



Australian Reptile Park's John Weigel has broken the American Birding Association's "Big Year" record spotting 750 different species in just over six months.

Central Coast

Aussie swoops in and pinches coveted 'Big year' prize

Richard Noone, Central Coast Gosford Express Advocate
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LIKE a seagull on a chip, the Australian Reptile Park's John Weigel has swooped on the Holy Grail of American bird watching and set a new record for a "Big Year".

Those going for the American Birding Association's Big Year contest for the number of birds spotted usually blog about their experiences but Mr Weigel did not signal his intentions until well into the season, with commentators lamenting the sudden emergence of an "Australian interloper".

Mr Weigel's competitor – bird watching author Olaf Danielson, also known as the “naked birder” – bolted out of the blocks early, never staying in the same place for long and racking up huge numbers.



📷 John Weigel takes a picture in the Denver high country doing the “chicken run” for Prairie Chickens and Sage Grouses.

“I am starting to wonder if this Australian birder doing an ABA Big Year is an urban legend,” one commentator said.

“Half the year is almost gone: at this point Olaf would have almost certainly run into him if he was seriously competing.

“They should be approximately hitting the same rare species and the same seasonal targets at the same time ... They can't keep avoiding each other forever.”



📷 John Weigel with fellow Big Year competitors Christian Hagenlocker and Laura Keene on board a birdwatching charter off Attu Island, Alaska.

Their paths did cross on a cruise ship a couple of months ago chasing sightings of rare pelagic species.

“The fact that both parties apparently didn’t communicate with one another AT ALL is weird yet hilarious,” one commentator posted on the ABA Big Year 2016 Bird Forum.

“Even if Olaf didn’t know the guy’s name, you think John would know who Olaf is, especially with his picture plastered across his blog.”

Mr Weigel said he did not let anyone know he was going for a Big Year because he “didn’t know anyone” and his approach was the polar opposite to Mr Danielson.

Instead of madly spotting every bird he could, Mr Weigel targeted rare hard-to-find birds and crossed them off before chasing the relatively easy, common birds.



📷 John Weigel (left) and other twitchers including former record holder Neil Hayward (far right).

“When I decided to not make a big splash on the birding scene here, it became easy to keep putting it off,” he wrote in his blog.

“It’s no surprise then that not everyone involved in this year’s ABA Big Year chase is gushing with warm and fuzzy feelings toward the interloping Aussie.”

Mr Weigel’s strategy paid off when he snatched the record with 750 birds on July 16, while Mr Danielson simply ran out of birds and has been left hunting species that rarely visit North America at a time when their breeding season was coming to an end.

Mr Weigel has pushed the record to 753 and said he had no intentions of stopping.

“This is a sweet moment,” he said. “Since it’s so early in the Big Year still, I feel there’s plenty of scope to set the bar considerably higher before midnight on New Year’s Eve, requiring the next Big Year lunatic to stretch even further.



📷 John Weigel's tilt at a Big Year took him all over North America.

“I’m so pleased to reach the time of year when new vagrant rarities coming into North America slow down and I have very few local birds I still need to find.”

The relentless wildlife crusader has used his Big Year to raise Americans’ awareness of the reptile park’s Devil Ark Tasmanian devil breeding program in the Barrington Tops and its support partner Global Wildlife Conservation.

WHAT IS A BIG YEAR?

EVERY year a handful of dedicated bird enthusiasts known as “twitchers” go on a quest to see which one of them can spot the most species of birds across North America.

The annual race was the subject of the Hollywood comedy *The Big Year*, starring Jack Black, Steve Martin and Owen Wilson.

The last record was set in 2013 by Massachusetts birder Neil Hayward, who spotted 749 different birds.

Tilts at a “Big Year” are as legendary among twitchers as the larger-than-life personalities who put their lives on hold – and their bank accounts into meltdown – chasing birds so rare they might only be seen once or twice in a generation.

John Weigel’s record-breaking total includes 89 rare species, two of which may not have been

seen before in North America: the Cuban vireo in Florida and the pine flycatcher in Arizona.



📷 Poster for the film *The Big Year*



His Big Year has taken him across the US, from the remote Attu Island in Alaska to the southern tip of Florida.

Mr Weigel has found the most bird species in Texas (174), Arizona (131) and Florida (93), with the most rare species in Alaska (19).

He attributed his success to chasing an influx of rare birds brought into North America by the El Niño conditions and leaving the more common species to last.