

GAME TIME IN CLOUD-CUCKOO-LAND

The furious sport of competitive birding



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AMONG LOVERS OF nonhuman organisms, I stand somewhat to the right of center. I would never go out of my way to run over a dog or step on a cat, nor would I torment birds in winter by setting out pieces of plastic bread. When I speak to plants I am invariably civil, though seldom genuinely warm. Still, I have avoided people who allow their cats to molest visitors or who send Christmas cards with the tag line, "And Foeie says, 'Me too!'" I was, then, rather surprised to discover that several of my acquaintances had a consuming interest in birds. Had they been straightforward with me, I could have written them off early, but the webs of interaction and affection had formed and I was stuck with them and their peculiar passion. At first, I teased them with gentle wit and ironic inquiry. But in time I developed genuine curiosity about why these vital, intelligent, and otherwise normal people would drive four hours to a sewer pond where a Red Phalarope was said to be feeding, or fly to the Yucatán on the off-chance of finding a Turquoise-browed Motmot perched in the Mayan ruins.

Many birders—"Don't call us birdwatchers"—trace their fascination with avian life to early childhood and admit to a certain nonrational quality about the whole enterprise. Ben Feltner, a Houstonian who serves as a professional guide for individual and group birding tours, is typical when he says, "I just like to see what birds are doing. My earliest memories were of birds. Watching birds has been the one consuming thing of my life. It is almost a disease."

When pressed, however, most veteran birders can provide plausible justifications for their odd pursuit. Victor Emanuel, a prominent Texas birder, recalls "standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon and having a strong urge to jump, to involve myself with the canyon. Just at that moment, a Clark's Nutcracker jumped out of its nest and flew into the canyon. How

could anyone not envy that ability?" Many birds, of course, are strikingly beautiful—not just peacocks and parrots and cardinals but hundreds of species that good binoculars can transform from little gray blobs into stunning, sharply delineated patterns of yellow and red and blue and black. Others are intrinsically interesting to watch, evidence perhaps that God not only exists but likes amusement parks. Birding also offers an opportunity to relate to the environment at a level difficult for most city-dwellers. A good birder notices what kind of bushes or trees are in an area, whether the water is fresh or brackish, how fast the wind is blowing, and what the weather is going to be the next day.

But for a growing number of intensely active enthusiasts, freedom, aesthetics, and environment run a poor second to sport. It has been the sport-birders who have most resisted the term "birdwatcher." Ben Feltner explains that "the term has bad connotations. When you think of birdwatching, you think of little old ladies oohing and aahing over a Vermilion Flycatcher. I don't have anything against that, but that is just not what we are doing." What they are doing does, in fact, share a number of the enduring features of the more established sports. To those of a predatory bent, birding offers all the pleasures of hunting—rising early, wading through swamps, sitting in bogs for long periods, and fending off the attacks of insects and reptiles—without the disadvantages of being restricted by a bag limit on a small number of species or the stigma attached to blood sport. Like skiing or scuba diving or canoeing, it can be grueling and sometimes dangerous; like golf, it can be played on a variety of courses in a knockabout or highly disciplined manner. It can be done individually or in teams. And like the crown jewel of sports. (I mean baseball, of course), it offers boundless possibilities for keeping records.

The great bird count

THE BEST-KNOWN EVENT in competitive birding is the annual Christmas Count, in which teams of birders all over America enumerate all the species they can find within a circle fifteen miles in diameter. Although the Christmas Counts (which in 1900 involved 26 persons, and in 1973 over 15,000, in more than 1,000 different teams) operate under the Audubon Society, the society has tended in recent years to deemphasize the sporting aspects of birding in favor of broader ecological concerns. Today, the more hot-blooded competitors have flocked to the five-year-old American Birding Association, headquartered in Austin, Texas.

In sport birding, as encouraged by the ABA, one is judged by the size and quality of one's lists. Virtually all birders keep a "life list" of all the species they have ever seen. The best list in the world belongs to Stuart Keith of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, who has birded all the major areas of the world and seen over 5,000 of the approximately 8,000 known species. Obviously, a list of this magnitude is possible only for the idle rich or those whose jobs involve extensive travel. Less cosmopolitan birders concentrate more on the American Ornithological Union (AOU) checklist area (including the United States, Canada, and assorted islands) and regard 600 as a big-league list, or on individual states: a mark of 80 percent is required to merit a reputation for having thoroughly birded a given state.

