

May 11, 2023 Howard County Big Day

For the 11th straight May, a Big Day team captained by Russ set out to see how many species of birds we could find in one 24-hour day. In May, the sweet spot seems to be the 10th or 11th of the month, and with overnight winds turning favorable the evening of the 10th after several days of northerly winds, we felt that today might hold some promise despite this spring producing an unusually poor migration.

Realistically, we harbored no thoughts of threatening the whopping mark of 129 set in 2021, which itself blew out the long-standing record of 122 that was established way back in 2013. Nonetheless, Val, Gregg, and Russ gathered in the darkness in Russ' front yard at precisely 3:58 a.m. to start our day by listening for nocturnal flight calls before heading out for more typical birding. Almost as soon as we started, a Great Horned Owl serenaded us and continued for the next 40 minutes from a perch directly above us. This is very unusual for this location, as most times Russ hears GHOWs faintly in the distance far to the south, and infrequently at that. A Barred Owl also called a few times from much farther away, and over the next one hour and fifteen minutes, we tallied 20 species including a peenting Common Nighthawk (never a given on a May Big Day), plus Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos, Spotted Sandpiper, thrushes (Veery, Swainson's, and Wood), and Rose-breasted Grosbeak in addition to some more common local species. Of the birds heard, only Black-billed Cuckoo would not be ticked via traditional birding methods throughout the day.

At 5:15 a.m., and a little later than planned, we packed up and rushed over to the nearby Howard County Conservancy to listen for marsh birds in the small wetland along Davis Branch. This site had failed to produce any rails of late but did hold a Marsh Wren over the past week. This morning, however, no marsh specialties responded to our digital inducements, but in the 23 minutes we spent there, we added Solitary Sandpiper, Great Blue and Green Herons, and audibly picked up singing White-eyed Vireo, Swamp Sparrow, Orchard Oriole, Eastern Meadowlark, and Prairie Warbler among other species that were just starting their day.

Based on recent activity, we chose Patapsco/Henryton as our next stop over Patapsco/Marriottsville, which has been an early-morning staple of our recent May Big Day attempts. The thought was that Henryton offered the same forest breeders but also a better chance at tough-to-get Hooded and Kentucky Warblers. It also had a vocal Red-headed Woodpecker over several recent days. Either way, it was imperative that this next stop produce not only the expected breeders but also a nice tally of non-breeding warblers; without the latter, any May Big Day is doomed to underwhelm.

We parked Russ' minivan at the end of Henryton Road at 6:03 a.m. and headed up-river with eyes and ears straining to tick as many birds as possible. Even with a slow start, the next two hours and six minutes yielded a total of 68 species, including Big Day coups Wild Turkey and the aforementioned Red-headed Woodpecker calling in the distance, always-sketchy Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Hairy Woodpecker, and a wonderful total of 17 warblers including NINE non-breeders (Northern Waterthrush, Tennessee, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, and Canada). Most surprising was that on the one+ mile walk upriver, we had almost no warblers; only after reaching our furthest point did we run into a small but highly variable feeding flock, and then on the walk back we produced a few others. Overall, the sheer numbers were underwhelming, but the species count is all that mattered. We left this location with 84 on the day so far.

Wanting to stay "in the forest," we made our way to MPEA but made quick stops first at the small pond along Rte. 144 at Folly Quarter Road. On past Big Days, this stop has always produced something interesting, and today it yielded four Least Sandpipers and a lone Killdeer to lift us to 86 species. Stopping in front of the University of Maryland Farm, from Folly Quarter Road we were able to add singing Horned Lark, Yellow Warbler, and Willow

Flycatcher out in the field along with a handful of Rock Pigeons sitting on the farm silos. The stop failed to produce any raptors - not even a Bald Eagle was seen in the nest at this location! - nor any desired Bobolinks. Next, proceeding down Sheppard Lane toward MPEA with all four windows open, we heard a Blackpoll Warbler sing from along the roadside to our left precisely at the moment we passed by. This bird, #91 for the day, was the ONLY Blackpoll we encountered the entire day and that would prove critical as the day wore on. You take them any way you can get them on a Big Day!

