

Two Guys Just Broke the North American Big Year Record— But How?

It turns out, seabirds and extreme birding go really well together.



When Sandy Komito (the cheery guy played by Owen Wilson in the movie *The Big Year*) saw 748 species in 1998, many thought his North American birding record would last forever. In fact, Komito's number stood for 15 years—until Neil Hayward managed to log 749 species during his [frenzied transcontinental run](#). Since then, birders have wondered when someone might go for the big 750.

Well, it happened this month—twice! On July 16, John Weigel [spotted a Buller's Shearwater](#) on a boat trip from Half Moon Bay, California, marking his 750th sighting of 2016. Then, on July 18, Olaf Danielson [encountered some Red-faced Cormorants](#) while birding on Saint Paul Island, Alaska, notching his own Big Year triumph. It's hard to tell which is more remarkable: that the North American Big Year record was smashed less than seven months in, or that two separate birders hit the mark within two days of each other.

For Weigel, an American ex-pat now living in Australia, this is just another drop in the birding bucket. He's completed two previous Big Years Down Under, and his Australian record of 770 species still holds. Turning his attention to North America seemed like the natural thing to do. "Apart from the obvious but hopefully avoidable risks of financial ruin and family dissolution, why not?" he wrote [on his blog](#) before setting out this past January. He's gunning to [raise funds for Tasmanian devils](#), an Australian marsupial—while enjoying some raw adventure along the way.

Danielson is also a Big Year veteran, having set his own [special record](#): In 2013, he saw 594 species of North American birds au naturel (in other words, the birds were wearing more than he was). He's been tearing up the race this year (clothed), and was in the lead until Weigel pushed ahead in July. He's dedicating his Big Year to his grandmother, Lucille.

The two competitors are neck and neck right now, and it will be interesting to see how they fare for the remaining five months. On reaching 750 in California, Weigel coyly commented, "I'll keep my long-term goals to myself for the time being, but all can be assured that I'm not planning on going soft any time soon."

Both Weigel and Danielson have benefited from [a few recent splits](#) in species taxonomy. This year, for instance, the Western Scrub-Jay was divided into the California and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, adding on an extra tick. The [strong El Nino of 2016](#) also pushed a few rare birds into North American territory that normally wouldn't occur here; though as [the "ABA Blog" points out](#), all of Weigel's species in the past month have been regulars. Now the question looms: Could these guys reach 775 by December?

In the grandest sense, the Big Year is more than just a game. Though few mortals will ever tackle the endeavor,

most of us can appreciate the decision to follow a passion to its outer limits. Dedicating [a whole year to birds](#) is an exhausting, exhilarating, occasionally demoralizing, and addictive pursuit, and anyone crazy enough to go the distance is in for a wild ride. A big hat tip to Weigel and Danielson for chasing their dreams—and best of luck to both of them for the rest of 2016 and beyond.

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