

# Howard County, Maryland

## April 30, 2021 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

At 5:13 a.m., our attempt to break Howard County's April Big Day record of 107 species set by Russ Ruffing, Harry Fink, and Allen Lewis in 2014 began. A few days prior, BirdCast migration forecasts had shown that the night of April 29/30 would have very favorable conditions for migrants, but more recent updates indicated that a cold front passing through early in the night would probably limit movements to some extent. Also, forecasted high winds (20-30 mph with gusts to 50-60 mph) throughout the day had considerably dampened our hopes, so we began the day just hoping to get some new birds for the year and thought we'd end up stopping after the morning hours.

We put on our knee-boots and, as the sky began to brighten to the east, walked out into the Davis Branch floodplain at Mt. Pleasant for a try at rails. After crossing the beaver dam, we stood near the small wetland site that had been built several years ago and began playing Sora calls. Within seconds, one answered back to our right! We moved through the others – Virginia, Black, King – and tried both Bitterns and Marsh Wren, but didn't get any responses to those calls. We tried another marsh location nearby with no success, but got one of our few Swamp Sparrows for the day.

Russ' yard and surrounding area is usually a very good indicator of how things are going to go on a Big Day...and this day did not look good, as not a single warbler, vireo, or thrush species was found at our survey there after dawn. The best sighting was a few Purple Finches. Thinking that the day was going to be a complete bust at this point, we decided we'd just continue on and hit a couple spots in the morning hours and then call it a day. We viewed the U of M Farm from Folly Quarter Road and added a few Solitary Sandpipers and a Lesser Yellowlegs, along with other species typical of that location. The best bird was a Red-headed Woodpecker that Russ spotted flying east way out in the distance. We also had a Northern Harrier there...always a tough bird to get on any Big Day.

Moving on to MPEA, our two-hour circuit added nine warbler species but no Kentucky or Hoodeds, which were our main targets. We did add a Yellow-throated Vireo and a Red-breasted Nuthatch, but no thrushes other than Wood, and no Pewee or Acadian Flycatcher. Still not thinking much of the day, we moved on to Springdale Pond and Brighton Dam, adding Osprey, Cormorant, and Cliff Swallow. Russ also spotted a Bank Swallow from the dam but couldn't get Kristin and John on it.

We then moved on to Waterford Farm, and that location ended up being one of our better stops on the day. At the entrance pond, we had two unexpected waterfowl species, Ring-necked Duck and Bufflehead. Waterfowl of any kind are a great bonus for any Big Day in April or May. On the walk down to the shorebird site, John literally almost stepped on a Wild Turkey. The bird must have seen us coming and it huddled down in grass no more than a foot high along the road. As John stepped off the road to get a better look at some birds along the stream, the bird flushed with a flourish right at his feet. We couldn't believe that such a large bird could be that stealthy, but we were glad to add it to the day's list!

The shorebird flats produced a nice haul of shorebirds – both Yellowlegs, Spotted, Solitary, and Least Sandpipers, Killdeer, and Wilson's Snipe. Kristin's sharp eyes also picked out a distant Caspian Tern which ended up flying right over our head. We also ticked our only Purple Martin, Palm Warblers, and Savannah Sparrows of the day here. Leaving this site with a healthy 94 species thus far, we began to feel like challenging the 107 record was looking more possible. Even though the winds by this time (1:30 p.m.) were quite strong and would make hearing and seeing birds much more difficult, we decided to keep going.

Our next stop was right across the street, at the Jennings Chapel Woods location. We put in a lot of energy to walk all the way down to the Patuxent River, hoping for Hooded, Kentucky, and maybe Cerulean Warblers. None of those warblers showed, but we did add a Worm-eating as well as a lone Veery, a White-eyed Vireo, and an Indigo Bunting to our day tally. Sitting at 98 species and with several “easier” species still to look for, we decided our best plan of action would be to scope Underwood Road for Kestrels, then stop quickly at West Friendship Park to look for Grasshopper Sparrow and then head to Henryton for things like Pileated Woodpecker, Belted Kingfisher, American Redstart, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Wood Duck. Success with all would put us at 105 species with a real chance to break the record. Before leaving for Underwood Road, Kristin suggested we try for a Screech Owl at a nest cavity that she knew of on Shaffersville Road, about a 15-minute ride away. We agreed and set off, and as soon as we arrived, we ticked the bird - a gray-phase individual - as it sleepily gazed out its “window.”