Arriving at MPEA's Trotter Road entrance at 9:12 a.m., we knew the next few hours would be critical to any success we might have today. It was imperative to add more warblers here along with any other species we could encounter. Over the next two and a half hours, we walked nearly three miles and made some excellent finds, the best of which was two Anhingas flying over the treetops in a northeasterly direction. Now, this is a species that would never make it onto even the most ambitious "potential" list for a Howard County Big Day, and it wasn't on ours either despite the fact that Anhingas had been visiting the Columbia lakes as recently as the week prior. This first-ever Howard Big Day species was definitely an energy boost for the team. Other excellent finds were two Gray-cheeked Thrushes together in an open area of understory, singles of Cooper's Hawk, Common Raven, and a late-ish Blue-headed Vireo, and two Ruby-crowned Kinglets. We tallied 16 warbler species here including three new for the day - Nashville, Blackburnian, and Wilson's. Having added 15 to our day list, we left MPEA precisely at noon at 106 birds.

Now that our forest locations were over with, this was the point at which decisions-on-the-fly began to be made. We thought of going to Sharps Waterford Farm next but opted instead to hit Centennial Lake with the hopes that recent Horned Grebe, Glossy Ibis, and Great Egret might still be lingering. The location is also good for Warbling Vireo, Osprey, and late gulls. Parking at the boat dock, we quickly located a Double-crested Cormorant, then moved to the concession stand parking area where we added an Osprey clutching a fish in its talons as it departed the lake. Walking toward the west end, singing Warbling Vireos were detected and a Great Egret was spied foraging near one of the islands. A few minutes' search of the islands didn't pick out any night-herons, nor did we encounter a Brown Thrasher which we half-expected.

With 110 species and many potentials still left to tally, we began to think we could make a run at the record...that is, until Russ talked the group into driving east to see if we could find any gulls near the trash transfer station. Though we added Black Vulture on the way, this detour proved to be utterly fruitless and wasted over an hour and a half as we attempted to somewhat recover from the whiff on gulls by visiting Tarbay Pond and GE Retention Pond for shorebirds or waterfowl, to no avail. Finally getting back on track but a bit pessimistic now, we hastily drove to Springdale Quarry Pond, which was virtually empty of birds, and then to Brighton Dam where we found dozens of Cliff Swallows for species #112. Just four days earlier, there had been zero Cliffs at this location.

Next, we hit Triadelphia's Pigtail area and added a single Greater Yellowlegs in with many Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, and then were able to entice a Pine Warbler into view across the creek from the parking lot. This spot is a known breeding location for Pines. At nearby Big Branch, we also spotted a Lesser Yellowlegs and left that location sitting at 115 species. Still needing many field birds, Waterford Farm was next in our sights. We arrived there at 4:26 p.m. and soon thereafter added our first Bald Eagle soaring east of the entrance road. A Brown Thrasher flew down to the paved road behind us, and this was our only encounter with that species on the day. In order, we added Purple Martins, Savannah Sparrows, a handful of Bobolinks, a single Red-tailed Hawk, and a bonus Broad-winged Hawk that we picked out way up high as we viewed the Red-tailed. This put us at 122 birds, which is only the third time that total has been reached in Howard County, but big misses at Waterford included Grasshopper Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, and American Kestrel.

Now with a real chance to break the record, it was all about strategy. Should we try Hipsley Mill or Jennings Chapel Woods for Kentucky and Hooded Warblers? We still needed the aforementioned misses at Waterford, plus Yellow-breasted Chat. Remembering that Kentucky and Hooded bred not too far down the trail at Jennings Chapel last year, we decided to try there first. Stopping at the exact spot where a Kentucky pair bred last year, we briefly played Kentucky songs to no avail. At one point, we saw a yellow bird flash across the trail and into some thick brush but were not able to get on it again. We were handsomely rewarded for our efforts, though, when a Mourning Warbler sang twice from a location to our south! This species has never been encountered by any of Russ' previous May Big Day teams!

Buoyed by this find, we decided to make a quick stop at Hipsley Mill; perhaps there we would add Kentucky or Hooded Warblers, Eastern Screech-Owl, and maybe even a late-peenting American Woodcock? Just as soon as we left the parking lot of Jennings Chapel, we heard House Finches along the road near, appropriately, a few houses. Amazingly, this was a new species at this late juncture of the day! We were sitting at 124 birds when we turned the minivan into the Hipsley Mill parking area just before 6:00 p.m. A mini sprint along the floodplain for about one-half mile failed to turn up anything new despite our trying to entice a Hooded, Kentucky, or Cerulean Warbler to sing; this area had been pretty reliable for those species up until recent years. Leaving there, we stopped at the woodcock spot just up the hill to the north, a location that is also dependable for screech-owls, but once again we left empty handed. A little downhearted now and with daylight running out, we made a beeline for Underwood Road.

