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**Praise for Noah Strycker:**

'This beautifully written book is a treasure trove of information on the avian world, from the life-long relationship of the albatross to the remarkable memory of the nutcracker'  
*BBC Countryfile*

'[This book] turns a shrewd, comparative eye on a succession of bird families to explore what [Strycker] calls their "human" characteristics ... This is an engaging work which illuminates something profound about all life, including our own' *Economist*

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'Mr Strycker has the ability to write about the worlds of man and fowl without simplifying either ... He thinks like a biologist but writes like a poet, and one of the small pleasures of [this book] is watching him distil empirical research into lyrical imagery ... Part the palm fronds behind his sentences, and you can almost see the British naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough standing there in a pith helmet, smiling with amused approval at Mr Strycker's off-centre sensibility' *Wall Street Journal*

‘Strycker has a keen eye for what is most interesting about each species, and he presents each bird story with tight language, humour and even an occasional splash of self-consciousness ... this is a lively and vibrant book. Bird journalism of the highest order. Bird journalism that crackles’ *Washington Post*

‘Beautifully written, filled with strange and lovely details ... a delightful read from start to finish’ *Boston Globe*

‘As the “owner” of a dancing green-cheeked conure, as a life-long pigeon-lover, seabird researcher and falcon enthusiast, I can tell you that not only is this book full of solid information – I expected that – but as a writer I am astonished at how loose and easy Noah Strycker has made the reading for us. This is an insightful and wonderfully companionable book. I can’t wait to read more from Strycker; meanwhile we have this gem’ Carl Safina, author of *Becoming Wild* and *Beyond Words*

‘Lovely ... provocative’ *NPR*

‘[Strycker] is a rising superstar in the birding community ... a fun and enlightening read. Strycker knows words as well as birds; he has the literary chops to make the results of very complex experiments accessible ... Perhaps Strycker’s greatest accomplishment in [this book] is forcing the reader to think of birds not as flying rats that poop on cars, but as animals with superpowers’ *Newsweek*

‘Delightful’ *Kirkus Reviews*

‘[Strycker] combines the latest in ornithological science with snippets of history and his own vast experience in the field to hatch a thoroughly entertaining examination of bird behaviour ... In Strycker’s absorbing survey, we find out how much fun it is simply to watch them’ *Booklist*, starred review

# BIRDING WITHOUT BORDERS

AN OBSESSION, A QUEST  
AND THE BIGGEST YEAR IN THE WORLD

NOAH STRYCKER

FOREWORD BY KENN KAUFMAN



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# FOREWORD

Birds are real. If I had to justify extreme birding, that would be my first defense. Even as we dash around in a mad quest for the biggest list of bird sightings, we're keenly attuned to reality—not just the birds but also geography, weather patterns, forest types, tide schedules, and myriad other factors, because everything in nature is connected. Other people may take up hobbies to escape reality, but birding has the opposite draw. It's a deep dive into the real world.

A year is also a real thing—one orbit around the sun—and yearlong birding efforts are the epitome of extreme birding. The first “Big Years” were done in the 1890s by Lynds Jones and W. L. Dawson in Lorain County, Ohio, cooperating and competing to run up their county tallies. By the 1930s, a few birders were competing for the biggest annual list for all of North America north of Mexico. The popularity of the pursuit has been creeping up ever since, and so have the totals produced. Recent North American Big Year champs have pushed the theoretical maximum and cratered their bank accounts by flying back and forth across the continent, chasing every rarity that strayed within our boundaries.

I myself did a Big Year as a teenager in the 1970s, on a very modest budget, but the restriction of boundaries rankled. I took time out for three trips into Mexico that year, even though birds south of the border wouldn't “count.” The allure of tropical diversity was irresistible. Even then, the wide world of variety beckoned more than the idea of birding within borders.

Peter Alden, a pioneer leader of international birding tours, had ticked more than 2,000 species globally during 1968. We all thought that was cool, but in that era, no one seriously thought

about topping that score. World birding was hard. Thousands of tropical bird species had never been illustrated at all, and good field guides existed only for North America, Europe, and South Africa. Bird-finding publications were almost unheard-of outside the United States. Birding tours still took in relatively few destinations. For my friends and me, an overseas birding trip involved weeks of preparation, and often more research afterward to figure out what we'd seen. As rewarding as these trips were, no one wanted to cram too many into a single year.

In the few decades since that time, world birding has gone through two major revolutions, utterly changing the game.

The first big change, gradual but massive, has been the information explosion. Today, every known bird species has been superbly illustrated. Practically anywhere on Earth, we can choose among multiple bird ID guides. Thousands of “mystery birds” are now less mysterious, their secrets revealed. Excellent sound recordings make all the difference in finding elusive targets, especially in dense tropical haunts. At one time, if you wanted to see a Zigzag Heron, for example, you wandered in the Amazon Basin for a year and prayed for a miracle. Now that its voice and precise habitats are known, this weird little wader isn't hard to find.

An even bigger change is the emergence of a worldwide community. Not long ago birding was a lopsided pursuit, popular in a few English-speaking countries, plus northern Europe and Japan. Between these silos of activity, communication was limited. The rise of the Internet changed that. Listservs brought about instant communication among the continents. Social media like Facebook even broke the language barrier with the sharing of bird photos and automated translation. At the same time, local birding communities have sprung up in most nations. In the past, if you wanted advice on birding Colombia, you sought out North Americans or Europeans who had been there. Today that country has a thriving

birding scene, and Colombian experts know their own avifauna better than any outsider. Knowledge is now decentralized. And since birders everywhere tend to be open and sharing, travelers now have vastly more potential sources of help.

