

Maryland Yellowthroats Go Again for the World Series of Birding

An interview with Matt Hafner

... Then an inspirational look at Centreville Middle School and their run at the WSB



@copyright and used with permission of Julia Diebold, Cape May Bird Observatory

Maryland's finest in 2007: Zach Baer, Bill Hubick, Jim Brighton, and Matt Hafner

You remember the Maryland Yellowthroats, don't you? They only won the World Series of Birding (Cape May County flight) in 2007 - for the second consecutive year. Well this year, on May 10, they compete again, and it should be another well planned effort, a great execution of a Big Day, if there ever was one. This year's team will consist of Bill Hubick, Jim Brighton (captain), Zack Baer, and newcomer Mikey Lutmerding. You may recall that last year Matt Hafner was an integral part of the team. Although he won't be there this year, MarylandBirds.org caught up with last year's captain to discuss what it's like to prepare for and compete in perhaps what is birding's most prestigious event. As you will see, Matt has already done a lot of planning with this year's Yellowthroats in preparation for the event. This article also explores some of the other Maryland birders, including the intrepid students at Centreville Middle School in Queen Anne's County, who have participated in the World Series of Birding.

MD Birds: Could you compare Cape May County, the home of the World Series of Birding (WSB), to Worcester County, MD, the best spot in Maryland for a wide variety of birds?

MH: Some of us have had this discussion as to whether we could have a comparable count in Worcester County. Worcester County is comparable to Cape May in many respects. But by far the better place for migrating warblers in May is Cape May. It is possible to see 25 species of

warblers in a day at Cape May. That really isn't likely in Worcester County. Also, there are some birds that are much easier to find in Cape May. Gull-billed Tern is much easier to find in Cape May, and Blue-winged Warbler is possible in Cape May and next to impossible in Worcester County.

Also, Cape May is more isolated by the ocean and Delaware Bay and so the birds that land in Cape May are more conspicuous. Additionally, the birds

that stop at Cape May tend to stay around for a few days.

MD Birds: When do you start preparing for the World Series of Birding?

MH: Last year after we finished the 2007 WSB, we did some talking to other teams that did the count and learned what they saw and where. So you could say that our planning for this year's 2008 WSB began immediately after the 2007 count was over. Next, in January and February 2008, we started going through the Google Maps that we had already set up for our routes.

We plan 3-4 main routes. For example, our route #1 might cover the forested areas on northwest Cape May County, known as Belleplaine State Park. We would have a main route for this area, and then have some contingency routes, in case we need to make adjustments for finding target birds. Then we have Route 2 and all the contingency routes that go with it and so forth.

The next phase of our planning for the WSB begins a few weeks beforehand. We go through all the List Server postings, and we may adjust our routes based on what was seen and where. Then the day before the count, we weigh everything out and make any last minute adjustments to our routes based on our observations on the previous days.

We start with a good idea of the time we want to be at certain places. The exact time is not so important, but if we say we want to leave Belleplaine State Park at 7 AM, then we need to leave between 6:50 and 7:03.

Before we leave Belleplaine, we want to have seen all our target birds for that area.

MD Birds: What happens if its time to leave Belleplaine and you have missed 4-5 birds?

MH: Fortunately, that has never happened to us, but we did leave Belleplaine last year without getting a Hairy Woodpecker. There were a few contingency places outside of Belleplaine within the scope of our remaining routes to see a Hairy Woodpecker, but we did not see one. So even

though we finished the day with 184 species for the 2007 WSB count, Hairy Woodpecker was not on the list.

MD Birds: What about Red-shouldered Hawk? That's a pretty good bird for Cape May County, isn't it?

MH: Right. We have never found a single reliable spot for Red-shouldered Hawks, but we have seen them on our WSB count days over the last 2 years.

MD Birds: How about Brown-headed Nuthatch, do you spend any time thinking where you could possibly see that bird.

MH: Never. There has only been one record for Brown-headed Nuthatch in Cape May County. You can see Brown-headed Nuthatch in Delaware at Cape Henlopen where you can look across the Delaware Bay and see Cape May, but that bird does not like to cross wide bodies of water.

MD Birds: At what time do you start the count?

MH: We start at midnight. Swamp Sparrows sing all night long in May, and so do Seaside and Sharp-tailed Sparrows. We also go for owls and rails, as you would expect. We have gotten Soras every year, for example. Horned Larks start singing when it is still completely dark, say between 3 and 4 am. That's an important bird for us to get at that time because we are not in good Horned Lark habitat during any of our day routes.

