

Howard County, Maryland

Sparrow Big Days

Bonnie Ott and Joanne Solem

Sparrow Big Day 8 October 16, 2010. Leader: Bonnie Ott. Recorder: Joe Hanfman. Total participants: 11. Dan Haas, Gayle Hill, Bill Hill, Grazina McClure, Mike McClure, Kurt Schwarz, Joanne Solem, Anna Urciolo, Mark Wallace. Weather: Clear; chilly early warming into 60s; light breeze for first few hours, then steady wind with gusts to 25+. Time: 7:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. Total sparrow species: 12. Meeting site: UMDCF. Notable bird species: Marsh Wren, American Pipit, Rusty Blackbird, Nelson's Sparrow, LE CONTE'S SPARROW, Purple Finch – UMDCF; Northern Harrier – Alpha Ridge Landfill; LE CONTE'S SPARROW – Waterford Farm.

In the early morning chill at the UMDCF, Bonnie listed the possible sparrow species at this location. There had been no Nelson's reported during spring so that became the target species. By the time we reached the swale, the sun was beginning to warm the air. Most of the group was strung out along the east side of the swale with Bonnie alternately in the swale or on the west side of it paralleling the rest of us. We had barely gotten a good start when up from the base of a switchgrass clump popped a sparrow with an orange face. Joanne's notes to the Maryland/DC Records Committee describe how herd mentality works: "When Bonnie spotted it and called 'Nelson's,' we were all predisposed to see that species... The bird moved in a leisurely fashion among the grass stalks alternately pausing to soak up sun and to nibble at grass seeds. It exhibited no particular fear. Pictures were being taken and people were talking quietly, but it appeared to ignore us... I was on the east bank above the bird while Bonnie was in the swale more at eye level and behind it. I had excellent head-on looks at the top of the head. The white crown stripe kept nagging at me, but not having seen any Nelson's for more than a year, I couldn't remember whether that species had a white median stripe. Meanwhile, Bonnie was looking at the collar and wondering about the striping. Nevertheless, none of us raised any questions. Big mistake! When the bird moved out of sight, we blithely continued north along the swale thinking we had had a Nelson's Sparrow (a 'second' Nelson's was seen briefly at the edge of pond 2)."

From the farm, the group moved to Alpha Ridge Park to carpool for the landfill and from there went on to Mt. Pleasant until 2:30 p.m. By that time, the number in the group was down to about half (Dan, who had taken numerous photos during the trip, left about 1:00 p.m.; Joanne left after Mt. Pleasant). Those remaining headed to West Friendship Park and finally to Waterford Farm. By the time they reached the last stop, the group consisted of Bonnie, Joe, Grazina, Mike, and Kurt. As they worked the farm, there was a final surprise in store. Bonnie recently said, "How I remember that moment! I recall the bird flushing up out of the grass. I didn't want to call it because I couldn't believe my eyes. I think Joe and I looked at each other and both were waiting for the other to speak." Joe added, "Bonnie was the first to flush it and it perched up in a tree. I am sure we both immediately recognized it even though it was in immature plumage. I learned later that LE CONTE'S SPARROW will migrate in immature plumage." The group celebrated this as a new county record. Bonnie called me within a few minutes, deliriously happy. This was a species that she, Emmalyn Holdridge, and I had, for years, anticipated finding so, at least one of us had notched it. Emmalyn was at home with a broken ankle and I had opted out of those last sites. All experienced birders have stories of the "one that got away" and this seemed destined to be one of mine.

But that was not quite the end of the story. Late that same afternoon, Dan, who had been reviewing his photos, noticed something and sent Joe an email while the group was at Waterford. Joe remembers, "Dan

Haas sent me an email and asked if Nelson's ever had a white median crown stripe and said he had a photo. The rest is history." At home that evening, Bonnie looked at Dan's photos and also realized that the bird in the swale that same morning at the UMDCF was not a Nelson's at all, but a SECOND (or rather the FIRST) Le Conte's! How bizarre! A new county species—and two in two different locations on the same day. Need I add, I appreciated Bonnie's phone call that evening with the news that everyone on the trip had seen a new county bird.

Bonnie's succinct summary: "Sparrow Big Day was a huge success!"