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Big Year birder on course to set new North American single-year record

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Big Year birder John Weigel on the Texas coast in early April 2016.

After a little more than six months of birding, John Weigel is only four species away from beating the record for most birds found in North America in a single year. He broke the Big Year record for Australia in 2012.

So far, Weigel's strategy has focused on finding birds that the ABA considers rare. As of July 11, he has counted 89 rare species and 746 total species. He's even recorded two species that may not have been seen in North America before — Cuban Vireo and Pine Flycatcher — and await ABA classification.

Massachusetts birder Neil Hayward set the current Big Year record, 749 species, in 2013.

So far, Weigel has been to 20 states and two Canadian provinces. He found the most rare species (19) in Alaska, where he ventured to the westernmost island, Attu Island.

He attributes his success so far to the El Niño conditions, which have resulted in an influx of rare birds. For the rest of the year, he will be racing time, the elements, and a small group of other dedicated Big Year birders also out to beat the record.

They include the writer and nude birder Olaf Danielson, who is running neck and neck with Weigel, and the educator and blogger Christian Hagenlocher. Weigel is tracking his efforts on his blog [Birding for Devils](#), where he is sharing his list. Danielson is reporting his Big Year at [The Bad Weather Birder](#). Hagenlocher is the author of [The Birding Project](#).

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Weigel's efforts are not just about the birds. He says his Big Year is about re-connecting with his home country while raising awareness about a non-bird species that he's trying to prevent from vanishing in his adopted country of Australia.

Weigel is founder and managing director of [Devil Ark](#), a Global Wildlife Conservation priority project and the largest, most successful breeding program for the Endangered Tasmanian devil. Once widespread in Australia, the devils have been nearly wiped out by one of the only cancers known to spread as a contagious disease, called Devil facial tumor disease. The devils are now extinct on mainland Australia.

"It has been wonderful to use the excuse of birding to explore unimaginably beautiful areas of North America in a wide range of states, from Florida to California to Alaska, in search of rare birds," Weigel said. "I set out to explore, and now this has turned into the ride of my life. Even if I don't end up breaking the record, if more people hear about the Tasmanian devil through my efforts, this ride will be well worth it."

[The most important bird news from early July.](#)

[Read John Weigel's blog Birding for Devils.](#)

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Updated July 13 to include links to blogs maintained by fellow Big Year birders Olaf Danielson and Christian Hagenlocher