MD Birds: Dawn chorus occurs just as it starts to get light. How do you plan your dawn chorus?

MH: We have just one spot for the dawn chorus. I won't say where; we never run into any other birding parties there. We are looking to get a lot of birds at this time, but more importantly, we are trying for certain target bird that will be singing at dawn chorus.

Your ears are the biggest factor on a Big Day. Ovenbird has a night call. We also pick up thrushes and cuckoos by hearing their flight calls. I do not think we have ever seen Black-billed Cuckoo during the day for any of our counts, but

we do get them at night by hearing their flight calls.

MD Birds: How do you hone your skills at identifying birds at night, listening to their flight calls?

MH: The CD-ROM by William R. Evans and Michael O'Brien (Flight Calls of Migratory Birds) is really good. Also, there's no substitute for field experience. Last fall at Assateague Bayside in Maryland, I spent a good deal of time watching the warblers migrate overhead around dawn. I developed some good field experience from that. In particular, I learned the flight call of the Black-and-white Warbler.

MD Birds: So how do you approach visual identification of birds at the WSB where you do not have a great deal of time to spend identifying birds and enjoying their splendor?

MH: Learning to scan effectively on a Big Day comes with practice. On a leisurely day of bird watching, you may spend say two hours looking through a flock of gulls to study the plumages in detail and to try to pick out something unusual. Never on a Big Day.

It's best to practice scanning quickly. Try to pick out the odd bird in an area; look for anything different. At the same time you have to sometimes slow things down enough to pick out the regularly occurring species in a given habitat. You are going to miss birds here and there when you scan this way. Also, when you come upon a big flock of gulls, if we already have seen Lesser Black-backed Gull, for example, we might just skip the scanning. Or, we could say, we'll take 6 minutes to scan the group. After 6 minutes, we have to stop and move on.

MD Birds: Roseate Tern was a good bird that the Yellowthroats found on last year WSB.

MH: I also saw one over the ocean the day before, but I did not expect to find it where we did: at the Cape May Meadows.

MD Birds: Did you see the long tail of the bird as a key identifying field mark?

MH: No. The bird was facing us, and in with a group of Common Terns. I identified the bird by its bill (all dark, thinner and longer than that of the Common Tern). Also, the bird had bright white on the breast whereas the Common Tern has a grayer breast in spring plumage. Lastly, the primary wing tips on the folded wing were whitish, not as dark as those of a Common Tern.

MD Birds: I understand that the Yellowthroats divide up the task of scouting out the routes for the count.

MH: That's right. Last year, Jim Brighton scouted out Belleplain State Forest. Zach (Baer) took care of the bay shore (along the Delaware Bay). Bill Hubick did the upper ocean coast: Stone Harbor, Avalon Island, Wildwood and Nummies Island, and I did Cape Island (everything south of the canal, including Cape May and Higbee Beach).

We are looking for that last White-crowned Sparrow that lingers on or that last flock of Savannah Sparrows.

MD Birds: So during the day of the count for the 2007 WSB, how did you feel you were doing?

MH: During the day, we felt that we were doing what we wanted to. There were good groups of migrants in many places, including lots of warblers. At around 8 PM we saw a White-faced Ibis and incredibly, that was the last bird we saw that day. There were 5 birds we thought we had a good chance of getting that evening, including Great Horned Owl. We missed them all, and we were not feeling good about that.

MD Birds: Did you think that since you missed those birds that some other group might have had a higher count than the Yellowthroats?

MH: During the Count, we don't know what other groups may have seen.

MD Birds: So 2007 was a pretty good day for migrants, but it was a different story during the WSB in 2006.

MH: There were very few migrants in 2006. We only had 6 species of migrating warblers during

the day, and most of those birds were single birds here and there. But of the 6, it was 3 more migrating warblers than what Michael O'Brien's (runner up) team had.

MD Birds: How many years have the Yellowthroats participated?

MH: For the last three years.

MD Birds: And how did you do the first year?

MH: We came in second place.

MD Birds: So when you started the first year you were about as well prepared as during the second and third years when Yellowthroats won the competition?

MH: Let me first say that we owe a large debt of gratitude to Hal and Lynn. (Editors note: Hal Wierenga and Lynn Davidson are two other really knowledgeable birders in Maryland. Hal won one of the flight levels of the WSB in just the 2nd year of the count --back in 1985. He then proceeded to win the same competition for the next 2 years. National Geographic sponsored his team for those years. All told, Hal has won the WSB an astonishing 5 times! Lynn has also entered the competition and has won at different flight levels of the competition for an impressive two times.)

