

Two rivals break American birdwatching record

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COURTESY OF JOHN WEIGEL

These red knots (the smaller birds) helped push John Weigel past the record for most bird species spotted in North America in a calendar year — and he did it by July.

Many a record was broken this summer. Here's one that didn't win a gold medal or much fanfare: It was for extreme birdwatching — and two people surpassed it.

Just over halfway through the year, a man named John Weigel spotted a Buller's shearwater in California on July 16, making him the holder of the record for most bird species seen in North America in a calendar year: 750.

But two days later, Olaf Danielson of South Dakota saw his 750th bird of 2016, a red-faced cormorant in Alaska. Now the men are in a fierce competition — such that exists in this normally genteel pastime — to see how high the record can go in a year when strange El Nino weather patterns, as well as some recent taxonomic splits that “created” more species to spot, may have made their oddball adventure feasible.

This quest is referred to as a North American “Big Year,” and the goal is to see as many as you can of the almost 1,000 species on the American Birding Association's list for the continental United States and Canada in a year. (It was fictionalized in the 2011 box office flop “The Big Year.”) From 1998 to 2013, the record was 748 bird species. A man named Neil Hayward broke that with 749 in 2013.

Now Weigel, 60, and Danielson, 50, are crisscrossing the continent to push into the upper 700s — but not many people who don't frequent birding websites would know that.

“I was tired, and I'm not sure what you're supposed to do,” Danielson said of his non-celebration upon seeing his 750th species on July 18. “I guess you want to enjoy the moment, but it's hard when you're alone.”

And being alone is a big part of a Big Year. Seeing the birds often happens in a group, because hardcore birders descend on spots where websites report rare bird sightings. But getting to them — because winning means checking off hard-to-find birds — takes an exhausting amount of time alone on airplanes and in cars.

What else does a Big Year take? A good eye for birds and a good ear for their calls, because you can check off a species just by hearing it. 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, spent 192 hours looking for birds at sea, walked 273 miles and visited 35 states and provinces. He'd also slept 12 nights in cars. Weigel said he hadn't tracked miles traveled nor dollars spent, though 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, no worries," Weigel said. "All I know is American Airlines loves me."

At core, Big Year hopefuls must also possess what many might consider a seriously geeky drive to see lots and lots of birds.

That's not totally unusual among birders, who embrace "listing" — tallying species on "life lists," or backyard lists, or even "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.

But it's fair to say Danielson and Weigel have rare levels of the birding burn.

Danielson, for example, tallied 594 North American species in 2013, and he did it naked. Among other pursuits, he is a writer, and he says his publisher put him up to it; the result was a book titled "Boobies, Peckers & Tits: One Man's Naked Perspective." (Shockingly, the effort resulted in no arrest record.) This year, Danielson said, the stars aligned for a more traditional Big Year. He'd sold his emergency room staffing company, his family situation allowed it, and he was turning 50.

"A lot of these [birding] places are really, really strenuous," said Danielson, who dedicated his blog chronicling the effort to the grandmother who taught him about birds when he was a kid. "A friend of mine and I got off the trail in the western Arizona desert on probably the hottest day of 2016. We made it back to our car all scratched and cut up and dehydrated . . . if I'm 60, do I want to do that? No."

Weigel does, and not for the first time. An American by birth, he moved in 1981 to Australia, where he owns the Australian Reptile Park. He said he was turned onto birding a decade ago, and he's since done two Big Years in Australia, where his 2014 record of 770 species still stands.

Now he's doing 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 — who, for complicated reasons, considers his 750th bird a black swift in Idaho — wrote on his blog.

These days, both Weigel and Danielson are wandering around St. Lawrence, an island in the middle of the Bering Sea that is part of Alaska but closer to Siberia. So are lots of other hardcore birders, because remote Alaskan islands are places where strong winds can blow birds that breed in Siberia but migrate at this time of year to Asia. They're "vagrants" - birds that aren't typically North American. But if spotted on Alaskan soil? Another check on the Big Year list.

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

A big question among those aware of Weigel and Olafson's undertaking is how they broke the record so early in the year - a feat the American Birding Association's blog called "unthinkable."

LeBaron said they've got a few things working in their favor. First, El Nino weather patterns are pushing vagrants into the corners of North America; Weigel said he has seen 93 vagrants so far. Second, the American Ornithologists' Union has recently "split" a few species, which happens when published research shows 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. (Sometimes the opposite happens, which is called "lumping," LeBaron said, adding: "The birds don't care; it's just how humans are accepting them.")

Also key, LeBaron said, are "listservs, the Internet, and the ability to get to places very quickly to see a bird that somebody just saw yesterday."

Danielson, who has now seen 757 species, said he didn't think El Nino had been any help to him. "At the end of the day, how you get to the top is a big credit card bill," he said.

Lest you think this quest sounds fun, Weigel and Danielson assured it is not - well, not exactly. Weigel, now at 760 species, described himself as "just trying to survive this next six weeks on the island," where he's seeking rarities and trying to get on every boat trip possible, even though they can make him violently ill.

Neither man acknowledged feeling like they're in a cutthroat competition with one another, though neither expressed an inclination to pull back. Danielson, for his part, said his Big Year experience has been heartening. Previously, he explained, he found other birders rude and egotistical.

"People I have never met before have taken me into their house and brought me breakfast out in the woods," he said. "My entire attitude about the birding world has changed 180 degrees."