

Maryland Big Day, 5/24/2009

Zach Baer, Jim Brighton, Ron Gutberlet, Matt Hafner, Bill Hubick, Mikey Lutmerding
(Summary and Narrative by Bill Hubick, Analysis by Matt Hafner)

SUMMARY

Minutes before midnight on Sunday, May 24th, six of us are standing in the drizzling rain in a parking lot in Cumberland. Common Nighthawks are flying overhead, calling, easily visible as they hunt in the lights around two nearby church steeples. When our cell phones register 12:00 a.m., the nighthawks become the first species tallied in our attempt to break the all-time Maryland Big Day record. We quickly pile into the van, an awkward routine we will repeat over 100 times during the next 24 hours. Heading west optimistically, the team is me, Zach Baer, Jim Brighton, Ron Gutberlet, Matt Hafner, and Mikey Lutmerding.

Our goal is to top the Maryland Big Day record of 214 species, which was set on May 22nd, 2002 by Marshall Iliff, Jim Stasz, Matt Hafner, and Andrew Farnsworth. The team has a lot of big day experience: Matt Hafner was a member of the record-setting team, and most of us are veterans of the World Series of Birding. We've been scheming for months, scrutinizing every detail. Could we really drop Deal? Can we really skip the Nassawango? We create an unconventional 6-person team, risking "5%" species for the benefit of more scouting, more eyes, and more fun. We've dedicated several days to full-time scouting and our route seems sleek and polished. As we head west, spirits and adrenaline levels are high. Our cooler is full of Dr. Pepper and Rockstar. Matt is making last-minute adjustments to Excel spreadsheets. Over the next 24 hours, this route morphs into an epic, unforgettable day of birding. Although we didn't break the record, our total of 200 species was very satisfying. We were excited to join Hafner on the short list of insane birders who have seen 200 species in Maryland in 24 hours. I always knew 214 was a solid record, but I have new respect for it.

SPECIES OF MOST INTEREST

Tundra Swan (Blackwater), Lesser Scaup (pair, Piney Reservoir), Surf Scoter (2, Cabin Creek), American White Pelican (1, Blackwater), American Bittern (Garrett Co.), Black Rail (2, Elliott Island Road), Upland Sandpiper (Garrett Co.), Iceland Gull (first-cycle, Ocean City Inlet and Skimmer Island), Glaucous Gull (first-cycle, Skimmer Island), Black Skimmer (4 each, Ocean City Inlet and Eagle's Nest), Northern Saw-whet Owl (Garrett Co.), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (Garrett Co.), Gray-cheeked Thrush (night migrant in Garrett Co.), Mourning Warbler (Garrett Co.).

MORE EXPECTED

Snow Goose, Gadwall (more difficult to locate in recent years), Hooded Merganser, Common Loon, Least Bittern, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk (late migrant), Broad-winged Hawk, American Kestrel, Sora, Piping Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Red Knot, American Woodcock, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Black-billed Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Common Nighthawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Alder Flycatcher, Common Raven, Bank Swallow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, 26 species of breeding warbler including Blue-winged (a traditional big day nemesis species), Golden-winged, Myrtle, Northern Waterthrush, Mourning, and Canada; Blackpoll Warbler, Henslow's Sparrow, Slate-colored Junco, Purple Finch, Pine Siskin.

MISSED SPECIES

Bad Misses (6): Peregrine Falcon (dropped from route last-minute due to schedule concerns), Common Moorhen (uncooperative, a reasonable miss), Lesser Yellowlegs (too many locations cut due to schedule), Brown Creeper (not singing at 5 reliable locations), Wood Thrush (horrifying; we must have just forgotten to note it until too late), Yellow-throated Warbler (another victim of schedule slippage).

Found during scouting, but not cooperative (19): American Wigeon (Blackwater), Blue-winged Teal (Rte 309 ponds), Ring-necked Duck (Rocky Gap, Easton WWTP), Greater Scaup (Cabin Creek), Harlequin Duck (Ocean City Inlet), White-winged Scoter (Ocean City Inlet), Bufflehead (Cambridge waterfront), Northern Bobwhite (multiple locations), Ruffed Grouse (multiple locations), Northern Gannet (Ocean City; we probably arrived too late), Brown Pelican (Ocean City Inlet, Skimmer Island), King Rail (Vienna), Great Cormorant (Ocean City Inlet), American Coot (3 locations), Greater Yellowlegs (2 locations), White-rumped Sandpiper (Rte 309 ponds), Stilt Sandpiper (Rte 309 ponds), Wilson's Snipe (Rte 50 Borrow Pit, Rte 309 ponds), Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow.