We sat down with Hal and Lynn before the first year we entered. Hal went through all the routes that he had developed, all the key habitats to consider, all the spots that might produce [above]

key birds during the count. So, when we left our meeting with Hal and Lynn we had this huge arsenal to work with.



Captain Matt Hafner

Members of the Yellowthroats

swear he made them call him

Captain !

And so as the interview with Matt ended, MD Birds asked him about the Yellowthroats and the 2008 competition. Matt chuckled and said something to the effect that (current captain) Jim Brighton was probably never going to let Matt be captain again. You get the sense that more than anything, these guys have a fantastic time every time they go out birding, let alone participate in the World Series of Birding. (More below)

Of course the Yellowthroats are not the only Marylanders to have participated in the World Series of Birding. We previously mentioned Hal Wierenga and Lynn Davidson of Anne Arundel County. Then there's Paul O'Brien of Rockville. Paul won a flight of the WSB at least twice. His son, Michael O'Brien, won with his father during those years, too. (Michael O'Brien now resides in Cape May – go figure.) Mark Hoffman of Carroll County has also won one of the flights of the WSB.

Perhaps most impressive is the inspirational work that George Radcliffe has done at Centreville Middle School. Under his guidance, students from Centreville Middle School have participated in the World Series of Birding on many occasions since 2000– winning the Grade 6-8 division in 2001, 2003, and 2007. When students leave Centreville MS, George's tutelage does not cease; he works with high school students. This year George is guiding three teams from Queen Anne's County into the WSB.

His teams this year are:

MOS Monster Tridders - high school

Amanda Spears, captain
Nolan O'Brien
Zach Gent
Charlotte Staver

MOS Chuckle-heads - middle school

Emily Vooris, captain
Emmett Mayberry
Emily Masucci
Madeline Masucci

CMS Timber Doodles

Gabby Caligiuri, captain
Amber Whitby
Savanna Tasler
Matt Hendricks

So watch out for those Monster Tridders!

Current MOS Yellowthroat, Zach Baer, is a product of the Centreville Middle School birding experience. In fact, Zach participated for the Centreville Middle Team starting in 2000. And, in 2001 his group won the Grade 6-8 competition with 126 birds. In 2005, Zach participated in the High School division competition. Sponsored by Nikon, Zach's team won the competition - finding an amazing total of 212 species in a day.

I asked George Radcliffe to tell me about something about Zach Baer. George responded with these words: "Our participation [in the WSB] was totally the result of one student's interest and determination. Zach Baer led that first school team." However, even after Zach left Centreville MS, he continues to inspire and help the birding students. Again George states: "Not only did Zach Baer start the Queen Anne's County Birding Program years ago as a 7th grader, but he continues to support and assist the younger birders. None of our students participating this year would be doing so with Zach's inspiration and guidance".

Amanda Spears, recent graduate of Centreville Middle School, agrees: "Now and through middle school, Zach was truly an inspiration! I'd always hear stories about his talents and dedication and [I] promised myself to do the same around his age. Now in high school, I take all the opportunities to teach kids what I've learned. Especially around WSB time, I look forward to the all information he shares with us, which helps our WSB team prepare and excel that year!" Well said, Amanda. Actually, Amanda Spears is no stranger to the competition, herself. This year she will be participating in the WSB for the third time.

So to show your support to one of George Radcliffe's teams or to the Yellowthroats please consider making a donation, as all proceeds benefit charities for the environment and /or the birding world.

George Radcliffe can be contacted at radclifg@qacps.k12.md.us. Also, you can view the remarkable WSB web pages of the Centreville Middle School at <http://www.qacps.k12.md.us/cms/sci/WSERBIRD.HTM> where you can find an thorough history of their participation, including amazing anecdotes told by birding students with great birding moments.

All proceeds to the Yellowthroats benefit the Maryland Ornithological Society. It's easy to contribute. Just send an email to Jim Brighton at jdbrighton3@hotmail.com, and tell him how much you want to contribute. (Or send him a letter -- 100 Prospect Ave. Easton, MD 21601. Don't send a check or cash. Someone will contact you later about where to send the check.).

So as Spring migration gets into full tilt, we can all be proud of the Maryland birders across the state who have participated and helped in Maryland's greatly successful efforts in the World Series of Birding. Good Birding!