

February 28, 2022 Howard County Big Day

At 4:40 a.m., the team of Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, John Harris, and Gregg Petersen gathered in the darkness of Russ' yard to attempt to break Howard County's February Big Day record of 75 species set by Russ Ruffing, Harry Fink, and Matt Rogosky back in 2013. This attempt was a hastily thrown together affair after Kristin suggested to Russ that we put together a team just a couple of days prior. John and Gregg quickly agreed, and so we now found ourselves rubbing the sleep from our eyes and straining our ears to pick up any vocalizing owls in the still air of the morning.

A Barred Owl called once or twice, but we could not induce a screech-owl to respond to any of our playback, nor did the low tones of a Great-horned Owl pair reach our ears from the south, where Russ had heard them duetting in recent weeks. Seeking to secure a peenting American Woodcock before dawn, we decided to make the long drive to Hipsley Mill, even though Russ had had one or two woodcocks sporadically in the field across from his house recently. The thinking was that Hipsley would all but guarantee woodcock, plus it could add potential owls or Wild Turkey. We arrived on site at 5:50 a.m. Almost immediately, we heard the staccato chips of a displaying woodcock at the exact same time that an Eastern Screech-Owl responded to our playback intrusion into its morning. Eastern Towhees called everywhere, and a Hermit Thrush obliged with its "bup bup" call. We spent 34 minutes at this stop hoping to find the roosting turkey that Gregg had seen here just a few days prior, but it was not to be.

Bopping next door to the Annapolis Rock location, we spent an hour and were rewarded with a single Winter Wren and four Fox Sparrows but did not find our other intended targets – kinglets of either species or the Wood Duck pair that had been reported in the wooded pond a day or two ago. Since we were already out in "west county," we decided to hit all the potential stops in that area before heading east. Larriland Farm Pond and the Florence Road Silage Pit offered nothing remarkable, but the AE Mullinix Road S-curve delivered four White-crowned Sparrows along with an American Kestrel and a Red-tailed Hawk. White-crowned Sparrows are definitely on the scarce side in winter in Howard County, but this location has become quite dependable for them in recent years for some unknown reason.

At Gregg's suggestion, we next hit the private pond along Jennings Chapel Road to see if the Redheads that he spotted there yesterday were still around. This pond can only be viewed from the car while stopped on the road, which can be dangerous; so, while we each kept one eye on the road behind us, we rapidly counted 13 Redheads (a healthy number for Howard County), one Greater Scaup, two Ring-necked Ducks, and six Hooded Mergansers in among the hundreds of Canada Geese. A brief view of the upper ponds at Waterford Farm revealed two Gadwall, one Bufflehead, and three dozen Lesser Scaup as new additions to our list along with a flyover Bald Eagle. With the time now at 9:00 a.m. straight up, we set our sights on Triadelphia.

We pulled into the Greenbridge parking lot hoping to pile on to our already-decent waterfowl list, which is imperative for any winter Big Day attempt. We were not disappointed, as the baker's dozen of Tundra Swans seen here in recent days still occupied the spit of land visible from the pipeline, and we were able to tease out at least two Red-breasted Mergansers from the 1000+ Common Mergansers scattered about the reservoir. Several Pied-billed Grebes, three dozen Ring-billed Gulls, two Common Ravens, and a Belted Kingfisher were other good additions to the day's list, but Gregg's spotting of a single hen Common Goldeneye was definitely a bonus. Bonaparte's Gull would have been a nice addition, but we could not spot any among the Ring-billeds.

Next up, Springdale Drive Quarry Pond proved empty of waterfowl, but we did add the obligatory first vultures (both species) of the day and a vocal Red-shouldered Hawk. Pigtail Branch on Triadelphia's northeastern quadrant was more welcoming, as it produced an American Black Duck, two Great Blue Herons, a Pileated Woodpecker (not always a "given" on Big Days), and two Golden-crowned Kinglets to make up for the miss earlier this morning at Annapolis Rock. A second Winter Wren of the day also chided us from low brush along the tributary at this location. Moving on to Brown's Bridge, we hoped for Killdeer on the expansive mud flats that exist at that location, but not a single bird was present. Reservoir Road/Lime Kiln Pond added no new waterfowl but a single Cooper's Hawk was a nice find by Kristin. Happily, Fulton Pond produced four Killdeer and an ample supply of Rock Pigeons to close off our efforts in the southwest sector of the county.