Selected species expected in some years, but not found this year (most of these were certainly present in the state, but none were located close enough to our route): Green-winged Teal, Common Merganser, Ring-necked Pheasant, Red-throated Loon, Pied-billed Grebe, Whimbrel, Bonaparte's Gull, Black Tern, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Sedge Wren, Swainson's Thrush; migrant warblers (Tennessee, Nashville, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Wilson's), Lincoln's Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Dickcissel.

FULL ACCOUNT

We feel good leaving Cumberland with our first target species so easily checked off. As we push west on I-68, we begin to have mixed feelings about the drizzling rain. Although some birds might be silent, the light rain could translate to a productive night migration. During our August Big Day in 2008, we experienced an impressive flight under just such conditions.

Our second stop is a brief visit to Old Legislative Road, where we listen quietly for the "Shtlllk" calls of Henslow's Sparrows. These creatures seem to sing all night long during the nesting season, and in just a few minutes, another target is in the bag. A Field Sparrow sings. Our first night migrant Indigo Bunting passes over, calling. Jszzhht!

Our next stop is Finzel Swamp in Garrett County. The drizzle is now more accurately labeled as rain. The marsh is quiet. A Slimy Salamander spotted on a fallen log retreats to its hideout. As we walk the trail into the marsh, we detect Swamp Sparrows singing, then a calling Black-billed Cuckoo. The impressive Spring Peeper chorus is complicating our listening, so we continue further in. We've built in time to listen here, but we are growing concerned about the rain. Soon there's no denying it—it is really coming down. We decide to skip ahead to our next stop, hopefully dodge the worst rain, and return.

We cruise down to St. John's Rock, one of Mikey's reliable locations for Whip-poor-wills. The bird lets us worry for a couple minutes, then pipes up with spirit despite the rain. Before returning to Finzel, we add a night stop at Piney Reservoir for the kind of diabolical innovation that makes us love Big Days. My theory is that we can ID the pair of lingering Lesser Scaup by the lights of the dam, allowing us to save a critical 10-15 minutes of daytime birding. We spot their silhouettes easily with binoculars and within seconds we are taking turns scrutinizing them in the scope. We become the first humans in history to view a pair of Lesser Scaup by telescope at 1:30 a.m. in late May in Garrett County, Maryland. Barred Owls are calling. The Sora I found here this afternoon does not respond to our whistled imitations, and this is a playback-free big day. Sora have been quite reliable at Finzel in recent years, but none of us has had them there since migration.

Returning to Finzel, we are relieved to find that the rain has significantly calmed. The night sounds have increased, and as we walk out, we hear Common Yellowthroats, a Wood Duck calling as it takes flight, and Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Night migrants are passing over quite low, probably due to the weather. Most are calling Yellow Warbler-like *zeet* notes, almost certainly all Blackpoll Warblers. Among the night migrants are several Black-billed Cuckoos, my favorite flight calls, and Matt hears a call he would have ID'd as Blue Grosbeak were it not such a rarity in Garrett County. There are outbursts of song from an Ovenbird, an Alder Flycatcher, and an Eastern Screech-Owl. Whip-poor-wills begin calling in the distance. We leave with 17 species and a lot of night ahead of us.

We move on to our western Garrett route, which includes traditional nesting locations for Northern Saw-whet Owl. Listening for saw-whet territories was part of my scouting responsibilities, and the job was complicated despite the area's remoteness by Friday night traffic. I cupped my ears against the trucks and peepers and eventually met with success. Tonight they are difficult at first, but we all hear them and depart on schedule. By the time we reach our dawn spot, we have 28 species, highlighted by an American Bittern, displaying American Woodcock, Virginia Rails, singing Grasshopper Sparrows, and a night migrant Gray-cheeked Thrush.

Dawn. The misty dawn finds us on a remote, alternate access to Backbone Mountain, where Mikey has staked out several of Maryland's most restricted breeders. As we drive up in the dawn twilight, a Hermit Thrush and several Slate-colored Juncos flush from the road. We step from the van for the chaotic excitement of dawn, but the chorus is subdued in the gloomy weather. This is a relative statement, however, and I'm scribbling quickly: EATO, CSWA, RBGR, BCCH, BAWW, VEER, CEDW, BLPW, SCTA, AMRE, CORA, BTNW, WIWR... Winter Wrens are singing in the distance, but it takes a couple team members until the drive back out to hear this lovely song. We get a taste of the dangers of a 6-person team. Most songs are not immediately heard by all six of us. Only half of us hear the calling turkey, which could have easily been our only one for the day. On an official Big Day, no more than 5% of a team's sightings can be detected by fewer than all observers. Any species beyond that 5% does not count in a team's total. We quickly have far more 5% birds than we would like. Fortunately, we stay focused on this detail and clean up more quickly than we add them for most of the day.