On the way to Underwood Road, we got our first Pigeons of the day at the I-70/Rte 97 interchange...species number 100. Underwood Road was a complete bust. At West Friendship, with ridiculous winds blowing across the fields, we fanned out and ended up putting three or four Grasshopper Sparrows to flight, getting good long looks at one that landed in the grass out in front of us. Moving on and arriving at Henryton at 3:22 p.m., we hurried to add the five “easy” birds mentioned earlier, but after walking 8-tenths of a mile upstream, we could only muster two each of Redstart and Yellow-throated Warbler. We couldn’t believe we were still in need of a Pilly, Kingfisher, and a Wood Duck this late in the day, but there we were sitting at 103 species with a thunderstorm threatening.

We decided to make a quick pass at Patapsco/Marriottsville, and Kristin suggested we walk upstream to where she had seen Pileateds excavating a nest cavity a month or so ago. This jaunt ended up being nearly to the Henryton Tunnel, but sure enough the nest site produced a Pileated glaring at us from its nest hole!. Checking the river frequently on the walk back to our cars, Belted Kingfisher and Wood Duck still managed to elude us. About half-way back to the cars, a large portion of a big tree broke off in the high wind and came crashing down about 30 yards away from us. It really was a terribly windy and sometimes dangerous day!

Seemingly dodging a cloud burst that had been threatening, we decided our next best stop would be the Conservancy to potentially add Prairie Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole, American Kestrel, Blue-headed Vireo, Cooper’s Hawk, and Warbling Vireo, but a 45-minute sprint there only netted one Prairie. A nice bonus was a cuckoo which we got brief glimpses of but could not ID to species...but a “sp” still counts on a Big Day as long as you don’t list any others of the same group. So, we left the Conservancy at 6:10 p.m., sitting at 106 species and needing one to tie the 2014 record and two to best it.

Running out of both time and options, we agreed that Centennial would be our best chance to add Wood Duck, Belted Kingfisher, Great Egret, and possibly some of the other remaining species that we missed at the Conservancy. Arriving at the west end of the lake at 6:18 p.m., John called out “kingfisher” as we viewed from the bridge. The bird never made a sound, odd for this species, but there it was flying straight away from us low to the water - species number 107! Kristin suggested we walk up to the end of the wildlife area, as that was where she had a family of Wood Ducks recently, and so we set off. A few minutes later, Russ spotted a hen with five young in tow. A new record for April! Almost immediately, Kristin’s sharp ears picked out a singing Warbling Vireo as icing on the cake; this bird proved to be our last new species of the day and #109.

With some light still left, we decided to view Centennial from the boat launch before taking a shot at Black-crowned Night Heron over at Wilde Lake, even though all of us were getting a bit delirious with fatigue at this point. Glassing from the boat launch, Russ picked out a lone Bank Swallow in with the hordes of other swallows and was able to get Kristin and John on it, making up for their miss of this species earlier at Triadelphia. We got decent looks as it flew past at fairly close range multiple times. We then moved on to Wilde Lake and walked the entire lake from the dam to the

inlet but could not find any new birds for the day. We ended our April Big Day at precisely 7:42 pm, 14.5 hours after we began.

This day was full of surprises and lessons learned. Despite a dim start to our day along with challenging and dangerous wind conditions in the afternoon that would normally keep any birder at home, we persevered and chipped away at our total throughout the day. Because we continued to add species - even just one or two - at almost every stop, it seemed to give us the "juice" we needed to keep going.

Without the terrible winds, we felt certain that we could have added at least a few more species to our total. It is quite shocking that we did not even hear a Baltimore Oriole on the day, and we all wondered where have they been this spring. Russ commented that he had only heard one about a week ago, and that was it. This is a species that is usually back by early April. Other "misses" were Great Egret, accipiters, Great-horned Owl, American Kestrel, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Blue-headed Vireo, Cedar Waxwing, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted and Blue Grosbeaks. So, even with those misses of a potential 10 more species, ticking 109 species in April in Howard County is not easy to do. We all agreed that the day was quite enjoyable and well worth our efforts to stay out all day.

We look forward to trying to break the County's all time Big Day record of 122 species in May!

Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, and John Harris