great Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, Pine Warbler, or Swainson's Thrush. Other birds that we should have gotten were American Kestrel and Willow Flycatcher.

Compared to the record Big Day back in 2013, our warbler haul today (22 species) was good but still two shy of 2013's effort. We also had no true stunners today, whereas 2013 produced both Cattle Egret and Marsh Wren. Interestingly, we had 18 species today that were not tallied in 2013; however, those were offset by 20 species ticked in 2013 that were not found today. Theoretically then, it should be possible to tally at least 140 species if things go absolutely perfectly. Our conclusion? It will not be easy to beat 122 species in Howard County!

Many thanks to all the folks who made pledges to support this Big Day, with proceeds going to the Howard County Bird Club in order to fund a new Sky Watch site at the Howard County Conservancy!

Russ Ruffing and Steve Collins