It's time to roll, but the singing Mourning Warbler that Mikey found yesterday is silent or has moved on. Already we are facing that endless Big Day dilemma. *Wait and get it vs. Wait, miss it anyway, and get behind schedule.* Minute-by-minute schedule slippage is the downfall of most Big Days. We reluctantly decide to wait, maybe because certain coveted species are worth the risk for their morale value. We wait. Some of us cup our ears. Someone sighs. There! Zach and I hear the bird sing clearly a bit further back than expected. We listen closely for it to sing again, but quickly decide it's time to move on. A Winter Wren sings right beside the road at one of Mikey's many back-up territories. An incredible highlight comes when a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker mews its distinctive call nearby. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is one of Maryland's rarest and most local breeding species, and we are extremely excited. We exchange high-fives and exclamations of disbelief as we descend Backbone Mountain. We're at 56 species.

We're feeling great, but now the clock is really ticking. We run an incredibly streamlined route through the Greater Pleasant Valley area, barely stopping to pick up staked out Red-headed Woodpeckers (Pleasant Valley Road) and cruising right past Garrett County's only known Purple Martin colony (leave nothing to chance). Bobolink. Cliff Swallow. Savannah Sparrow. Bird songs and flybys are picked up at 35-50 mph, often announced with excitement not typically associated with the species--Yellow Warbler!

Grackle!--followed by "Got it" in stereo. A nesting pair of American Kestrels is key. Matt pulls out our Upland Sandpipers at the last second. My nemesis species in scouting was Vesper Sparrow and even Mikey's reliable back-up location is quiet. We'll have to rely on Matt's Frederick bird.

Oakland can be productive for migrants, feeder birds, and the latest rarity or lingering waterfowl at Broadford. On my first full-state Big Day on 5/14/2005, I saw my lifer Red Crossbills on John Boone's feeders. This year, scouting dictates just two stops. We twitch Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers at Mountain Lake and then hit Broadford for a lingering Ruddy Duck. A closed south gate means painful runs both downhill and then back up. Ruddy Duck. Pewee. Thrasher. Catbird. Titmouse. 82 species.

Next up is Mikey's tailored route through Garrett State Forest and Swallow Falls State Park. The list of key targets in this area is long, and we quickly whittle down the list. Each stop is based around at least one territory for a key species. Most are cooperative: Golden-crowned Kinglet, Myrtle Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Canada Warbler, Purple Finch, and Pine Siskin. The latter was a serious concern, as hours of scouting around favorite nesting areas had turned up none until Mikey found them here yesterday. Half of the group gets brief views of a pair of Broad-winged Hawks. All of Mikey's Red-breasted Nuthatch spots hold only White-breasted, until a calling bird at the Swallow Falls parking lot puts an end to thoughtful comments like "Are you SURE you know the difference between their calls?" Black-throated Blue has us slightly concerned for a while, but this year's real nemesis is Brown Creeper. Despite at least five stops where Mikey had found singing birds, they simply would not cooperate. As we move east, the chances of lucking into this species diminish rapidly, and it becomes our first true miss.

Frank Brenneman Road provides cooperative singing Cerulean Warblers, but holds out on the singing Kentucky and Worm-eating Warblers that Mikey found during scouting. We probably failed to notice singing Wood Thrush here, which would ultimately become our horrifying worst miss of the day. This species is so widespread and vocal that it wasn't even mentioned during endless scouting discussions. We stop for a few moments at New Germany State Park just in case fate was tempted to offer us the territorial Sharp-shinned Hawk that Mikey encountered last week. Our last stop in Garrett is a very brief return to Finzel to pick up a reliable Northern Waterthrush and in hopes of migrants such as Lincoln's Sparrow or Olive-sided Flycatcher. A calling Wild Turkey is a nice clean-up species, but no other surprises await us here.

Passing through Allegany County, we agonize over the time investment to swing by Old Legislative Road, but at least our only Golden-winged Warbler is instantly cooperative. Despite much scouting at virtually every location where we have had Golden-winged Warblers in Garrett County, none were found during scouting. Quite disconcerting. At Rocky Gap, my stake-out hen Ring-necked Duck is nowhere to be found, but a Yellow-throated Vireo continues in the small migrant trap along the south shore. As we return

to eastbound I-68, we notice a soaring raptor replacing its inner primaries, an immature Broad-winged Hawk. Cooper's Hawks are unpredictable Big Day birds if you don't have a nest staked out, but we spot our first of four along this stretch as well.

The next hour of driving is spent strategizing, scanning the skies, and remembering to eat. Caffeine levels are maintained at safe levels, except for Mikey, who is speaking in Swahili and break-dancing from at least 14 energy drinks. We enter the scouting domain of Matt Hafner, the Frederick-Montgomery corridor.