For birding the world, the biggest driver of change is eBird, the massive online database of bird sightings. Launched in 2002, eBird was limited to North America at first, going global in 2010. Its acceptance and growth worldwide have been phenomenal, and it utterly changes how we perceive the potential in distant lands. Once, when reading about Blyth's Hawk-Eagle in the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia, it would have seemed impossibly remote. Now a few clicks into eBird will display half a dozen sites where the species has been seen within the last month, and we can check how consistent it is at those sites and who the local observers are. It's no exaggeration to say that eBird has become the global hub for active birders.

As world birding has evolved, the global year list record has pushed upward. The American ornithologist James Clements ran up a total over 3,600 in 1989—just before the Internet became a factor. An intrepid British couple, Alan Davies and Ruth Miller, surpassed 4,300 species in 2008—just before eBird went global. The time was ripe for someone to push past 5,000, recording more than half the world's birds in a single year. The previous champs—Alden, Clements, Davies, and Miller—have all been friends of mine, and I watched with keen interest to see who would be next.

We could not have hoped for a better contender than Noah Strycker. This brilliant young man was already a veteran of detailed field research, already renowned for writing about birds with depth and grace; no one could dismiss him as “just a lister.” In one carefully planned, continuous sprint around the globe, he shattered previous records. He also made a point of going native and con-

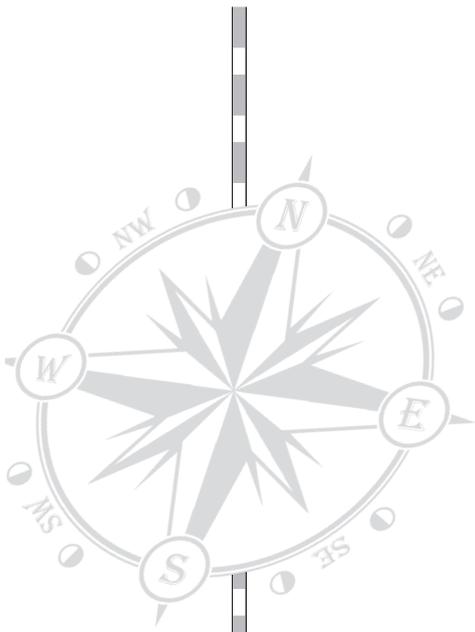
necting with local experts everywhere. The result is a thoughtful, vivid portrait of the world's birds and birders.

At this moment in history, it's easier than ever to see birds worldwide . . . and all over the planet, birds face unprecedented perils. A pessimist might say we're in the sweet spot between accessibility and extinction. I don't see it that way. Noah Strycker turned up plenty of birds on his grand tour, but more important, he met people in every land who care passionately about those birds and who will fight for their survival. Everything in nature is connected, and as the birders of the world become more connected also, the reality of the future looks brighter already.

—Kenn Kaufman

March 2017





# 1

## End of the World

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, superstitious birdwatchers like to say, the very first bird you see is an omen for the future. This is a twist on the traditional Chinese zodiac — which assigns each year to an animal, like the Year of the Dragon, or Rat — and it's amazingly reliable. One year, I woke up on January 1, glanced outside, and saw a Black-capped Chickadee, a nice, friendly creature that everybody likes. That was a fantastic year. The next New Year, my first bird was a European Starling, a despised North American invader that poops on parked cars and habitually kills baby bluebirds just because it can. Compared to the Year of the Chickadee, the Year of the Starling was pretty much a write-off.

So it was with some anxiety that on January 1, 2015, I looked around to see which bird would set the tone for the next 365 days. I already knew this would be no ordinary year: I'd just quit my only regular job, broken up with my girlfriend, spent most of my savings, and then, cramming all my possessions into a small backpack, made my way literally to the end of



the Earth. Now, at the stroke of midnight, on top of a Russian ship in the frozen reaches of Antarctica, with a bottle of champagne in both hands and binoculars dangling around my neck, I was in a hot tub with a Scottish historian, a penguin researcher, and a geologist. What bird could possibly tell where all of this was heading?

With any luck, it would be a penguin. I'd gone to great lengths to engineer this New Year celebration just so that, right after the obligatory countdown and toast, 2015 could be declared the Year of the Penguin — which, karmically speaking, couldn't possibly go wrong. In the previous week, I'd spent a lonely Christmas night on the floor of the Los Angeles airport, traveled from the United States to the southern tip of Argentina, caught this ship, sailed across the tumultuous Drake Passage, and positioned myself for this moment, this pivotal moment when fate would set in motion the biggest year of my life, and possibly of international birdwatching history.

The goal was simple: in the next twelve months, I hoped to see 5,000 species of birds — about half the birds on Earth — in the ultimate round-the-world journey. After leaving Antarctica, I'd spend the next four months in South America, then migrate north through Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, reaching the United States in May. If things went well, I'd fly over to Europe, do a big U-turn through Africa, bounce around the Middle East, zigzag across most of Asia, and island-hop Down Under to ring in the following New Year. While the Earth completed one full orbit of the sun, I would visit forty countries with no days off. Nobody had ever attempted such a trip, and bird-brained experts argued about whether it was even possible to spot 5,000 species in one calendar year. By the end, the journey would surpass even my own wildest dreams. But for now, all I knew was that the clock started ticking at midnight.