We arrived at the turnout on Underwood Road at 6:49 p.m. and almost immediately we had singing Grasshopper Sparrows and a Blue Grosbeak greeting us. Now at #126, we decided to walk down the gravel lane (Val had previously asked the landowner for permission) with hopes of an early Dickcissel in the back field where they've bred for several years now. With distant singing Bobolinks as a backdrop, we noticed sparrows popping up out of the grass one by one and flying into small trees at the bottom of the hill...Field Sparrows all, except one odd-ball – a White-crowned Sparrow! Completely unexpected was this bird, as it was only the second time one has been encountered by Russ' May Big Day teams. Now at 127 species, we scanned all the surrounding wires, poles, and snags for American Kestrel to no avail.

What to do next? We still needed Yellow-breasted Chat, and the Conservancy is very reliable for those, but would any be singing so late in the day? We could also try again for the Marsh Wren, and perhaps a Cape May Warbler would still be foraging in the pines near the old farmhouse as they had been recently. There was also a chance for Northern Harrier and a kestrel. Yes, the Conservancy offered us the highest probability for new species, so off we went, arriving at the Route 99 turnout near the Davis Branch at 7:17 p.m. Trying first for the Marsh Wren, it seemed like days since we had been at the exact same location 14 hours earlier! Eliciting no response, we walked north along the field to the bridge over Davis Branch, and just as we turned to cross the bridge, we all heard a chat singing overhead and we looked up just in time to see it flying over the stream in the odd, humped-back flight style that is typical of that species.

Needing one more to tie the record, we walked up along the stone wall to the main parking lot. Amazingly, just as we arrived at the pines near the farmhouse, a beautiful male Cape May Warbler appeared at the top of the pines right in front of us! We couldn't believe it – 129 species to tie the record! Exhausted and exhilarated, did we have one more bird in us to break the record? Discussing our options while taking the shortest and most direct route back to the car, we all agreed – we would speed to the mouth of Lake Kittamaqundi to try to tick the singing male Prothonotary Warbler that had been present there for two days. We knew it would be nearly dark by the time we'd arrive, but we set off in hot pursuit, nonetheless.

We parked the minivan near the boat dock at 8:20 p.m. and jogged most of the way to the mouth of the lake about one-half mile to the north. Arriving at the bridge over the inlet at about 8:30 p.m., wow it was getting pretty dark by then! We quickly tried a few Prothonotary songs, and when that failed to get a response, we then played some of the harsh metallic chip notes that are typical of this species. By then, the local White-throated Sparrows were very vocal with their chip notes as they assembled to roost for the evening, but over the din we thought we definitely heard the chip notes of a Prothonotary coming from somewhere above the stream. Just to be sure, we checked to see what Merlin would indicate, and it displayed "Prothonotary Warbler" almost immediately. Satisfied with our ID, we realized we had just broken the record with 130 species! Nevertheless, we thought, "you know, this would be a good area for screech-owls too," so we played some whinny and trill calls just to see what would happen. Just as before at Hipsley, none answered us.

Elated, we headed back to Russ' house. Surprisingly, all of us felt pretty lively, not completely obliterated as is usual after a long Big Day effort, so we decided to listen again for nocturnal flight calls for about 30 minutes just to see what might happen. That effort proved to be rather uneventful, with only a Green Heron "squonk" call heard at 10:10 p.m., a full 18 hours and 12 minutes after we began, but that wasn't new for us on the day.

In summary...what a day! Yes, there were a few minor misses, but it's hard to complain when you've just broken the all-time county record! American Kestrel was probably the most egregious followed by Hooded Warbler and Eastern Screech-Owl, but even then, those are never givens on a Big Day. Others we could have rightly expected were a flyover Common Loon or one at Triadelphia, a roosting Black-crowned Night-Heron (although we did not hit Wilde Lake, a known sweet spot for that species), and Blue-winged and Kentucky Warblers, both of which are known but scarce breeders in the county. These misses were more than offset by gems such as Anhinga, Mourning Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, and White-crowned Sparrow along with the major run we had on warblers in general. Our warbler tally (including Yellow-breasted Chat for comparison to previous years when it was still considered a "warbler") was 28 species...three more than our best Big Day total ever! The 18+ hours we put in today certainly paid off in a major way!

Russ Ruffing, Val Swan, and Gregg Petersen