Our first stop is a success, and I breathe a sigh of relief as Matt's back-up Vesper Sparrow sings moments after our arrival. We call out our first mockingbirds and Carolina Wrens at 40 mph. On Oland Road, our clean-up Horned Lark is perched boldly on the tallest corn stalk. Another Cooper's Hawk.

Lilypons has hosted all manner of key Big Day species over recent weeks, but many of them have been unreliable. A calling Least Bittern is wonderfully cooperative, but other hoped-for species are much less so. Despite Matt making us run all the way across the gardens, we do not turn up the American Coot, Common Moorhen, or Hooded Mergansers. On the positive side, our significant time investment nets several important birds: three Red-shouldered Hawks, Belted Kingfisher, Warbling Vireo, and Prothonotary Warbler. A Sora responds to whistled imitations, but is heard only by Matt and Mikey (5% bird). Leaving Lilypons, we make brief stops along back roads and stream crossings, where Matt has nailed down a number of key nesting species. A stakeout Blue-winged Warbler on Sugarloaf Mountain Road is especially satisfying, as this species is the bane of many Big Day routes. A Kentucky Warbler sings on cue, but our Louisiana Waterthrushes have turned on us. We invest too much time, always knowing one would *have to* be at the next stream crossing. Finally half of us hear a distant bird singing, which we are forced to 5%. We also pick up an overdue Hairy Woodpecker, which had somehow eluded us in Garrett Co. I can't imagine there have been many seven woodpecker days in Maryland on May 24th!

Our last two stops before the long drive to the Bay Bridge are for our back-up Hooded Mergansers and our staked out Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. On 5/20, Andy Martin reported a Hooded Merganser with six young at a storm water pond at the intersection on I-270 and Route 27 (thanks, Andy!). We monitored this site as a perfect, on-route back-up for Hooded Mergs, but there was a problem. Each visit, there were fewer young mergansers. By 5/22, there were just three remaining young, and that rate of predation meant we might be in trouble. We scanned the shallow pond thoroughly but found no ducks. Obstinate, I insist on scoping the pond to make absolutely certain. We start to pull away, very disappointed, when Mikey notices a second pond. There, against the near shore, almost out of view, is the hen Hooded Merganser with a single remaining youngster. Nature is harsh, but hopefully the one hangs in there. We lose 15 minutes to a missed turn in suburban Montgomery County, but we pick up our Yellow-crowned Night-Heron and keep pushing east. Bay Bridge bound, we are more than 30 minutes

behind schedule. There is a strange mix of anxiety and excitement in the air. 138 species.

Finally we approach the Bay Bridge, and the promise of a surge of new birds livens up the group. We hurry to spot the first Osprey. We agree that we can't afford the 15-minute detour for Peregrines on the Severn River, so we intensely scan along the Bay Bridge. No joy. Still, our morale goes up as we call out Laughing Gull, Bald Eagle, Herring Gull, Snowy Egret. We enter the scouting territory of Zach Baer, where our hopes are pinned on lingering ducks. We start off on a positive note, tapping the brakes to pick up nesting Mute Swans at Kent Narrows. It is a testament to the success of control efforts that successful Big Days runs should now actively plan for this species.

Zach scouted both species of scaup at Cabin Creek, and we arrived in time to watch a large duck being pursued by an adult Bald Eagle. Scopes are trained, but we're having trouble with the ID because it is diving for its life. When it catches a break, we ID it as an unexpected Surf Scoter, and then find a second Surf Scoter nearby. A Pine Warbler is singing behind us. Least Tern. Fish Crow. Black Duck. As we depart, a Wild Turkey runs down the road awkwardly, then veers wildly right.

We then begin a torturous series of misses, constantly, painfully aware of the schedule. Gloomy, overcast weather compounds our concern for our handful of remaining passerines. The Ring-necked Duck is a no-show at Easton, but at least our Bank Swallows are swirling around the treatment pond. In a moment of staring off, considering our options, I note my first fledged starling of the year. Zach's lingering Bufflehead in Cambridge gives us the slip.

We enter the stomping ground of our official Big Day driver, Jim Brighton. Many readers know that Jim is well-positioned to beat the current Maryland Big Year record (300 species on 5/25), but I think he has an eye on the Dorchester title as well. Lest anyone accuse him of sleeping, he recently paid Hafner a visit in Florida, completing a successful 28-hour solo chase of the Greater Sand-Plover. He has been scouting for weeks, and he must be feeling a tad bit of pressure at the moment. Game on.