The world's most frequent fliers don't have platinum status, free upgrades, or even passports. Every hour, millions of these undocumented immigrants pour across major political borders, and nobody thinks of building walls to keep them out. It would be impossible to anyway. Birds are true global citizens, free to come and go as they please.

A few years ago, two British scientists tackled the question of how many individual birds are living on Earth — a sort of global avian census — and calculated that, at any given moment, between 200 and 400 billion feathered friends share this planet with us. That works out to something like forty birds for every human, spread from here to Timbuktu. Birds occupy almost every conceivable niche of our world, from the wild Amazon in South America to the heart of the Bronx in New York City. Even places that seem lifeless lie within their reach: intrepid birds have been recorded at the South Pole, winging over the summit of Mount Everest, and soaring across the open ocean hundreds of miles from land. As of 2015, 10,365 bird species had been identified on planet Earth, a number that only begins to hint at their sheer diversity. The smallest, the Bee Hummingbird of Cuba, could perch comfortably on the toenail of the largest, the Ostrich.

Birding is a state of mind more than anything else, which makes it hard to define. Roger Tory Peterson, generally considered the father of modern birdwatching, once observed that birds are many things to many people: a science, an art, a sport. They can even, as Peterson's friend James Fisher added with a wink, "be a bore, if you are a bore." It's a tough activity to pigeonhole, though many have tried; birding is hunting, collecting, and gambling rolled into one. Nobody can decide whether birdwatching constitutes an addiction, a release, or just a game played by khaki-clad eco-nerds.

My own interest in birds was sparked innocently enough at the age of ten, when my fifth-grade teacher suction-cupped a clear

plastic bird feeder to our classroom window. When I was twelve, my dad helped me build bluebird houses and took me to a bird-watching festival in eastern Oregon. Pretty soon I was dragging home rotting deer carcasses to attract and photograph Turkey Vultures, then deferring college to go study bird nests in Panama, then eschewing a nine-to-five job entirely, introducing myself as a “bird man” whenever anyone asked.

From the beginning, the pursuit gave me a sense of purpose. By watching the skies, I began to see the world in different and unfamiliar ways, letting curiosity lead me to new places. By my mid-twenties, I’d spent more than a year and a half occupying tents in various remote corners of the world, in between avian research projects and expeditions, and accepted that there was no going back. I also had a growing, slightly uneasy sense that even if I kept it up for the rest of my life, there were just too many birds and too little time.

The feeling of urgency seems to be everywhere. Psychologists call it FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), conservationists call it habitat loss, and Hollywood directors call it *The Apocalypse*. In terms of connecting with the outdoors, we live at an interesting moment. A hundred years ago, people watched birds in hopes of finding new species, but the golden age of ornithological discovery has mostly passed; virtually all birds are now thoroughly, scientifically described, and tucked away as musty specimens in museum collections. Today, people are drawn to birding for the exact opposite reason: to rediscover and celebrate nature at a time when significant chunks of society rarely venture outdoors. It’s poignant that, just as record numbers of people are paying attention, the birds themselves have never faced a more uncertain future. This planet is being cleared, flattened, tilled, drilled, paved, and developed at an unprecedented rate. What that means for birds, humans, and the rest of the world is unclear.

As easy as it is to get discouraged, birders are a particularly optimistic, action-oriented group. They know that you won't see much if you stare at the wall all day. They also know that some experiences can't be duplicated digitally. There is a special joy in watching an actual Scarlet Tanager instead of looking at a virtual red bird, however spectacular, on a phone screen. And by setting their sights on the freest creatures in the world, birders have a unique perspective about how their subjects stitch together even the farthest parts of our globe. Birds teach us that borders are just lines drawn on a map — a lesson we can all take to heart.

As my thirtieth birthday loomed, a grand plan emerged: to travel the planet, meet its most passionate birders, perhaps set a fun record, and take a unique snapshot of Earth, all in one swoop. I set out to see the world, one bird at a time.



About a hundred passengers and forty crew had converged for this Antarctic expedition, advertised as “New Year’s Eve among Emperors and Kings” — a reference to the world’s two largest penguin species. If you’re going to see the world, you might as well start at the end of it, and Antarctica seemed like the perfect beginning for my yearlong journey.

As the official onboard ornithologist on this cruise for Canada-based One Ocean Expeditions, it was my job to point out the penguins and other wildlife until the ship returned to Argentina a week after the New Year. We traveled on the *Akademik Ioffe*, a Soviet-era vessel ostensibly built for oceanographic research but rumored to have once scouted American submarines during the Cold War. The trip’s passenger manifest included doctors, lawyers, business people, technogeeks, and a variety of well-traveled and well-heeled types from South Africa, Australia, the United States, Europe, and other scattered countries, about a third of whom were

bucket-listing their seventh continent. The interpretive staff, by contrast, were younger, free-spirited souls like me, many of them experts in their field, who could happily spend extended periods in remote parts of the world. This was my nineteenth polar expedition in the past three seasons, and it would be my last for a while.