Because most people prefer games that end before they do, life lists do not fully satisfy the competitive drive of many birders. For them the ABA has encouraged other types of contests. Perhaps the most exciting is the Big Day, in which an individual or party tries to see or hear as many birds as possible in a calendar day. For a successful Big Day, a group must cover a wide range of habitats, arriving at each at the optimum time of day. Dr. James Tucker, founder and executive director of the ABA, and the leader of a party that set the current American record of 229 species, explains that "it takes years to build up a good route and a precise schedule. On the day we set the record [April 28, 1973], we started out at 3:45 A.M. in downtown Houston. We identified an Ovenbird by flashlight, and it turned out to be the only one we saw all day. From there we went to some woods east of town for night birds, moved north to Lake Houston, then down to the mud flats at Galveston and along the coast to Rockport, picking up birds we had spotted the week before. We had a flat tire in Rockport, and we asked the attendant if he could plug a tire while it was still on. He said he could, put the plug in, sawed it off, and we got away in less than

five minutes. From Rockport we went on to Corpus Christi, south through the King Ranch, where we got some desert birds, then finally wound up in the Rio Grande Valley where we picked up several Mexican birds, and at 9:30 that night we ended with the barn owl. We had driven 551 miles in eighteen hours of solid, nonstop birding. We even did all our eating in the car while we were driving. It takes that kind of arduous experience to make a Big Day really work."

Even the most fanatical birders seldom attempt more than one or two of the rigorous Big Day runs a year, but Tucker, whose indefatigability is legend among his colleagues, has devised an even more killing form of competition: "A marathon is a number of Big Days back to back. I did them for several years in a row, but the last one in 1971 cured me. On five successive days we birded the Valley, the Rockport area, Houston, Austin, and finally wound up in Big Bend National Park in far West Texas, where we backpacked into the mountains. That night, after five days of all-out birding with no more than two or three hours' sleep a night, I was totally exhausted. Then, at 2:00 A.M., one of the other two guys had a kidney-stone attack. I hiked down the mountain with a flashlight and walked four miles to the nearest telephone and called a ranger. He and I walked back up and carried the guy down on our shoulders, trading off down the mountain. Then we drove 100 miles to the nearest hospital, and I drove on home to Austin, another 500 miles. It was the most grueling, exhausting experience I have ever had. That cured me." One suspects, however, Tucker has experienced not a cure but a temporary remission; in the next breath he revealed plans for an even more demanding exploit. Though he swore me to secrecy, I am permitted to reveal that "it would be great! It would be *unprecedented!*"

TUCKER'S BIG DAY notwithstanding, the biggest birding story of 1973 was the race between Kenn Kaufman and Floyd Murdoch to beat the American Big Year record of 626 species, set by Ted Parker in 1971. Parker himself had asserted that one could probably see at least 665 species in one year in the AOU checklist area. Members of the birding fraternity all over the country avidly followed the Kaufman-Murdoch contest, not only because of the intrinsic interest in seeing a record broken, but also because of the striking differences between Kaufman and Murdoch. Murdoch is a clean-shaven, short-haired college instructor from Tennessee, with ample resources to finance a Big Year run. Kaufman is a bearded, long-haired Kansas high-school dropout with no money. While Murdoch drove and flew about the

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country in comparative comfort, Kaufman hitchhiked 80,000 miles and kept his total expenses for the year under \$1,000, which he raised by borrowing, cashing in life insurance, working briefly as a fruit picker, and selling blood plasma. He gained basic nourishment by eating Friskies and other pet foods—"People laugh at that, but it's like laughing at Washington's troops going barefoot in the snow"—and sped himself along by drinking deeply of the bottomless cups of coffee available at twenty-four-hour restaurants. He was mugged, jailed for hitchhiking, and, while birding with Murdoch, trapped in a fierce storm in the Tortugas. Kaufman slept outdoors in sub-zero weather in Alaska, protecting himself from the cold by crawling in holes in the rocks and pulling his pack in on top of himself like a trap-door spider. Finally, on the Freeport, Texas, Christmas Count in December, he was swept off a jetty by a huge wave and came dangerously close to drowning.

Because of recent changes in the AOU checklist and slight differences in the areas allowable under AOU and ABA rules, the contest ended in perhaps as satisfying a denouement as possible. According to the ABA list, Murdoch was the winner with 670 species to Kaufman's 666, but the AOU area includes Baja California, where Kaufman found five species to run his AOU total to 671. Both Murdoch and Kaufman can, therefore, claim with some legitimacy to be the new American champion. Although both men approached their Big Year in the spirit of "anything worth doing is worth doing to excess," they admit they were pretty well burned out by October but kept going primarily because of the vicarious enjoyment others were getting from their struggle. Neither seems interested in repeating the feat; Murdoch flatly states he will never work on a big list again. Still, he notes that Peter Alden's single-year record of over 2,000 birds for the world would be quite a challenge—if he were interested in another Big Year.