He takes us down Cambridge roads I've never seen and then suddenly we're on Egypt Road. He points out dry fields where he's had hundreds of shorebirds less than two weeks ago. An ideal shorebird landscape has become grim in this area practically overnight. For reasons we don't comprehend, the best shorebird pool at Blackwater, so recently teeming with shorebirds, has been drained to bone dry. We're lucky to find our only Semipalmated Sandpipers on one of the Egypt Road impoundments, but we can't buy a single yellowlegs. We still have spots, but now every stop is considered for the chopping block.

Our Blackwater loop is hacked down to two brief stops for Big Day rarities, the lingering Tundra Swan and the single American White Pelican. The latter has not been seen

moving for weeks, and during each visit Jim has texted us about the ominously increasing number of Bald Eagles sitting beside it. As we cruise past it without tapping the brakes, we have a unique conversation about whether it is safe to assume the bird is alive. The winning arguments are along the lines of, “Seriously, there’s no way it would be sitting upright with its head tucked like that” and “Yeah, something would have eaten it... it would just be a pile of feathers.”

Jim expertly guides us, selecting one-minute stops for our remaining passerine targets. We pick up a single, silent male Summer Tanager, a roadside Blue Grosbeak. In a throwback to the record-setting Big Day, Brown-headed Nuthatches try to evade us, but they are finally tracked down. A considerate Worm-eating Warbler sings for us at an unexpected location and saves us precious minutes.

We have high hopes for Bestpitch Ferry, a brief but vital marsh stop. We hop out of the van to the sounds of singing Marsh Wrens, followed quickly by Seaside Sparrows. These are almost impossible to miss night species on Elliott Island in May, but the additions to the list feel good. Ron picks out Jim’s stakeout Northern Harrier hunting in the distance, which is critical. Alas, there are no shorebirds here.

Between quick stops, we create a list of our easy misses and begin strategizing about remaining stops. We come to the shocking realization that we do not have Wood Thrush or White-eyed Vireo. We are far enough behind schedule that we begin a debate about what needs to be cut. We all know that reaching the coast too late is suicide, but we also don’t want to forfeit our staked out Snow Geese, Yellow-throated Warblers, and Northern Bobwhite. As we discuss, fortune smiles upon us and someone spots the sneaky, unreliable pair of Blue Geese that have been seen occasionally around Griffith Neck Road. We’re divided on the optimal strategy and settle for a compromise, hitting a few un-scouted spots just off the direct route to O.C. We get lucky with Jim’s pick for White-eyed Vireo on Kraft Neck Road. Before Salisbury, we scope the Borrow Pit from the eastbound shoulder of Route 50 in hopes of snipe or yellowlegs. Instead, we pick up five Glossy Ibis. Our final riparian stops for Wood Thrush and Yellow-throated Warbler are quiet. Damn.

Well, we have some painful misses, but the coast offers endless possibilities. If we avoid traffic, we’ll begin our seawatch almost on schedule. Traffic stops for a minute on the Route 50 bridge and already we’re calling out the expected terns: Forster’s, Common, and Royal. We avoid serious Memorial Day weekend delays and are soon in place, racking up coastal species. After quickly noting expected Purple Sandpipers, American Oystercatchers, and Sanderlings, the good birds come steadily. A Brant is bobbing along the south jetty, while a Common Loon is intermittently visible as it hunts along the far side. A Piping Plover feeds in the surf on north Assateague, while the roosting gull flock holds the continuing first-cycle Iceland Gull and an adult Lesser Black-backed. Zach makes an excellent spot, picking out a high-flying Black Skimmer near the mouth of the

inlet, followed by three more. Despite extensive squinting into the distance, no one picks out a gannet, shearwater, or pelican.

We grudgingly pull ourselves away from the inlet to make our way to Eagle's Nest (now Castaways; permission to visit kindly received) before ending the day at Skimmer Island. We arrive at the campground to find the tide higher than expected, adding only easy species expected at Skimmer Island: Great Egret, Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Our important bird finds us while we are northbound on Route 611, a very unexpected migrant Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Skimmer Island treats us well. The roosting gull flock is huge, and large flocks are still inbound. Waders are arriving in ones and twos, and, with Tricolored Heron and Black-crowned Night-Heron, we complete our sweep of Maryland's 11 nesting waders. There are plenty of shorebirds, the highlights of which are 24 newly arrived Red Knots. We're surrounded by the raucous calls of Boat-tailed Grackles. As we scrutinize the gulls, we tally at least eight Lesser Black-backs (3 adult, 3 third-cycle, 2 first-cycle). We're all focused on pulling out key species. Is there a Red-breasted Merganser somewhere in the distance? A gannet visible over the hotels of Ocean City? Has a pelican flown in undetected? Any large cormorants? Is there a Roseate hiding among the terns? Matt and Mikey are chatting about Glaucous Gull details, and I finally realize this is a discussion of an actual candidate. I ask to be vectored in and am dumbfounded to see a perfect first-cycle Glaucous Gull, a shocking bird for late May. As we all get on it and nod in surprised agreement, the Iceland Gull arrives to roost, allowing a comparison that has certainly been made few times in May in Maryland. We depart with minutes of technically usable daylight, still thinking we might hear the dusk calls of a Wood Thrush or pick up our final staked-out American Coot.