As midnight arrived, strains of “Auld Lang Syne” wafted up from the ship’s bar two decks below while four of us soaked in the hot tub outside. The geologist, a master’s student named Casey from New York’s Stony Brook University, shook up a champagne bottle and popped its cork like a starting gun. Its contents sprayed freezing foam on everything in sight.

“Happy New Year!” we shouted.

A few passengers emerged from the bar to take cell phone videos of us. Most people, which is to say normal people, don’t celebrate New Year’s by spraying champagne at each other in a hot tub in Antarctica. I gingerly shielded my binoculars. It was hard to focus because the whole world seemed to be rocking. Maybe it was the ship moving, or the champagne, or the general mayhem, or the hundred thousand miles of unknown lying ahead. But . . . no birds! Not one! Oh, I desperately wanted to find a penguin.

The Scottish historian, a red-haired doctoral candidate named Katie, caught my eye. “Well? Do you see anything?”

In the midnight sun, the view from the hot tub, strategically perched on the ship’s upper deck, was unbeatable. Thousands of sculpted icebergs, glistening in shades of cobalt, sapphire, and steel, dotted the ocean as far as the eye could see, with a narrow line of dazzling glacier faces tracing the Antarctic mainland on one horizon. An artistic friend, inspired by a similar sight, once confided to me his idea to carve a few bergs to psych out passengers of passing ships: just imagine sailing past a mansion-sized block of ice in the Southern Ocean shaped like Mickey Mouse. But my friend was forced to admit that human creativity has nothing on

the brute forces of nature, especially down here. An iceberg the length of a football field weighs a million tons, about the same as, oh, the annual wheat import in Ethiopia; and in the icy waters of the southern sea, I've seen bergs several miles wide. A few years ago, a chunk broke off the Ross Ice Shelf south of New Zealand that was bigger than the entire land surface of Jamaica; it drifted for several years, interfering with penguin and ship traffic alike. In this part of the world, the ice is likely tens of thousands of years old — perfect for an aged whiskey on the rocks — and the tip of an iceberg above water truly is only about a tenth of its full size. Watching icebergs is like watching birds: the more you think about them, the more insignificant you feel, and only gradually do you begin to sense how much lies beneath the surface.

The sun hung at a low angle, casting everything in its eerie glow. In the distance, I could see Trinity Island, a fifteen-mile-wide projection of ice and rock. It was too far away to make out the Gentoo and Chinstrap Penguins I knew were nesting in its sheltered harbor. Still, with a breeding colony so close, I figured I could spot one or two strays passing by. Penguins are perfectly capable of swimming hundreds of miles, and they like to rest on icebergs.

But . . . no penguins. On top of that, the hot tub was getting cold. Outdoor hot tubs are not really made for Antarctica, and this one couldn't keep up with the frigid temperature. If we didn't hit the sauna soon, the four of us would turn into icicles.

"Do goosebumps count as a bird?" asked Nicole, the young penguin researcher, and no one answered.

In the austral summer, when phytoplankton flourishes in twenty-four-hour sunlight, the Southern Ocean is perhaps the single most productive place for life on Earth — and yet there were no signs of life at all, not a single whale spout or seal. In the so-called land of penguins, where was a penguin when you really — *really* — wanted one?

Someone said: “You’re the worst birder in the world! How are you ever going to reach five thousand if you can’t even find number one?”

Casey got out, then Katie. Water sloshed over the side of the hot tub and froze on the metal deck. Nicole took off. Which left just me, the self-described bird man, sitting alone in a half-filled, half-frozen hot tub in Antarctica near one o’clock in the morning, with zero penguins in sight.

What could I do? Birds are fickle souls. I picked up a towel, followed the others inside to warm up, and abandoned my carefully scripted plan to spot my first bird of the year from a hot tub at the end of the world. All around me in the narrow corridors, people straggled toward their cabins. With the ship’s lights dimmed for dusk, a uniformed Russian officer soberly patrolled the bridge, and a Canadian bartender mopped up in the bar. Throughout the ship, people tucked into their bunks, and things settled down after a long and lively evening. Adventures awaited after breakfast — namely, a visit to a large penguin colony, where I was guaranteed to see thousands of the tuxedoed birds on the first day of the New Year.

But I was just too keyed up to sleep. After most everyone had ambled off to bed, I pulled on two layers of long underwear, wool socks, a pair of ski pants, a fleece sweater, a waterproof down jacket, a fleece neck warmer, a pair of insulated waterproof gloves, a wool toque, a pair of fleece-lined waterproof boots, and binoculars, and headed out. This time, instead of staking out the upper deck, with its expansive view, I made my way to the very back of the ship, where I could look down its roiling wake. Wedged on the stern deck between a winch, a large crane, coils of rope, and several inflatable Zodiac boats lashed in place, I stood sheltered from the wind by a metal dumpster storing all of the expedition’s garbage, and leaned on the rail.

This was my favorite spot on the ship. Personal space is scarce

on a 383-foot-long vessel occupied by 140 people, so I retreated here whenever I wanted a moment alone. Nobody ever went behind the dumpster. Plus, some species of seabirds like to follow vessels, and I often saw birds coursing the wake, occasionally hanging in the breeze almost close enough to touch. None was visible now, but at least this was a nice vantage point.

