

2 super-competitive birders race across North America to see most species

A pair of gung-ho bird-watchers are in a cross-continental race to set a record.

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Two ardent bird-watchers are in a fierce competition to be the one who sees a record number of species in a single year.

Call it extreme bird-watching: A record for the number of species seen in a single year is going to be set in 2016, and two ardent bird-watchers are in a fierce competition to be the one who does it.

It's a given that a record will be set because the old record has been broken, done in by unusual El Niño weather patterns, as well as recent changes in classifying birds that have created "new" species. The only questions remaining are: Who will eventually post the higher number, and what will that number be?

On July 16, John Weigel spotted a Buller's shearwater in California, breaking the record for most bird species seen in North America in a calendar year: 749. But two days later, Olaf Danielson of South Dakota saw his 750th bird of

2016, a red-faced cormorant in Alaska.

Now, Weigel, 60, who was up to 760 when he last reported in, and Danielson, 50, standing at 757, are crisscrossing the continent in a race to see which one can see the most among the almost 1,000 species on the American Birding Association's list for the continental United States and Canada.

Checking off hard-to-find birds involves an exhausting amount of time on airplanes and in cars getting to out-of-the-way spots. To find the birds when you get there, you need a good eye for spotting them and a good ear for their calls.

It also takes stamina, loads of free time and a lot of money. By the end of July, Danielson had spent nearly \$70,000, flown 124,800 miles on 129 flights, driven 33,934 miles, walked 273 miles and visited 35 states and provinces. Weigel said he hadn't tracked miles traveled or dollars spent, although he said his bid has been "hideously expensive."

"I've had to go from West Coast to East Coast and back again in 24-hour periods, and then back again," Weigel said. "All I know is American Airlines loves me."

Ardent bird-chasers also must possess what many might consider a geeky drive. Many birders embrace "listing" — tallying species on "life lists," or backyard lists, or even lists of "how many birds they've seen through the sunroof of their car," joked Geoff LeBaron, the Christmas Bird Count director at the National Audubon Society.

"It doesn't have to be crazy, gonzo travel to every farthest corner of the country," he said. Nonetheless, it's not an endeavor that attracts a lot of couch potatoes.

"A lot of these birding places are really, really strenuous," Danielson said.

Weigel, an American by birth, moved in 1981 to Australia, where he owns a reptile park. He said he was turned onto birding a decade ago, and his 2014 record of spotting 770 species in Australia still stands.

Now he's going for the North American version to draw attention and funds to his side project, Devil Ark, a conservation breeding program for Tasmanian devils that is partnered with Global Wildlife Conservation.

"Apart from the obvious but hopefully avoidable risks of financial ruin and family dissolution, why not?" Weigel wrote on his blog.

Both Weigel and Danielson are spending September wandering around St. Lawrence, an island in the middle of the Bering Sea that is part of Alaska but closer to Siberia. The remote island is a place where strong winds can blow off course birds that breed in Siberia but migrate this time of year to Asia. They're "vagrants" — birds that aren't typically North American. But if spotted on Alaskan soil? It's another check on the list.

"It's windy, cold, sleety, cold and miserable," Weigel said by phone. "Did I mention cold and miserable?"

A big question is how Weigel and Danielson broke the record so early in the year. LeBaron said they've got a few things working in their favor.

First, El Niño weather patterns are pushing vagrants into the corners of North America; Weigel said he has seen 93 so far.

Second, the American Ornithologists' Union recently "split" a few species, which happens when research proves that birds that look alike are genetically different. This year, the union split two — the Western scrub-jay and Leach's storm petrel — into two and three different species, respectively.

Also key, LeBaron said, is the internet, which provides a steady stream of information about what birds are being spotted where, and ready access to transportation that "can get a birder to places quickly to see a bird that somebody just saw yesterday."

Danielson said credit also should go to the folks who've reached out to help him in his quest.

"People I have never met before have taken me into their house and brought me breakfast out in the woods," he said.