

# Howard County, Maryland

## August 29, 2021 Big Day Summary

Russ Ruffing

At 5:13 am on 8/29/21, Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, and John Harris began a “casual” August Big Day attempt. This was a hastily thrown together affair, with the three of us agreeing just a day or two earlier to make a less intensive-than-usual Big Day attempt. Russ had been part of two previous Howard County attempts in August (2013 and 2014), both netting 84 species. Our thought starting out was that if our morning went well, we’d continue and see how we’d do on the day. If not, we’d just get a decent morning of birding in.

Starting at Russ’ yard, we almost immediately picked up two or three Barred Owls dueting in the morning darkness on what was an exceptionally quiet morning. We noted that there weren’t even any frogs, crickets, or katydids calling. Before the dawn arrived, John and Kristin heard a very distant Great Horned Owl, and Russ detected a Black-billed Cuckoo briefly calling from somewhere to our west. A good start to the day!

An astounding number of robins and starlings passed over as the sky lightened. We spent just over two hours at this location, netting a respectable 44 species, with Warbling Vireo, Common Raven, and Purple Martin the highlights. The morning was light on migrants, and we only had two American Redstarts, one Chestnut-sided Warbler, and one Northern Parula from the warbler group.

A brief check of the Waverly Stormwater Pond netted our Mallard, Wood Duck, and Green Heron for the day prior to heading across the street to the Howard Conservancy. A one hour, 23-minute jaunt around this beautiful property revealed just a couple new species, most importantly Blue Grosbeak.

To have any success on a Big Day, one has to do well with several different groups. With that in mind, we decided to head to Triadelphia’s Pigtail location, as that area had proven in recent days to be Howard County’s only productive shorebird location. It did not disappoint! On arriving, we all noted many individual shorebirds scurrying about out on the mudflats. Among the first birds we noted was a female Blue-winged Teal, a very good August Bird in Howard County. Shorebirds included healthy numbers of Killdeer, Least and Spotted Sandpipers, and Lesser Yellowlegs. Great Blue Heron and Great Egret were good birds for the day, and just before leaving we had our first Song Sparrow of the day.

Moving on to Triadelphia Dam, we hoped for some lingering Cliff Swallows, which breed on the dam structure, but no swallows of any type were present. We picked up our Double-crested Cormorant for the day, and just before leaving, two Caspian Terns dropped in out of the sky. That was one species that we hadn’t expected to get today. Before moving on to Waterford Farm, Russ suggested that since the reservoir water level was fairly low, we should try Triadelphia Lake Road / Cattail Creek just in case there was decent mud exposed there for shorebird habitat. The short drive north and subsequent walk out to the viewing area for Cattail Creek was worth it, as we picked up our only Solitary Sandpipers (2) and a single Greater Yellowlegs on the day.

Now just after 1:00 pm, we continued on to Waterford Farm, a private location that requires birders to be a member of the Howard Bird Club and be trained on visitation procedures in order to visit. Here we did get both adult and young Cliff Swallows, as this species bred in one of the barns at this location for the first time this summer. A single Common Nighthawk and Osprey were nice additions to our day list. At this point, now 2:15 pm, we were sitting at 77 species on the day, with a decent shot at topping the August record of 84 species.

We took stock of what we still needed and could reasonably get, then decided that a stop at West Friendship Park offered good potential. We went there with the thought that if we ticked a handful of new species, we'd continue on and try to break the record. We still needed warblers, as we had only ticked four species on the day, as well as field birds. A nearly 40-minute drive/walk along the entrance road to the park gave us several new birds, including Red-tailed Hawk, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Meadowlark, and Red-winged Blackbird, the latter of which become very scarce in Howard County for a few months after the breeding period ends.

Now sitting on 81 species, we decided to give Patapsco/Henryton a try with the hope of adding some warblers and potentially some thrushes to our tally, needing just three more birds to tie the August record. We arrived at 3:47 pm, and almost immediately got on a great little feeding flock just upstream from the parking lot. New species here included Great Crested Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Wood Thrush, Worm-eating Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, and Scarlet Tanager. Another flock further upstream produced much of the same along with two Yellow-throated Warblers! The best bird here, however, was an Eastern Screech Owl which suddenly decided to respond to the scold tape that we had been using to attract passerines. This unexpected addition put our total for the day at 89 species.

Now nearly 5:00 pm, we looked over what other species we could expect to get on the day vs. what stops could potentially prove fruitful. Not seeing anything obvious, we decided that 89 was a great effort and a quite unexpected total, especially given the lightness of migrants in the early hours. Did we leave some meat on the bone? Likely. This was the first Big Day that Russ could remember where at least one of the Columbia Lakes did not make the menu, and visiting those may have netted a few more species. But we were satisfied with our efforts, and given that we had very low expectations going in along with the fact that we were all quite tired by now, we called it a day...and a very good one it had been!

We noted what an extraordinary year it had been for Howard Big Days for us. Russ and Kristin were part of all three record-breaking Big Days this year – April, May, and August – while John had been along for the April and August dates. There hadn't been a new Big Day record in the county since 2014, so we were all quite satisfied with those results!

Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, and John Harris