Could I really spend a whole year birding the world without burning out? I wasn't sure. From now until the end of December, I planned to do nothing else. I would be so focused that I'd skip some of the great wonders of the world — Machu Picchu in Peru and the Taj Mahal in India — just for a couple more hours of stalking birds in the nearby forests. Was that gauche? My friends love to poke fun at me for constantly chasing birds, and I admit that “taking time off” is kind of a foreign concept. But 365 days of predawn awakenings, total strangers, and nonstop, grueling travel would test the limits, sort of like a drug addict doing nothing but cocaine for a year. If it didn't completely break me down, it would leave me high as a kite.

There was only one way to find out if I could hack it, and now I was committed.

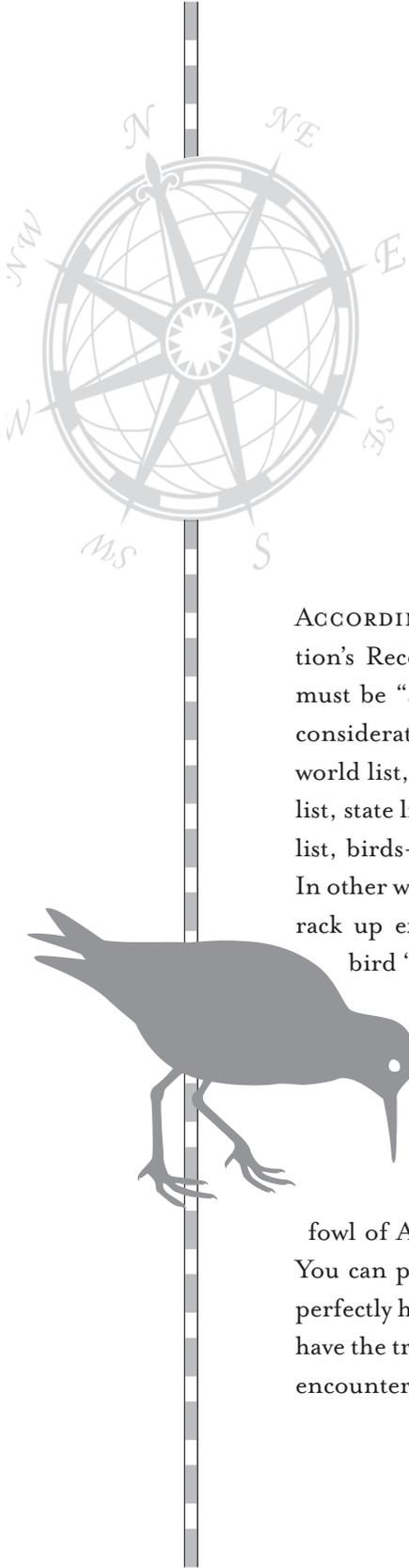
My watch read 3 a.m. Suddenly, a hundred yards out, something flickered among the icebergs. In the low light, it almost escaped detection — appearing as a dark speck skimming the surface, zigzagging on broad tacks, gradually approaching the ship.

I knew what it was before even raising my binoculars. This bird flew on stiff wings, riding intricate wind currents deflected from waves; every now and then it flapped a series of snappy beats to change direction, but mostly it just glided on air. It was the length of a football and equally plump. Its head was matte black, contrasting with immaculately white underwings and belly, and its tail was dark. But the bird's most striking feature resolved when it banked toward me and swooped low, below eye level. The upper sides of

its wings were spattered with frosty black and white blobs, a crisp vision of abstract expressionism.

Many people call this bird a “pintado,” literally meaning painted, because of its splotchy appearance, but in proper English I had spotted a Cape Petrel, a relatively common Southern Ocean bird that nests on remote cliffs. Although Cape Petrels occasionally spew stomach oil from their beaks in fits of foul humor, they are admired and well liked by most people lucky enough to encounter them. This tough little seabird, trying to keep pace next to the ship at three in the morning, might not be a penguin, but it was perfect.

Petrels, in their infinite grace, are thought to be named for Saint Peter and his habit of walking on water. With a blessing like that, the Year of the Petrel was off to an auspicious start.



# 2

## The DSP

ACCORDING TO THE American Birding Association's Recording Rules and Interpretations, a bird must be "alive, wild, and unrestrained" for official consideration on a birder's list of sightings, be it a world list, year list, world year list, life list, national list, state list, county list, month list, yard list, feeder list, birds-seen-while-driving list, or any other list. In other words, dead birds don't count, and you can't rack up exotic sightings in zoos and aviaries. Any bird "under the influence of captivity" is as illegal as can be.

The rulebook has a few more interesting tidbits. Webcams are a no-no for listing. Eggs don't count until they hatch, and chickens, as domestic animals, don't count at all (except the Red Junglefowl of Asia, the wild ancestor of barnyard stock). You can put an injured bird on your list, but not a perfectly healthy hybrid; to be countable, a bird must have the traits of one recognized species. Heard-only encounters are fine so long as recorders "assure

themselves” that they aren’t listening to someone else playing a tape from the bushes, a circumstance that happens surprisingly often.

Otherwise, keeping your list is up to you. Many people assume that birders must document every sighting as if collecting evidence for a court case, but that misses the spirit of the game. As a practical matter, it would be impossible to photograph them all — birds are often too far away or flitting too quickly to get a shot — and anyway, birding works on the honor system.

