

Howard County, Maryland

November 28, 2021 Big Day Summary

Russ Ruffing

At 6:00 a.m. on 11/28/21, Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, and John Harris began an attempt to break Howard County's November Big Day record of 64 species, set back on 11/23/2014 by Russ. Today would be a "play it by ear" type of day...if things went well early, we'd continue; if not, we'd just have a pleasant morning out birding and end when it seemed appropriate. Russ had been part of two previous Howard County attempts in November (2013 and 2014).

Like many previous Big Day runs, we began at Russ' yard in hopes of hearing some owls. We played tapes of Great Horned, Barred, and Eastern Screech, but nothing responded in the quiet of pre-dawn. As the sky brightened and we chit-chatted, suddenly a Barred Owl began "hoo-awing" literally right over our heads in the tall Norway pines above Russ' barn. Almost immediately, two others joined in the ruckus. They must have been there the whole time and figured, "let's give these folks a bit of a startle." It worked. That was probably as close as any of us had ever been to multiple Barred Owls facing off.

Our next bit of business was to watch Russ' hummingbird feeder for the continuing adult female Rufous Hummingbird that had been visiting since November 19. She didn't disappoint, showing up right at 6:46 a.m. to put her stamp on the day's affairs...not a species one would ever expect on a Big Day anywhere in the state! Other very good birds ticked at Russ' place included a continuing but very late House Wren, a late Brown Thrasher, a Common Raven, and both kinglet species.

Waverly Pond held nothing of significance, but Willow Green Pond on Marriottsville Road held large numbers of Ring-necked Ducks as well as several American Black Ducks. Russ also heard the "bup" calls of a Hermit Thrush nearby. Moving farther north to the Patapsco River, we added good birds of the day such as Belted Kingfisher and Hairy Woodpecker.

Next on our schedule was the Howard County Conservancy, where we hoped to clean up on sparrows. Immediately on getting out of the car after parking on MD 99 at the Davis Branch, Kristin spotted a Northern Harrier hunting the swale in the large west field. We birded along the Davis Branch for a few minutes and picked up our Swamp Sparrows for the day, along with other easier sparrows. The real bonus was when Russ spotted an obliging American Tree Sparrow, which can be hit-or-miss and even quite scarce throughout the county during the winter months. There ended up being two Trees in the area, and a walk up the swale matched that total for Savannah Sparrows. At the top of the swale, we heard the rough chatter of an Eastern Meadowlark before flushing it from the recently hayed field.

Next, on the way to Folly Quarter Road to scan the University of Maryland Farm property, Kristin detected a Cooper's Hawk flying over the field at MD 144 and Folly Quarter. The farm property offered up little other than a Bald Eagle and a Red-tailed Hawk. A quick stop at nearby Woodmark Lake produced a few dozen Hooded Mergansers in with the myriad of Canada Geese and Mallards.

Moving on to Triadelphia Reservoir, a brief stop first at Springdale Pond turned up a Merlin posted in a small tree in one of the yards that abuts the water; however, the water itself was completely empty. The view of Triadelphia from the dam was rather disappointing, with only a few handfuls of Ring-billed Gulls, a Great Blue Heron, and a Double-crested Cormorant being new, in addition to our second kingfisher of the day. We decided to walk out to the pipeline and beyond in order to be able to see much more of the

reservoir, and, despite it being disappointing for waterfowl, we added a lone Lesser Scaup, two Buffleheads, three Common Mergansers, a half-dozen Pied-billed Grebes, and two additional Merlins, one of which gave us excellent extended photo opportunities at fairly close range. This bird was perched on a small dead plant stalk about ten feet off shore, and seemed completely unconcerned with our presence. More importantly, we left this location sitting at 64 species, tied with the previous November Big Day record...and it was only 12:15 p.m.!

Moving south now, we stopped at Browns Bridge, which was completely empty of birds save for a few Killdeer that blended very well with the distant mud that they were standing on. Next, Lime Kiln Pond held good numbers of waterfowl but nothing new for the day, and Fulton Pond held nothing. We then diverted to Race Road in hopes of adding more waterfowl, stopping at the Trash Transfer Station to see about gulls first, but it was closed and empty of the typical birds that scavenge there on days of operation. At Race Road, we did add three Northern Shovelers but no teal or wigeon. Amazingly, we saw our fourth Merlin of the day at this location. As we left, Kristin somehow detected the distant calling of a Pileated Woodpecker through an open car window as we drove down the road; this was a bird that we still needed for the day.

Sitting at 67 species, we drove south back to the Columbia Lakes area in hopes of more waterfowl. The GE Retention Pond and Lake Elkhorn both disappointed, but a stop at the US 29 x Broken Land Parkway stormwater pond turned up a single drake Wood Duck in with a few Mallards and Ring-necked Ducks. Stops at Lake Kittamaqundi, Wilde Lake, and Centennial in that order failed to turn up anything new and were, frankly, rather unexceptional for birds in general.

With maybe one hour of daylight left and having established a new November record of 68 species, we decided to call it a day. This ended a remarkable run of Big Days for members of the team in 2021, having set new Big Day records on every attempt made (April, May, August, and November). Russ and Kristin were part of all four record-breaking Big Days this year, and John had been along for all but the May attempt. After quite a few disappointing years of doing Big Days in the county, 2021 certainly proved to be memorable!

Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, and John Harris