

IBA Birdathon Summary - 2015

I had the pleasure of participating in the sixth annual IBA Birdathon on Friday (5/8) and Saturday (5/9) with Matt Hafner, Mikey Lutmerding, and Tim Carney. (Dave Curson was unable to participate this year and was certainly missed!) The 24-hour event raises money to protect the most critically important bird habitats (Important Bird Areas, or IBAs) in Maryland. There's still time to read more about the program and contribute here: <http://md.audubon.org/sponsor-2015-birdathon>.

For anyone new to the phenomenon, a big day is an attempt to detect as many species as possible in 24 hours. Our noon-to-noon approach in recent IBA big days is not kosher by ABA standards, which are based on midnight to midnight schedules. That said, we've enjoyed re-imagining our traditional routes for the noon-to-noon model, as it turns a lot of things upside down. It also lets us see our families on both days and moves hours of driving to the middle of the night! Instead of starting on some lonely stretch of marsh in the middle of the night, you are in place before noon. That's where this summary begins.

We are at the Hurlock WWTP in Dorchester Co. and we've been tallying everything we can see since 1145. When Matt's phone announces official noon, we quickly tally the birds that "matter" most for the big day. "Everyone got RUDDY DUCKS? The WOOD DUCKS? The BONAPARTE'S GULLS?" Got 'em. Oh god, where are the Spotted Sandpipers? Nearly any species can be missed in the whirlwind of activity, so it behooves a team to not assume you'll "just get" anything later. We make mad dashes back and forth to relocate them before everyone announces their flight calls simultaneously. OK, go. Stop. Scan the shorebirds again real quick. Go, go, go. The frenetic pace would go on for 24 hours with dozens of surgical stops.

The first hour is punctuated by non-stop announcements of every distant call and flyby. Mockingbird! Pewee! Pileated! Cheers erupt for non-guaranteed species that readily present themselves at 50 mph, a pair of HORNED LARKS flushing from Indiantown Road, a WILD TURKEY foraging in the open just south of Salisbury. We're making rapid progress south.

Our visit to the marshes at Deal Island WMA is productive and action-packed. Cooperative BLACK-NECKED STILTS are easily seen along Green Dumpster Road and we tally at least seven for that road. SEASIDE SPARROWS and MARSH WRENS are rarely out of earshot. A distant NORTHERN HARRIER is exciting, as our chances of that species drop dramatically after Deal. We easily find all of the expected waders and easy shorebirds. Twice we spot VIRGINIA RAILS foraging in the open. We then head to Riley Roberts Road, where we tend to always pick up a couple interesting birds. GREEN-WINGED TEAL are scoped in the distance and a YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO perches in the open to pose for photos. We add YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT, BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCH, and others along the road.

Before we know it we're off to the teeming riparian woodlands of the Nassawango, where we quickly tally a galaxy of breeding forest interior birds. Even in the heat of the afternoon, they are singing triumphantly at every stop. In some places it's as challenging as dawn to pick out songs from the cacophony. Some cruel species usually likes to make us sweat a little, but today the Nassawango is kind. They announce themselves quickly: YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER, ACADIAN, OVENBIRD, SUMMER TAN, HAIRY WOODPECKER, KENTUCKY, SCARLET TANAGER, REDSTART, PARULA, WOOD THRUSH, WOOD-PEWEE, WORM-EATING, BLACK-AND-WHITE, YELLOW-THROATED VIREO, LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH, WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH.

We stop for RED-HEADED WOODPECKER on Mt. Olive Church Road and an adult is literally perched at the top of the highest snag, just waiting for us. A PRAIRIE WARBLER sings for good measure. We leave the Nassawango right on schedule. In fact, we've never done a better job of keeping almost perfectly on schedule on any big day I can remember.

Next stop is Byrd Park in Snow Hill, where the lingering SNOW GEESE are visible right from the road. Still, this place screams migrant trap to us, so we make a quick stop. MYRTLE WARBLERS confirm our suspicion, but we add only a few other common species.

We find Truitt's Landing engulfed in a low fog, but fortunately the shorebirds are numerous and fall steadily in a game of name that silhouette. The birding gods liberally sprinkled no-see-ums to add to the challenge. Among the flocks we pullout a couple nice finds, including our first-ever (late) PECTORAL SANDPIPER for the birdathon and a WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER. Two SALTMARSH SPARROWS show themselves further down the road. Figgs Landing is kind to us and continues to host AMERICAN WIGEON, LESSER SCAUP, and BLUE-WINGED TEAL. We try hard to pull out the Eurasian Collared-Dove recently seen in the area, but come up empty.

Now north to Assateague and Ocean City in the gathering fog, both apprehensive and excited. Late afternoon on the immediate coast is a turbo-boost and anything can happen. From the Assateague causeway we quickly pick out COMMON LOON, BUFFLEHEAD, BRANT, and RED-BREASTED MERGANSER. Our seawatch on the island is challenging in the fog, but there is enough activity to keep up hope. (We always miss Northern Gannet anyway.) Impressive numbers of LEAST TERNS are foraging frenetically and I count at least 33 in one scan. Tim spots a distant RED-THROATED LOON, and the three we ultimately locate here are our only ones for the evening. The memorable highlight comes when Mikey spots an adult PARASITIC JAEGER flying directly toward us. It turns south and allows exceptional scope views in the late afternoon sunlight.

Castaways Campground (always politely check in) is packed, but the distant mudflats are covered in birds. Here we count no fewer than 6 PIPING PLOVERS and a gorgeous breeding plumage RED KNOT, along with expected species like AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER and COMMON TERN. The Ocean City Inlet holds good numbers of PURPLE SANDPIPERS and RUDDY TURNSTONES, as well as a large flock of about 110 BLACK SCOTERS. Mikey's sharp eyes pick out

a single WHITE-WINGED SCOTER during intense scrutiny of the flock. I spot a BOTTLE-NOSED DOLPHIN at the mouth of the Inlet.