Not that a few con artists haven’t tried to fudge the facts. Birders even have a name for them: fakers are called “stringers,” and fabricating a sighting is “stringing.” In one particularly egregious case several years ago in Australia, a birder announced his intention to see as many bird species as he could in one year in his home state. He spent the first few months notching up an impressive list of sightings, started a blog, and built a following. About halfway through the year, some local experts began to get suspicious; then, in a dramatic stroke, the guy was caught red-handed: he reported a frigatebird — a tropical species rarely seen in that part of Australia — and posted a photo of it flying against a blue sky. When it was pointed out that the weather on that day was cloudy, the man broke down and, in a long and cringing confession on the regional email list, admitted that he’d actually photographed the bird on a trip to Fiji. For such blatant stringing, the man was blacklisted by the birding community. As they say, you can lose your reputation only once.

But birding scandals are rarer than a Diademed Sandpiper-Plover. It’s pretty easy to tell if someone’s faking it, and there isn’t much reason to make it up. Adding bogus birds to your list is like lying to your diary. What’s the point?

Most birdwatching transgressions involve far more minor infractions. For everyday situations, the American Birding Association (ABA) maintains a “Code of Birding Ethics,” which outlines respectable field behavior and follows common sense: don’t stress

birds; give nests enough space; respect private property; keep your bird feeders clean. The ethical code advises birders to “be especially helpful to beginning birders” and “support the protection of important bird habitat.”

The rules leave a few gray areas. For instance, if you snap a photo and later discover a bird in the image that you hadn’t noticed before, can you count it? If you are standing near an international border and spot a bird on the other side, can you record it for a country in which you have never set foot? Situations like these come up constantly, and not all birders give the same answers.

Also, just because the rules allow certain birds, it doesn’t mean you have to count them. Some birders count only self-found sightings, omitting any bird first identified by someone else. Others, who designate themselves NIB — “no introduced birds” — try to keep their lists pure by excluding non-native species. The thorny subject of introduced birds involves various official committees and whole swaths of gray areas. In short, established feral species are legitimate, but the word “established” has inspired heated debates. Even the term “native” is problematic.

The most contentious part of the ABA’s recording rules is Rule 4, Section B, which allows birds that are heard but not seen. Despite this rule, many birdwatchers note only visual sightings and pay little attention to sounds beyond the most familiar ones. Jotting down heard-only birds can seem almost like cheating; some species that are phenomenally difficult to spot, like cryptic owls and skulking rails, are relatively easy to hear. Few people would dispute that the distant call note of a Stygian Owl is somehow less satisfying than having the bird itself stare back at you. And yet some bird species have such distinctive calls, why wouldn’t you count them, even if you didn’t see them?

For my Big Year, I decided to tally both seen and heard birds. The previous single-year world record had counted heard-onlys, so

I'd be applying the same standard. Also, it's better for the birds: listening has less impact than playing recordings, trampling through a bird's territory, or flushing it in a desperate attempt to get a visual. Many species are best appreciated by their sound, anyway; one might argue that you haven't really experienced a Screaming Piha until you've heard one. Vocalizations are as reliable as visual field marks, and lots of drab-looking species have lovely, distinctive songs. In wide-open environments, such as Antarctica and the Chilean Andes, it's easy to see almost everything; but in places such as the Amazon, where birds hide in thick jungles, the soundscape becomes more important. By the end of this year, I would identify about 5.5 percent of the birds I encountered — one in eighteen species — by ear alone.

Although hard to believe in this globalized age, there is no single, agreed-upon checklist of all the bird species on Earth. Instead, we have competing interpretations: the Americans versus the rest of the world. In the United States, most birders use the Clements Checklist, which is periodically updated by experts at Cornell University and which recognized 10,365 living bird species while I traveled in 2015. In Europe and other parts of the world, birders tend to rely instead on the International Ornithological Congress (IOC), a progressive committee that acknowledged 10,612 species in 2015. Some countries, notably the Netherlands and Brazil, have adopted their own, even more liberal checklists. The trouble is, birds don't always fit into neat boxes, and many so-called species blur into each other. On top of that, scientists lately have been re-evaluating birds around the world with DNA evidence, and in the past couple of decades they've proposed thousands of "splits" — dividing one species into two or more — narrowing our definition of what a species should be.

You need rules to play the game, and for my year I adopted the Clements Checklist — the American standard. It helped that eBird,

the app I use to keep track of sightings, is based on the same checklist. Along the way, I would keep notes on subspecies, too, so that it would be possible to dynamically adjust the tally. These days, a list of birds is more software than hardware, and keeping it up to date presents an unending task.



A week after the New Year, high in the Andes Mountains of central Chile, I went looking for an oddball animal called the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover. Two local birders from Santiago, Fred Homer and Fernando Díaz Segovia, came along to help with the search, and the three of us were switchbacking up a magnificent Andean valley at dawn.

Months before, I had asked a friend in Arizona if he knew any good birders in Chile, and he referred me to Fabrice Schmitt, a Frenchman who, after taking a teaching sabbatical in South America, had been inspired to move to Santiago to lead birdwatching tours. Fabrice replied right away with regrets that he would be on a trip to Antarctica when I arrived in Chile — but kindly put me in touch with Fred, who thoroughly embraced the mission.