At Berlin, a Great Horned Owl lands on a telephone pole, casting a sharp silhouette against the violet sky. The Green Tree Frog chorus is impressive. No coot. As the van turns back to the west, we know that the record has eluded us for this year. That said, the distinction of a 200 species Big Day in Maryland is motivation enough, and we are all still committed. En route, we reach a state of hilarity that is only achieved during Big Days and select other insane pursuits. We laugh until our stomachs hurt and our responses are high-pitched and unintelligible because we can't breathe.

At Old Bradley Road, a single stop nets a singing Chuck-will's-widow. A June bug lands on Mikey as he gets in the van and he flails about so wildly that I literally almost die laughing.

We arrive at Elliott Island Road and find the marsh quiet. Jim and Ron have done a lot of scouting here recently and they are immediately concerned about the silence. Still, a Clapper Rail slowly keks nearby, and Virginia Rails grunt occasionally in the distance. With my most recent memories here being August and January Big Days, this doesn't seem so bad to me. We spend a lot of time quietly listening, each of us fighting personal

battles with exhaustion. A Barn Owl shrieks in the distance. We reposition regularly, and finally Jim points out a Black Rail singing, followed by a second. We quietly enjoy them for many minutes. I record them on my tiny handheld recorder and am excited to hear that it worked. A night migrant Black-billed Cuckoo is an excellent bonus, a county bird for at least most of us, and only my second on the Eastern Shore. I'm tired. I have a point I want to make about Black Rails, but making words seems way too difficult. We fight through until true midnight, ultimately netting distant Gadwall and Black-necked Stilt. At midnight, we nod gravely. Two hundred feels good.

(And there is no sleep like the sleep after a Big Day.)

BIG DAY ANALYSIS by MATT HAFNER

WARNING: I am aware that this is overly long and certainly not for everybody. My feelings will not be hurt if you hit the delete key right now.

WHY MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND?

To be honest, it was the weekend that I could do it. Of course I can still make up excellent justification for it!

The top 5 previous Big Days in Maryland were 22 May, 18 May, 18 May, 21 May, and 26 May. We could have done ours on Saturday, 23 May, but we opted for an extra day of scouting and were betting on less traffic on Sunday.

Garrett – Garrett provides the best justification for doing a “late” Big Day in Maryland. Garrett is necessary for northern breeders such as Slate-colored Junco, Winter Wren, and Hermit Thrush, which are not likely to be found in migration in early to mid-May. However, it stays colder in Garrett much longer than the rest of the state and several neotropical migrants arrive later, making scouting difficult. As Mikey told me when I asked how scouting was going a week before the Big Day, “It’s 22 degrees, nothing’s singing until 9am.”

Shorebirds – Maryland is not exactly a shorebirder-friendly state when it comes to Big Days. The best shorebirding areas are Hart-Miller and Poplar Islands, very difficult to visit on a full state Big Day. Later in the month, shorebird diversity and our chances at finding birds increase. For example, we had a flock of Red Knots on Skimmer Island that was not present last weekend, or even much earlier in the week. This is where everyone can point out that we missed both yellowlegs.

Lingering waterfowl – I used to think that if a duck was present on 10 May, it was likely to be present on 25 May. I still think that, but the anecdotal evidence from our day wasn’t good in that regard. We had 2 Ring-necked Ducks, a Greater Scaup, and a

Bufflehead all disappear overnight. Maybe earlier is better here, but I bet we were just unlucky.

Migrant passerines – Migrants are always difficult on Maryland Big Days because getting from Garrett to Ocean City is hard enough without stopping at places that may or may not have migrants. We feel that putting more focus on the breeding species is more productive than trying for migrant warblers. Also, many of the more likely birds tend to be later migrants anyway (Blackpoll Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher, thrushes). If we had found migrants in the previous days scouting, we would have looked for them a little more. Finding migrants the day before was crucial to the record-setting Big Day in 2002.

ROUTE DESIGN

Garrett and Worcester are the two anchors of a Maryland Big Day that are required for any chance at the record. The number of species that are present and easily found in those two counties accounts for well over half the checklist.