Dusk at Skimmer Island is always exciting, and at this time of year is almost certain to offer a surprise or two. Our major highlight is a roosting ICELAND GULL, which is, of course, carefully studied to rule out bleached common species. We count 5 BLACK SKIMMERS among the large numbers of ROYAL and COMMON TERNS. CATTLE EGRETS are roosting among other herons on the island, and there is the expected dusk commute of many BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERONS. Our final tally of LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULLS is 20 today, a noteworthy spring and summer phenomenon these days.

We make one last stop as the last light recedes and the chorus of Spring Peepers and Cope's Gray Treefrogs begins. CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOWS begin calling from a cut-over area and an AMERICAN WOODCOCK begins twittering overhead. An EASTERN SCREECH-OWL is calling down the road before we even try whistling to win its affection. Before leaving Ocean City, we indulge in pure Big Day luxury - takeout pizza! The piping hot food for the long drive west is heavenly.

Of course we spend a lot time quietly listening in the marshes along Elliott Island Road in Dorchester Co. It isn't one of those inexplicably silent nights, but it isn't a big party down night for the residents either. VIRGINIA RAILS are nearly as vocal as ever, but we hear just a handful of SEASIDE SPARROWS and MARSH WRENS, which are often difficult to count due to their abundance here. Amazingly, we don't hear a single CLAPPER RAIL during our visit, an unlucky break this year. (We don't use any playback.) We have some good luck, though, including two calling LEAST BITTERNS and COMMON GALLINULES at several locations.

Our midnight route to Garrett County is punctuated by interesting stops and absurd conversation. We stop for a YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON on a nest. Empty Red Bull and Mountain Dew cans gather at our feet.

The EASTERN WHIP-POOR-WILLS at Green Ridge State Forest are out in such force on this calm, moonlit night that we have trouble counting them. Our tally says 15, but a dedicated effort in this stronghold for the species would have yielded impressive results tonight. We hear a night migrant YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO and a single VEERY. In Cumberland, we are used to immediately hearing the calls of COMMON NIGHTHAWK overhead, but today hear only the sounds of cars on I-68 and some distant robins. Just as we're getting nervous, Matt picks out a silent bird and we watch as it quietly passes overhead. Before reaching Garrett County we have added HENSLOW'S SPARROW (they sing all night), BARRED OWL, FIELD SPARROW, and others. Two lucky breaks are a calling WHITE-THROATED SPARROW and a night-migrant BLACK-BILLED CUCKOO.

Pre-dawn at Finzel Swamp is beautiful as always. This visit we are serenaded at length by an EASTERN WHIP-POOR-WILL and then pick out the distant booming of an AMERICAN BITTERN. Dawn doesn't produce the dreamed-of migrant fall-out, but we add many new species like

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE, COMMON RAVEN, NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH, and RUFFED GROUSE, among others.

Our Garrett Route cuts a strategic path through the county to tally breeding birds. Many birders in the state might be surprised that all of these and many more are readily located as nesting species: PURPLE FINCH, BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER, GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET, RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH, BLACK-THROATED BLUE, BLACK-THROATED GREEN, DARK-EYED JUNCO, WINTER WREN, MYRTLE WARBLER, MAGNOLIA WARBLER, CANADA WARBLER. Unfortunately, we had a couple inexcusable misses here - HERMIT THRUSH and BROWN CREEPER, which really shouldn't have been an issue. That's how it works, though. Other species we worried about missing much worse showed up randomly at three locations. Migration was pretty weak overall, with just a few passage migrants - two NASHVILLE WARBLERS, one CAPE MAY WARBLER, and a singing SWAINSON'S THRUSH.

Jennings-Randolph Reservoir is exceptional as always and features no fewer than 10 singing CERULEAN WARBLERS among 13 other warbler species. Farther up the road in a cut-over area, we spot a singing VESPER SPARROW in the same location as last year.

Unfortunately, at pond after pond in Garrett Co., ducks found by Mikey and others have departed the area since last weekend. From Piney Reservoir to Little Meadows to Jennings Randolph to Broadford, we add no new waterfowl.

At Broadford Lake, we add WILLOW FLYCATCHER and nesting RED-SHOULDERED HAWKS. Pleasant Valley offers nesting AMERICAN KESTREL. A single AMERICAN COOT on Deep Creek is all that remains of all of Mikey's finds from previous weeks.

With heavy boat traffic and no discernible migration, we end the day at some random favorite locations. As the last minutes tick by and we greedily scan the sky on Pete Moss Road, an unexpected flock of AMERICAN PIPITS appears and lands in the nearby field. Our group photo (attached) was taken minutes later, after Matt's phone signaled the end of the 24 hours.

Our total was 202 species, and we can feel good about any number over 200. The state record is 214, and our highest tally for the Birdathon was last year's 213. Between the departing ducks, a light migration morning, and a couple lame misses, that last 10 species or so was a little out of reach. That said, what a day! The list of highlights is long and the absurdity of four sleep-deprived guys drinking a couple dozen caffeinated beverages over 24 hours is not easily forgotten. That we get to have that much fun while raising some desperately needed money for conservation is a wonderful thing indeed.

Thanks to everyone who supported the event, and for anyone who hasn't, please consider doing so now. This long report is the final step in my sleep deprivation for the IBA Program for 2015. I hope I get to participate again next year!

<http://md.audubon.org/sponsor-2015-birdathon>

Good birding!

Bill

(Group photo, from left to right - Tim Carney, Mikey Lutmerding, Matt Hafner, Bill Hubick | other photo shows dawn at Finzel.)

