

The Big Sit! – October 12, 2019
Aquia Landing Park, Stafford, VA
By Sally Knight

As the day approached for our fourth consecutive Big Sit, it looked as though Mother Nature was going to grace us with a warm, sunny day with no cold wind or remnants of a hurricane to battle as in past years. However, the day before we got word the access road to Aquia Landing Park was flooded and the gate would be closed to vehicles. Thankfully, we were given permission to hold the Big Sit as planned, but all equipment and food would have to be carried in on foot. It turns out Storm Melissa, a hybrid between a tropical storm and a nor'easter, was centered approx. 300 miles off the coast of Delaware. Too far away to feel its 55-mph winds, but close enough to cause flooding to low lying areas along the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay.



Mike Lott, Jim Goehring and I met before dawn at the front gate and proceeded to walk into the park to set up our circle and listen for owls. It was high tide and as we turned to walk the road parallel to the beach, we found the entire length of the road was under water and in one section came over the concrete wall. The only way through was to wade – I went back to retrieve my wellies, Mike and Jim took off their shoes and socks! I've lived in the area since 1992, and visited this park regularly,

in all that time, with one exception - Hurricane Isabel, I have never seen it this flooded.

With the circle established, an Eastern Screech Owl responded to a recording, followed by a Great Horned Owl – a good start to the day. Meanwhile we were treated to a beautiful sunrise over the water and the predawn temps in the low 50's started to climb. A few more participants started arriving and with the tide falling the section of beach that we had to wade through opened up. Joyce and Mike arrived with the makings for breakfast and coffee, all of which had to be carried in, and the cooking, and brewing, began.



We quickly checked off a number of species including, Cardinal, Song Sparrow, Canada Goose, Brown Thrasher, Carolina Wren, Eastern Phoebe, American and Fish Crows. With more light we spotted the resident Mute Swans, a Great Egret, an adult and juvenile Bald Eagle, Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls. Several Forster's Terns flew by and then a larger tern that we first assumed was a Caspian. On closer examination, Dave Larsen noted the orange bill and lack of black in the outer wings. Scott Byrd pointed out the black crown did not reach to the bill, and was shaggy like a Royal Tern. There were three perched on a dock in the distance, too far for a photo but scope views clearly pointed to Royal. This was exciting as it was a rarity for this location. Later in the day as Mike and I walked out of the park, there were two perched on buoys close enough for a good photo.



We took a break for breakfast - scrambled eggs, sausage, fruit nut bread and Joyce's homemade zucchini bread. Along with coffee and tea it was much appreciated. Thanks J&M! Back to the circle, we were sorting through a group of sparrows busy eating seed close by. Most were Song and Swamp Sparrows, but there was one that stuck out as different. We eventually settled on Savannah Sparrow, but it didn't feel quite right. Jim took some photos and the next day, when he had time to look at them, he thought it looked more like a Lincoln's and

with further discussion with Mike they agreed. Another exciting find for the day.

Walking back and forth to our cars, participants spotted several species in the park that we couldn't include in our tally because they were observed outside the circle. Spotted Sandpiper, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, Kestrel, Black-and-white and Palm Warblers. Sora's were heard, along with a Hairy Woodpecker, and a Common Loon. As I walked back with my crockpot of soup, I spotted a Red-shouldered Hawk on the grassy, flooded area. It was within sight of the circle but no one was looking in that direction. I called over and they were able to add the hawk to the tally.



The day had warmed up nicely and we enjoyed a nice picnic lunch of split pea and ham soup, croutons, sun-dried tomato pasta salad, cucumber feta and mint salad and clementines. After lunch we picked up a couple Northern Parulas, White-eyed Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Magnolia and Yellow Warblers. Five Wood Ducks flew over, a couple Pied-billed Grebes popped up, and several Double-crested Cormorants were seen flying by and perched on various structures in the water. Catbirds were vocal but we never saw one, thankfully we also had a couple Northern Flickers, our namesake!

Mike and I closed the circle at 4:10pm, bird activity had slowed down and the darkening sky was making it difficult seeing into the trees. One last stop at the portajohn proved inadvisable - it was approaching high tide and the parking lot was flooded again. Wading up to the loo, the water was about to top my wellies so I leaned over, and reached for the door and the whole structure moved!

We ended up with 47 species, three shy of our goal of 50, but ahead of last year's tally of 44. As always it's a fun way to spend time with fellow birders and the mild, sunny weather was a bonus. Thanks to all those who came out and I look forward to doing it again in 2020!



Participants

Mike Lott, Jim Goehring, Sally Knight, Joyce and Michael Bathke, Scott Byrd, Jim and Bev Arnold, Dave Larsen, Bill Hohenstein, Brenda Chase, Maureen Daly-Hamm, Trudi Witt, Gwen Skinner

Photos

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|-------------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Sunrise | Jim Goehring | Red-shouldered Hawk | Jim Goehring |
| Group | Joyce Bathke | Flooded Road | Sally Knight |
| Royal Tern | Sally Knight | Mute Swans | Jim Goehring |
| Lincoln's Sparrow | Jim Goehring | | |

Species List - 47

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|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Canada Goose | Royal Tern | Gray Catbird |
| Mute Swan | Caspian Tern | Brown Thrasher |
| Wood Duck | Great Horned Owl | Northern Mockingbird |
| Pied-billed Grebe | Eastern Screech Owl | Common Yellowthroat |
| Double-crested Cormorant | Belted Kingfisher | Yellow Warbler |
| Great Blue Heron | Red-bellied Woodpecker | Magnolia Warbler |
| Great Egret | Downy Woodpecker | Northern Parula |
| Black Vulture | Hairy Woodpecker | Black-and-white Warbler |
| Turkey vulture | Northern Flicker | Yellow-rumped Warbler |
| Coopers Hawk | Eastern Phoebe | Swamp Sparrow |
| Bald Eagle | White-eyed Vireo | Song Sparrow |
| Red-shouldered Hawk | Blue Jay | Lincoln's Sparrow |
| Red-tailed Hawk | American Crow | Northern Cardinal |
| Laughing Gull | Fish Crow | Red-winged Blackbird |
| Ring-billed Gull | Carolina Chickadee | Common Grackle |
| Forester's Tern | Carolina Wren | American Goldfinch |
| | Ruby-crowned Kinglet | |