“We’ll meet you at the airport and dash off to hunt the birds,” Fred emailed, “and then we’ll rush you back with tires smoking.”

Fred then called Fernando, a young Chilean biologist, who picked us up at oh-dark-thirty that morning. And that’s how it went: a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend — someone I had neither met nor even corresponded with — was now taking me to see one of the world’s most enigmatic birds in the world’s longest mountain range.

The Diademed Sandpiper-Plover, or DSP as birders call it, is a peculiar creature, found only at high elevations in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru. It is a shorebird that doesn’t live on the shore, apparently related to plovers but with a profile more like a

sandpiper (hence the hyphenation). No other bird looks much like it: the DSP, about the size and shape of a dinner roll, has a dumpy body, fat yellow legs, a droopy beak, a deep reddish collar, finely barred underparts, and an upturned white mark behind each eye — the “diademed” part — that gives it a quizzical expression. The bird looks like it doesn’t mind being stared at but wonders why anyone would bother.

You won’t stumble across one by accident unless you spend a lot of your spare time stumbling around desolate Andean bogs, as Fernando does. For the past few years, Fernando has been tracking sandpiper-plovers, trying to coax out their secrets. As part of a research project, he surveys likely looking habitat; for some reason, the DSP is reliably found in some bogs but not in others that look just the same, and nobody has figured out why the bird is so darned picky. Fernando also captures each bird so that he can mark it with color bands, which help identify individuals from a distance. Keeping track of all these little sandpiper-plovers is like following a soap opera, but maybe the data will unlock some of their mysteries.

Fernando drove us in his freshly washed SUV up a dusty gravel road that emerged above tree line and continued, hacked into a cliff, up a steep-sided valley. The route was so narrow in places that only one vehicle could pass. When we nosed around a corner to find an oncoming car, Fernando painstakingly reversed along the sheer drop to a slightly wider spot, then folded in his side mirrors to allow the other vehicle to squeeze by.

While we climbed, I sat in the passenger seat, my thoughts drifting back over the previous week. After kicking off the New Year with champagne and a Cape Petrel off the Antarctic Peninsula, the year’s bird count had progressed slowly. I quickly ran out of Antarctic birds to see, and on January 3 — just the third day of the year — recorded no new species at all, notching my first zero day practically out of the starting gate. The pace picked up with

albatrosses and other seabirds on the Drake Passage, followed by a fantastic morning at a colony of charismatic Southern Rockhopper Penguins in the Falkland Islands. But by the time our ship returned to port in Ushuaia, the world's southernmost city at the southern tip of Argentina, I'd recorded only 53 species of birds in the first seven days of the year. With the need to average 13.7 new species each day — about one bird for every daylight hour — to break 5,000 by the end of December, my score was already lagging.

A full week in Antarctica wasn't exactly strategic, because there aren't enough species on the whole continent to keep up this average. If I had scheduled the same time somewhere in the tropics, I would have seen two or three hundred birds by now, well ahead of the target pace — starting my marathon with a sprint rather than a lope. But then I would have missed the world's coldest and driest and windiest continent, with its massive colonies of Adélie and Chinstrap Penguins, spouting humpback and minke whales, impossibly blue icebergs, and unparalleled ice cap. To me, Antarctica underlined, from the beginning, that this year was not just about numbers. Any global journey that skipped Antarctica wouldn't be as cool.

Still, as our ship neared the dock, I was ready to pick up the pace. I felt light and happy. Everything lay before me — uncertainty, opportunity, and a limitless planet of birds and birders. The sun bathed the world in a hopeful light, and I had the exhilarating feeling that I was exactly where I should be, doing exactly what I should be doing. There would be challenges, but I was eager to explore. I was a little apprehensive, too. I couldn't help wondering whether the local birder I planned to meet would actually show up.

In the few hours after the ship docked in Ushuaia, before flying on to Santiago, Chile, I hoped to track down some Patagonian bird specialties in nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park. An Argentine birder named Esteban Daniels, whom I had contacted months

before, had agreed to help — but now that the day had come, would he remember me? I said a round of hurried goodbyes to the ship’s staff and crew, grabbed my backpack, and walked down the gangway onto Ushuaia’s industrial dock. There, outside the pier’s security checkpoint, awaited Esteban and a friend, a keen photographer named Rogelio “Roger” Espinosa. I was ecstatic to see them — and relieved. Over the next couple of hours, Esteban, Roger, and I stopped by the local landfill, then made our way to the park, where we found my most-wished-for bird species of the day: a pair of red, black, and white Magellanic Woodpeckers, the largest woodpecker in South America. We clocked thirty-seven new bird species — bringing my year total so far to ninety-one — before heading to the local airport in midafternoon.

After a quick flight to Santiago, I sped through immigration, skipped the baggage claim, and headed straight for Exit 3, where Fred Homer, exactly as planned, awaited in a green hat. So far, so good! Fred and I crashed at his house in Santiago, where Fernando picked us up in the early morning hours, and now the three of us were hot on the trail of the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover.

The road continued to climb, skirting around a shallow reservoir in a broad valley of rock and dirt, which was birdless except for a lone Andean Gull flying in lazy circles.

“A couple years ago I came down here,” Fred said, “and, maybe three hundred meters from this spot, saw something on the road ahead. As I got closer, I realized that it was the rear axle of a lorry, implanted into the road surface. When you looked around, there were bits of lorry all over the place. I guess it went off the edge above and just fell to pieces.”

