

Howard County, Maryland

May 10, 2021 Big Day

Russ Ruffing

For about a week's time, excitement had been building for our attempt to take down the Howard Big Day record of 122 species set by the team of Ruffing/Fink/Rogosky back in 2013. For Russ, this was going to be his 8th straight year and 12th attempt to better the 2013 mark. This year's team was made up of Russ and holdover Kristin Trouton from last year's team, and newcomers Steve Luke and Gregg Petersen. All agreed to meet at Russ' house at 4:00 a.m. to begin our assault. This was the first time that Steve or Gregg had ever been part of any Big Day team before.

Now, first a disclaimer. We began our day by listening for nocturnal flight calls via Russ' NFC microphone, hoping for cuckoos, shorebirds, and thrushes primarily, along with any local owls. Some may protest that this is not a valid method of birding for a Big Day. We disagree. Without a binocular to amplify vision, one would not be able to ID the vast majority of birds seen. The same principle applies to ear birding – a microphone simply amplifies what is already flying over and vocalizing. That said, the Big Day purists out there need not fret, as we heard exactly ZERO avian sounds over the 40 minutes we listened. This did not bode well at all and Russ was thinking that this coupled with forecasted winds in the 10-15 mph range were going to blow this day up before it even began.

We departed for the nearby Howard Conservancy to listen for marsh species in the small wetland mitigation site adjacent to Old Frederick Road and Davis Branch. This site had recently produced both Sora and Virginia Rail for Russ in pre-Big Day scouting, but not on this morning. With no marsh specialties at all, we dejectedly headed to Patapsco State Park at Marriottsville Road.

Arriving at 5:10 a.m., we briskly walked the 0.75 mile in the dark to the Henryton tunnel, stopping only briefly to listen for owls. For those that are interested, we did use playback of owl calls and, during daylight hours, scold calls to attract songbirds at some locations. No owls responded at this location, and this stop did not produce our desired Cerulean Warbler, a bird we missed on the day, but we did hit on several Common Nighthawks and a flyover Common Loon both spotted by Kristin, our only American Kestrel of the day spied by Russ, and good breeders like Worm-eating and Yellow-throated Warblers, White-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, and Blue Grosbeak. On the walk back to the parking lot, we were surprised by a nice feeding flock and ticked many non-breeding migrants including Northern Waterthrush, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped, and Canada Warblers as well as Rose-breasted Grosbeak. With a haul of 69 total and 16 warbler species here, our spirits were lifted and we were into the game. It looked like it was going to be a good migrant day after all, which is absolutely essential to make a run at a Big Day record. Back on 2013's record-setting effort, a good migrant day helped to produce 24 warbler species total.

Seeking more migrants, we headed straight to MPEA, making a quick two stops along the way. The Waverly Mansion Pond produced a lone Green Heron, but the real coup was a stop at an innocuous-looking pond at Rte. 144 and Folly Quarter Road. This site netted our only Swamp Sparrow of the day but also a distant Northern Harrier that Kristin spotted flying to the north of us. The latter species is a major "get" for a May Big Day in Howard County. Five minutes later, we were viewing the U of M Farm from Folly Quarter Road (the farm is private and off-limits) when Russ picked out a distant singing Willow Flycatcher, the county's first of the year. While scanning, a Merlin blew right past us at close range, another exceptional tick for a Howard Big Day. This site also produced a small flock of Horned Larks.

We arrived at MPEA at 8:52 a.m. and spent the next 3 hours, 27 minutes traipsing all over the area trying to tease out as many passerines as possible before heading to different habitat types. In years past, MPEA has repeatedly broke

Russ' heart on Big Days, virtually always failing to live up to its billing as a migrant trap. That may be due to a scheduling error, as it was never on the early part of the schedule before. The team figured we'd flip the script this time and hit it in the morning hours, and it paid off handsomely as we added Great-horned Owl, a Least Flycatcher, Veery, Kentucky Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Palm Warbler, and a Lincoln's Sparrow seen only by Kristin among a nice total of 66 species. Missing Hooded Warbler here at a known breeding location really stuck in our craw, however. Immediately afterward, we hit Gregg's yard to hopefully catch one of the two Evening Grosbeaks that had been hanging around as well as several Pine Siskins. Evening Grosbeak is a May Big Day species that really isn't normally on our radar, so it was too good to pass up a chance at one. We were unsuccessful on this try, but we did add our first House Finch of the day. We left Gregg's place at 1:10 p.m. sitting at 104 species.

By this point, every new species really started to count, so we were quite happy about adding Rock Pigeon at an overpass south of Gregg's house. 105 species and on to our water spots! Unbelievably, our first House Sparrow of the day was not seen until 1:30 p.m. at the Lager Ponds in Fulton where we briefly stopped to search for Wilson's Snipe. We were not successful on the snipe, but a stop at Fulton Pond produced our first Killdeer, while Browns Bridge/Rocky Gorge only added a Cliff Swallow. Springdale Pond had no water birds on it at all, but we did add Orchard Oriole at that location.

