

Howard County, Maryland

Sparrow Big Days

Bonnie Ott and Joanne Solem

Sparrow Big Day 1 October 4, 2003. Leader: Bonnie Ott. Total participants: 10. Stan Arnold, Ralph Cullison, Karen Darcy Heffernan, Kevin Heffernan, Emmalyn Holdridge, Elise Kreiss, Kurt Schwarz, Joanne Solem, + one more participant. Weather: Overcast early; by 7:15 a.m. mist, which quickly changed to drizzle and soon to light rain eventually becoming steady; it stopped by the time the group finished the UMDCF. By mid-a.m., the sun was occasionally visible; high in 60s. Time: 7:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. Total sparrow species: 9. Meeting site: UMDCF. Notable bird species: Blue-winged Teal, American Bittern (2), Sora, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Wilson's Snipe – UMDCF; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Cape May Warbler – Alpha Ridge Park; Red-headed Woodpecker, LARK SPARROW, Nashville Warbler – Western Regional Park.

Never let it be said that Howard County birders are afraid to get wet. On this day, the weather was such a major factor that the group almost gave up partway through the first site. Fortunately, conditions improved slowly, and the day was remembered as one of the most rewarding of any of the Sparrow Big Days.

Beginning at the UMDCF was calculated to take maximum advantage of the possibility for any unusual bird species, not just sparrows. The rain kept most sparrows hunkered down, but what was lost in sparrow variety and numbers, other species filled in. Blue-winged Teal, not one but two American Bitterns, Sora, Wilson's Snipe, Peregrine Falcon, and Merlin rewarded the drenched birders. A family of four River Otters splashing and playing near the junction of the swale and pond 1 was highly entertaining. Steady rain and relatively few sparrows reduced Bonnie's normal enthusiasm. On our return from pond 3 along the swale, she announced that if people wanted to leave, that was the time to make their decision. She intended to go back along the swale using a different path in an attempt to find additional sparrows; after that, she'd probably call it a day. A discussion about visiting at least two other sites led everyone to return to the parking lot together. By then, the rain had stopped, so an hour at Alpha Ridge Park was an easy choice. Spirits rose with the addition of Lincoln's, White-throated, and White-crowned sparrows, a Cape May Warbler, and the first Yellow-bellied Sapsucker of the season.

We agreed our last stop would be the far west section of Western Regional Park, a large park still under development. Although work was beginning in the westernmost section, the habitat there was less disturbed than in other parts of the park so we concentrated our efforts near the stream. From the westernmost parking lot, we worked downhill. Partway down, a bird with white outer tail feathers flew from the 30-foot- high pile of topsoil that had been deposited not far from the stream. Our first thought was Vesper Sparrow which we had not yet had. Near the bottom of the hill, but before reaching the streamside vegetation, three-foot-high wire fencing lined with plastic had been erected for sediment control. The birders were spread out along the east side of the fencing with Ralph on the far left beyond the end of the fence as we scanned for the elusive sparrow. Ralph was concentrating on the grasses and weedy plants surrounding the base of the dirt pile. Suddenly, he said, in his usual quiet, understated way, "Bonnie, I think you want to see this bird." She quickly found the bird and verified what had been obvious to both of them; they were looking at an adult LARK SPARROW! Everyone maneuvered to find viewing spots in order to best appreciate this handsome bird, a second county record. It was a life, state, or county bird for everyone! Ralph returned to his car for camera and scope and was able to obtain some fine

photos. Everyone watched this cooperative bird from multiple angles for half an hour. Despite the miserable initial weather conditions, the first Sparrow Big Day ended on an extraordinarily high note.

Bonnie summarized the trip in an article for *The Goldfinch* 32 (2):6 describing the sparrows in her very personal way. "I can finally relax since we found a DROP DEAD GORGEOUS adult Lark Sparrow!!! ... We saw three Lincoln's Sparrows that were as cute as buttons, and a couple of elegant White-crowneds. There were also some exceptional White-throated Sparrows (always glad to have them back!) Savannahs were zipping around and Swamps were skulking. Some Field Sparrows looked quite surprised and of course, we saw our friendly Song Sparrows (I wonder how many of the 56 sub-species we saw?) It was a memorable day for all 10 birders!"