At this point, at 11:41 a.m. and with 62 species in the bag, it was time to begin strategizing for the remainder of the day. We had done well with waterfowl but there were still some other ducks for which we could try. Race Road seemed to be a good option, plus we could stop at the Trash Transfer Station on the way to see if any gulls were around. Not surprisingly, both Herring and Ring-billed Gulls were aplenty at the Transfer Station, but no Great Black-backed Gulls were around, as it is getting late in the winter for them at this point. Scurrying north to Race Road, we

arrived at 12:40 p.m. to find Mary Lou Clark already scanning the water, which was basically empty of ducks. Northern Shovelers generally love this location in winter, but few had been seen here in recent weeks and none were present during our visit. Undaunted, we added several other new species for the day – three Yellow-rumped Warblers, an Eastern Phoebe, one Hairy Woodpecker, two Ruby-crowned Kinglets, a Swamp Sparrow, and a lone American Coot that Russ spotted sneaking through the reeds on the eastern edge of the pond. This proved to be one of the best birds of the day.

Heading west from Race Road, we decided it was time to pick up the overwintering male Baltimore Oriole at Jeff Cullers' feeders, and the bird appeared within a few minutes of our arrival, as did a whimpering Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in one of the street trees adjacent to Jeff's house. This put our day total at 71 species, certainly well within reach of the record of 75 and still not quite 2:00 p.m! A quick check of Waverly Pond revealed a single Wilson's Snipe huddled against the far shore; this bird was not detected on the team's first few passes with our collective optics, but Gregg remarked that a certain lump along the water's edge looked suspicious. Sure enough, a scope view revealed the long bill of a snipe! Willow Green Pond was next with hopes to add American Wigeon, and it did not disappoint with two among a handful of Ring-necked Ducks, Gadwall, and Canada Geese.

Still needing a few easy species (Field Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird), the team routed to Russ' house and immediately picked up the latter two species on his feeders and then a short walk offered up four Field Sparrows to break the record! With Horned Larks and Savannah Sparrows leading our "needs" list, we sped to Underwood Road and promptly found a single lark, and a beautiful bonus was a Northern Harrier floating over the ag fields for #78 on the day. It was a real disappointment to not find any Savannah's along the roadsides here. Seeing that we still needed Wood Ducks, we decided to head to Val Swann's house just a mile or so to the north where this species has been present recently in the ponds behind her house. A single drake was spotted on the larger pond, but not before Kristin spied a Brown Creeper low in a small tree. Now at 80 species, we homed in on what was left to target...Brown Thrasher and Gray Catbird.

Both of those species are scarce in winter but at least one of each had been reported off and on throughout the winter at Alpha Ridge Park. There was also the possibility of hearing a pair of Great Horned Owls that are nesting somewhere in the vicinity of the adjacent landfill. Arriving at the park at 5:10 p.m., we spent almost an hour looking and listening, but the passerines were pretty much settled in for the evening and no owls serenaded us unfortunately. Good numbers of Wood Ducks and American Black Ducks entertained us along with Mallards on the extensive beaver ponds at this location. With darkness settling in, we were quite happy and satisfied with our day's efforts – 80 species, a new record, and a pleasant weather day all around. We headed back to Russ' house and promptly heard two woodcock peenting in the adjacent field, as if to put an exclamation point on our day's efforts. Considering that we did not hit any of the Columbia-area lakes today, we still did exceptionally well on waterfowl, with only shovelers a noticeable miss. Green-winged Teal and Ruddy Duck wouldn't have been too out of the ordinary either, but they've both been scarce here this winter. Besides those species and Savannah Sparrow, other reasonable species that we missed included Eastern Meadowlark, American Pipit, Cedar Waxwing, Rusty Blackbird, Merlin (there have been several around the county this winter), Double-crested Cormorant, and Sharp-shinned Hawk. Nevertheless, we had a lot of fun, broke the old February record by five species, and continued the streak of record-breaking Big Days by members of this team. Going back to April of 2021, we have broken the Howard County Big Day records for April, May/all-time high), August, November, and now February in our last five attempts! Russ Ruffing, Kristin Trouton, John Harris, and Gregg Petersen