Next up, Brighton Dam initially seemed disappointing, only producing two Double-crested Cormorants and two more Common Loons. None of the buoys were occupied by gulls or other species. However, just before leaving, Steve remarked that something small and white was sitting on the most distant buoy, about a half mile out. A scope view confirmed the ID – Forster's Tern! What a great find for the county at any time but especially on a May Big Day! Howard County can go several years without a Forster's Tern record.

Now at 111 species, we departed for Waterford Farm (a private location), one of our most anticipated stops of the day, as we hoped for the lingering Bufflehead and Ring-necked Duck that had been there in recent days to still be present along with a good menu of grassland and shorebird species. With a good haul here, we knew we'd have a real shot at the record. Sure enough, the female Bufflehead was still present at the first pond, and we all heard a single Bobolink singing along the entrance road. A few Purple Martins were present, and we added our first Field Sparrow of the day on the walk to the lower ponds, where the best bird was a lone Greater Yellowlegs in with 11 Lessers. On the walk back up to the barns, Gregg stopped and asked, "is that a chat that I'm hearing?" It sure was, and it turned out to be our only one of the day. Yellow-breasted Chats seem to really be disappearing from the county in recent years.

Leaving Waterford, we had 117 species with several "easier" birds still to track down, but time was beginning to drain away as it was just after 4:00 p.m. We knew of a reliable location for Eastern Screech Owl, and we set off for it, but along the way Russ suggested we detour to Annapolis Rock for a try at Pine Warbler. This stop wasn't really on our itinerary, but it proved useful as two Pines materialized high in the trees right at the parking lot. Boosted by our quick success, Russ suggested a short walk to try for Blue-winged Warbler which has been known to breed here, plus a chance Common Raven or Wild Turkey was possible. Neither of those species revealed themselves, but Kristin got us on a skulky Swainson's Thrush for species #119.

Back on script now, the Screech Owl obliged us as we immediately ticked it as it sleepily gazed out of its nest hole. Now 5:10 p.m., we rushed with adrenaline to West Friendship Park, where we quickly added singing Grasshopper Sparrows and Eastern Meadowlarks to the day's tally, putting us level with the 2013 record of 122. We still hadn't hit any of the four major lakes in Columbia, so we felt that a new record was now a foregone conclusion. On the way to Centennial, we stopped by Howard Patterson's feeders where multiple Pine Siskins had been lingering, and one lone siskin sitting on Howard's platform feeder put us in record territory! We were all quite stoked, but Russ - the Big Day veteran of so many disappointing outings since 2013 - was especially pleased.

On to Centennial, at the west end we added Belted Kingfisher and Warbling Vireo rather easily, but no Great Egret. Strategizing on what we could still get in the limited daylight hours remaining, we headed east to a known Common Raven nest on a cell tower near Route 29. Seeing nothing but an empty nest, we thought we struck out here but then Russ spied a single adult preening itself in the trees near the nest. At Lake Elkhorn, we scoped a distant pair of Ring-necked Ducks to make up for the miss on this species at Waterford earlier in the day.

Now 7:30 p.m., we considered a walk around Wilde Lake for Black-crowned Night Heron but that would likely eat up the rest of daylight; instead, we decided to make one last try at Gregg's for Evening Grosbeak, where we were once again unsuccessful. It was then on to the Howard Conservancy because we felt both cuckoo species and Barred Owl would be possibilities. A totally unexpected addition to our total was a pair of gulls seen by Kristin out the left rear window on the way north on Rte. 29. She was unable to get an ID, but a gull "sp" counts on a Big Day if no other gulls were counted that day!

With minimal daylight left, we hiked around the Conservancy property looking for cuckoos. It seemed a lifetime ago that we were there at 4:40 a.m. listening for rails! No cuckoos presented, but with darkness settling in rapidly, Steve noticed a large black shape fly over us and land high up in a tree. We could not see what it was, but when the bird repositioned itself a few trees closer to us, we were able to confirm its identity – Barred Owl, species #129 on the day! What a great way to end our record setting day, crushing the previous record by seven species! We closed out the day at 9:47 p.m. by briefly listening back at Russ' house for cuckoos, but to no avail. We had been birding non-stop for exactly 17 hours and 47 minutes, had walked a total of almost 14 miles, and had driven over 50 miles.

The story of the day was undoubtedly how well we did on warblers, raptors, and flycatchers, tying or exceeding the highest totals Russ' team has ever had for those groups. A total of 25 warbler species was just fantastic, as was ten raptors. The addition of four "bonus birds" – Forster's Tern, Bufflehead, Ring-necked Duck, and Merlin – was major. None of those species should be in Howard County in mid-May. The team also ticked six species that Russ' teams have never before tallied on a May Big Day - Ring-necked Duck, Northern Harrier, Forster's Tern, Merlin, Bay-breasted Warbler, and the gull.

The biggest misses of the day were both cuckoos, Hooded Warbler, Blue-winged Warbler, and Great Egret – not really much to complain about! Maybe someday a Howard County Big Day team will get to 130 or higher, but given how long it took to break 122, it is not likely to happen any time soon. Still, we all imagined we'll be right back at it next year, trying again!

Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, Steve Luke, and Gregg Petersen.