Everything in between is a little more open to suggestion and can vary from year to year. Past routes have included either Elliott or Deal Island and the Nassawango region of Worcester County. We thought the time needed to visit these locations was not worth the potential birds. Many of the marsh birds could also be gotten at night and the land birds of Nassawango could also be seen elsewhere.

Since we were not visiting a few traditional locations, we added in Blackwater NWR, mainly due to lingering Tundra Swan and American White Pelican, and several smaller stops along route designed to pick up 1-2 birds at each location. We also planned to use some extra time in the Ocean City area.

WHAT WENT WRONG

We got behind schedule first thing in the morning due to a late-rising Mourning Warbler. This was compounded by Garrett County being unusually quiet throughout the morning and having to wait for several birds, some never appearing.

Once we were already behind, a series of typical Big Day problems ensued: I underestimated a few driving times, we birded for too long at several locations, and I missed our turn on the way to our Montgomery County Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. We were an hour behind schedule heading towards Blackwater NWR and songbirds continued to be quieter than normal. That was where we began cut out stops.

Shorebirds were nonexistent along our route. There had been shorebirds earlier in the week at Blackwater NWR, but they disappeared by Friday. The Egypt Rd ponds had fewer and fewer birds each day, but fortunately had our only Semipalmated Sandpipers

of the day. At night, the marsh was extremely quiet, causing us to miss Common Moorhen, which usually would have been more vocal.

WHAT WENT RIGHT

Our scouting was widespread and thorough, certainly the best for any full-state Big Day that I've been a part of. We had back-ups for several species that came in handy throughout the day. When it came time to cut locations at the end of the day, we were able to make informed decisions and pick up a couple more things along the way.

The Ocean City Inlet could have been disastrous. Given that it was Memorial Day weekend, it was not surprising that crossing the bridge onto the island was a little slow. The inlet parking lot was backed up with cars and would have been an incredible time sink if we had gone there. Fortunately, Ron and Zach had talked with the employees of the Atlantic Motel earlier in the week and received permission for us to park in their lot and use their second floor balcony for scoping. It was an easy in-and-out, plus we could see well on the other side of the south jetty allowing us to pick up Common Loon and Piping Plover.

Overall, given our late start, my miscalculated driving times, my wrong turn, and a few overly long stops, it was a little surprising we were only an hour behind heading to Blackwater. Also, six people may seem like a lot for a Big Day, but we became incredibly efficient at getting in and out of the van. Whatever birds we may have missed by making too much noise getting in/out of the van, I think we made up for in extra eyes and ears. Everyone spotted key species during the day and surely, we would have missed some birds with only 4 people, especially at the inlet and Skimmer Island.

BREAKING DOWN THE NUMBERS

I rank potential Big Day birds with three codes:

Code 1 – birds that are not likely to be missed, ranging from House Sparrow and Canada Goose to Chestnut-sided Warbler and Blue-headed Vireo (158 possible)

Code 2 – birds that require scouting or luck on Big Days, they may be local breeding birds or just unreliable, examples being Cooper's Hawk, Belted Kingfisher, Common Raven, Golden-winged Warbler (60 possible)

Code 3 – birds that are not likely to be found most years, usually staked-out rarities, uncommon migrants, or lucky flybys (68 possible)

Using these codes, I project a goal using the formula –

98% Code 1 + 70% Code 2 + 5% Code 3 or
 $155 + 42 + 3 = 200$

Obviously, we then hope to not miss any Code 1s, hit 75-80% Code 2s, and pick up a few extra Code 3s for the record setting 215.

This year we came close with Code 1s ($154/158 = 97.5\%$), missing only Common Moorhen (we were hoping for a night bird, but knew it was a risk), Lesser Yellowlegs (shorebirds were tough this year), Wood Thrush (I don't want to talk about it), and Yellow-throated Warbler (could easily be a Code 2, not really a bad miss)

It was with Code 2s that we did less than adequate ($39/60 = 65\%$), missing

Bufflehead – our Cambridge stakeout, found Saturday by Zach, was gone

Common Merganser – didn't find any on route

Red-breasted Merganser – at Castaways earlier in the week

Ruffed Grouse – had several places scouting in Garrett

Northern Bobwhite – we tried a couple places, but cut out some others at the end of day

Red-throated Loon – usually a couple hanging out in OC, not seen for the last 2 weeks

Pied-billed Grebe – none on route

Northern Gannet – may stop flying early in the day, I've never had it on a May Big Day in MD

Brown Pelican – only been 1-2 around, they seem to arrive late to coastal areas vs. the Bay islands. Taking the boat would help here.