All plant life ceased as we ascended into the upper El Yeso Valley, flanked on both sides by chiseled peaks in ochre and umber. The sky up here looked polarized, like the deep blue you see

through sunglasses. Snowfields clung to the mountaintops, almost at eye level, and I could see bluish, crevasse-wrinkled glaciers hanging from steep slopes above us. Every so often we passed a *Vía de Evacuación* (“Evacuation Route”) sign, illustrated with a friendly stick-figure image of mother and child walking in front of an exploding volcano.

Fernando turned at an unmarked junction at about 10,000 feet and followed a side track until it petered out into boulders. The three of us jumped out and walked a little farther to the only speck of green in this valley, where a snowmelt stream fanned into a bog of squishy, carpetlike vegetation.

This, Fernando said, is the realm of the DSP, and he led us straight into the bog. Surrounded by the stark landscape, Fernando looked the part of a rugged biologist: checked shirt, khaki cap, glacier goggles with mountaineering flaps around the temples, work pants, low-slung binoculars, and a slightly unkempt beard. He wasn’t much older than me and shared the same bent for fieldwork in remote places. He had quit working as a landscaper to focus full-time on bird research. Now he was in his element, scanning for movement.

Fred wandered behind us in the sunshine, smiling, enjoying just being out here. A few years ago he’d moved to Chile, after retiring in Britain from a career in financial services, and set up a bird-touring business as an excuse to spend more time watching birds. He wore a gray vest with lots of pockets over a collared T-shirt, aviator shades, and a wide-brimmed hat with braided leather accents; his trimmed beard was 25 percent pepper, 75 percent salt.

Halfway across the bog, I almost stepped on our target. Fernando pointed toward my feet, and I looked down just in time to see the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover staring up with beady-eyed

curiosity. It was completely unafraid as an animal a hundred times its size blundered toward it, and I wondered if this behavior might have something to do with the bird's low population. Nobody knows how many sandpiper-plovers are out there, but the best guess is about 2,000 individuals scattered over an area half the length of South America. They don't have many predators, at least not in human form, and part of the DSP's charisma is its totally blasé attitude — as if it knowingly trusts you.

An impossibly cute, fuzzy chick emerged from behind some nearby rocks and the two birds slowly waddled off together, probing for bugs with their droopy beaks. They wore matching green and red plastic bands on their right legs, and the adult had a red and yellow combination on the left. Fernando noted down the colors, adding another data point to the DSP project — and I chalked up species number 123 for my Big Year list.

The sandpiper-plover is listed as near-threatened because of its vulnerable populations. In the high Andes, insidious effects such as atmospheric disturbances and climate change could have serious impacts on the DSP's habitat, but it's hard to tell without enough data. Fernando hopes that more surveys will document patterns, which might eventually help with conservation efforts. We lingered until lengthening shadows reminded us that, despite its star status, the Diademed Sandpiper-Plover still counted as only one species.

"It would be pointless to bust a gut to see Chile's most rare and beautiful bird," Fred said, "if you could, in the same duration, find ten locally common and ugly ones that you weren't going to see elsewhere."

He was right, of course. When all birds are created equal, no bird is worth a significant amount of time. It's an age-old tradeoff: you can go narrow and deep, or broad and shallow, but you can't focus in all dimensions at once. I took one last look at the Dia-

demed Sandpiper-Plover, and we drove off to see how many ugly Chilean birds we could find.



Later that evening, Fred and I sat on his backyard patio in a leafy Santiago suburb. Fred served up a bowl of pasta and a fresh salad and poured us each a glass of red wine. The last rays of daylight caught the upper branches of a tree next to the patio. January is the hottest month of the year in Chile, and the afternoon's warmth hung in the air. We'd returned before dark to try for a Rufous-tailed Plantcutter that sometimes visited Fred's yard at dusk. As we waited, it was nice to sit back after a long day in the mountains.

"I'm not really a very serious birder," Fred said, "in the sense that I like watching birds, but I don't particularly care what the species is. I just like watching them. And, of course — today was a prime example — it takes you to some very nice places."

That's what I like about it, too. Birding is always an adventure, and it gives you focus when you travel, instead of staring yourself glassy-eyed at too many tourist attractions. Fred got hooked on birds from one of his sons, who caught an interest at a young age. Although his son's attention passed on to other things, Fred has been addicted to birds ever since.

"It was like a relay race — he handed off the baton, and I kept going," he said.

The sun was setting, its last rays of light fading from the trees. The evening air felt cool and refreshing after the blasting mountain sunshine and dust. Just then, from the corner of my eye, I caught a movement.

"Could you hand me my binocs?" I asked.

Even in the dim light, there was no mistaking this bird: chestnut crown and breast, dark cheeks, white wing bar, serrated beak. A

plantcutter! The plump little bird, named for its tendency to shred and eat leaves, had returned at dusk, as Fred predicted. It peered down at us for a minute before fluttering off to its nighttime roost. I was delighted with its brief visit, the sensation heightened by sharing it with Fred, a person I barely knew but with whom I already felt a deep connection. We thoroughly embraced the moment.

“A nice glass of wine, a delicious dinner,” Fred said. “Now *this* is birding!”