Peregrine Falcon – cut out a stop for the Severn River bridge birds, hoped to spot on the Bay Bridge

King Rail – several spots didn't pan out at night

American Coot – checked 2 of 3 spots seen Friday/Saturday

Greater Yellowlegs – getting a little late, but indicative of our overall shorebird problem

White-rumped Sandpiper – if we had found some shorebirds...seen at the Rt. 309 ponds earlier in the week

Bonaparte's Gull – not found during scouting this year

Caspian Tern – the route doesn't take us past their upper Bay stronghold

Black Tern – been lucky with this on previous Big Days, none found during scouting

Brown Creeper – Mikey had 5 territories for us, none worked out

Swainson's Thrush – poor night migration

Nashville Warbler – I list this as a two because of breeding bird potential, but it was not found on route this year

Saltmarsh Sparrow (new name coming soon!) – we basically gave up on this bird not going to a marsh in the daytime. We had little hope for a night singer.

We did better with Code 3s, just enough for us to hit the projected goal of 200 (7/68 = 10%)

Tundra Swan - Blackwater stakeout

Surf Scoter - found 2 at Cabin Creek, looking for a stakeout Greater Scaup

American White Pelican - Blackwater stakeout

American Bittern - not expected, but found by Jim Stasz and Ed Boyd the previous weekend

Iceland Gull - OC stakeout

Glaucous Gull - found at Skimmer on the Big Day

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - found in Garrett on the Big Day

FULL LIST OF OBSERVED SPECIES

Snow Goose

Brant

Canada Goose

Mute Swan

Tundra Swan

Wood Duck

Gadwall

American Black Duck

Mallard

Lesser Scaup

Surf Scoter

Hooded Merganser

Ruddy Duck

Wild Turkey

Common Loon

American White Pelican

Double-crested Cormorant

American Bittern

Least Bittern

Great Blue Heron

Great Egret

Snowy Egret

Little Blue Heron

Tricolored Heron

Cattle Egret

Green Heron

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

Glossy Ibis

Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
American Kestrel
Black Rail
Clapper Rail
Virginia Rail
Sora
Black-bellied Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Piping Plover
Killdeer
American Oystercatcher
Black-necked Stilt
Spotted Sandpiper
Solitary Sandpiper
Willet
Upland Sandpiper
Ruddy Turnstone
Red Knot
Sanderling
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Purple Sandpiper
Dunlin
Short-billed Dowitcher
American Woodcock
Laughing Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Iceland Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Glaucous Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Least Tern
Common Tern
Forster's Tern
Royal Tern

Black Skimmer
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Black-billed Cuckoo
Barn Owl
Eastern Screech-Owl
Great Horned Owl
Barred Owl
Northern Saw-whet Owl
Common Nighthawk
Chuck-will's-widow
Whip-poor-will
Chimney Swift
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Red-headed Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
Eastern Wood-Pewee
Acadian Flycatcher
Alder Flycatcher
Willow Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher
Eastern Phoebe
Great Crested Flycatcher
Eastern Kingbird
White-eyed Vireo
Yellow-throated Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Warbling Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Blue Jay
American Crow
Fish Crow
Common Raven
Horned Lark
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow
Carolina Chickadee
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown-headed Nuthatch
Carolina Wren
House Wren
Winter Wren
Marsh Wren
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Eastern Bluebird
Veery
Gray-cheeked Thrush
Hermit Thrush
American Robin
Gray Catbird
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Blue-winged Warbler
Golden-winged Warbler
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Pine Warbler
Prairie Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Cerulean Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Prothonotary Warbler
Worm-eating Warbler
Ovenbird

Northern Waterthrush
Louisiana Waterthrush
Kentucky Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler
Canada Warbler
Yellow-breasted Chat
Summer Tanager
Scarlet Tanager
Eastern Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Field Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Grasshopper Sparrow
Henslow's Sparrow
Seaside Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Blue Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Bobolink
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Common Grackle
Boat-tailed Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Orchard Oriole
Baltimore Oriole
Purple Finch
House Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to everyone who helped us with scouting and logistics. Support included advice, bird reports, and permission to access important sites:

Thank you to Stan Arnold, Harry Armistead, the Atlantic Motel, Ed Boyd, Mike Burchett, Castaways Campground, J.B. Churchill, Sam Dyke, eBird, Tom Feild, Barbara Gearhart, Jim Green, Dan Haas, Hans Holbrook, Scott Houston, John Hubbell, Marshall Iliff, George Jett, Geraldine King, Lilypons Water Gardens, Andy Martin, MDOsprey and everyone who has reported in the last 2 months, Robert and Michael Ostrowski, Danny Poet, Dave Powell, Troy Purnell, Jim Stasz, Mike Walsh, and Mike Welch. Of course, a thank you is also in order for our spouses and significant others for putting up with such ridiculous behavior. If we missed anyone, of course we blame sleep deprivation.

Thank you!