As part of its attempt to gain recognition for birding as a legitimate sport, the ABA has established rules for the various types of competition. The basic rule is that, to be counted, a bird must be "wild and unrestrained"; one cannot pad one's list by making a tour through the birdhouse at the local zoo. Other rules govern territory and the conduct of specific types of competition. For example, a bird seen on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande cannot be counted unless it flies across into U.S. territory while being watched. A Big Day team should contain no more than six members, who must ride in a single vehicle and remain within conversational distance of one another.

Such rules, of course, are virtually impossible to enforce. "This is a real problem," Tucker admits. "There is no way to be absolutely sure.

We have to rely on a kind of fraternal agreement that people will be honest. But there are controls. If a person claims he has seen rare birds but can never show them to anybody else, or if he cannot demonstrate his expertise when in the company of people of known quality, he gets a reputation pretty fast for not really having seen the birds he claims." Ben Feltner agreed: "There is no way to certify birding records, but you earn a reputation pretty soon. Either you are doing it or you are not doing it, and people seem to know."

This uncertainty vexes Noel Pettingell, a Houston postal worker who ranks as one of the purists of the pure, but it has not discouraged him. Pettingell is a man obsessed with records of all sorts, a man whose ultimate desire is to see "Birding" ensconced between "Billiards" and "Bobsledding" in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. He is the unofficial statistician for the ABA and publishes an occasional summary of birding records called *The Pettingell Report*. He keeps track not only of new marks in the major categories of competition but of such information as most species photographed in North America (650), most species seen in the smallest area in a single day (112, sighted in 100 square feet), and most species seen *from*, as distinguished from *in*, one's own backyard (92). Pettingell admits he is a compulsive lister, but he defends his records with philosophical seriousness. "Just as bowlers and golfers use their scorecards as a measure of ability in their respective sports," he said, "having one's list totals published gives a birder a sense of individual satisfaction, importance, and accomplishment as a competitor in a unique sporting activity that he or she may be unable to achieve in any other aspect of his or her life."

Giving the bird

DESPITE ITS VITALITY, the ABA and its philosophy are not without detractors. Among them is Dr. Sidney Gauthreaux, an ornithologist in Clemson University's Department of Zoology. "I love birds for the mystery," he said. "I am trying to gain a basic understanding of the way nature works, by looking in through birds. I started off as a lister, but I gave it up when I got more concerned with finding things to add to my list than with finding answers to questions about birds. I resent people who make lists of how many birds they have seen between the office and the barbershop or how many they have seen on a wire. I actually knew a guy with a wire list. Before long, he will probably have a list called 'Birds Hovering Near Wires.'"

Resentment toward listers is perhaps nowhere stronger than in England, where they are known as twitchers for their habit of "twitching



off" to see a bird. According to James Wolstencroft, a student who spent the first half of 1974 birding in America before entering Cambridge in the fall, most twitchers are "young people from London who wear their hair tied back in hippie headbands and walk around in bare feet. There is great antipathy between the pro- and antitwitching factions. Some traditionalists wouldn't go twenty miles to see a bird they haven't seen—they are not twitchers. The typical British birdwatcher, unlike the ABA people, would never publish in a magazine that he belongs to the 600 Club. We are just not on to that kind of thing. Some people think that if you even know your life list, you are not really a birdwatcher but more of a stamp collector or train spotter, or something like that."

Wolstencroft, who classifies himself as a cross between the traditional birdwatcher and the twitcher, admires the zeal of the latter but concedes the traditionalists have a legitimate complaint. "Seeing a new bird is so important to these twitchers that they sometimes charge across fields and destroy them, so that in some places the farmers have signs up that say 'NO BIRDWATCHERS,' 'BIRDWATCHERS NOT WELCOME,' 'GO HOME, BIRDWATCHERS'—that sort of thing. And the wardens at the reserves hate them because some of them will do anything to see a bird, and that can become an ecological threat. Take the Swainson's Warbler, which breeds in Maryland, where it is quite scarce. Every year it is driven out of its optimum territory by birders with tape recordings of the Swainson's song. These people want to draw the bird out, but the birds hear all these other males who are singing so much and they move further back into the swamp, which is not the best habitat for them. The optimum habitat in that region is held by tape recorders."

The division of birders into listers and non-listers or traditionalists and twitchers is, of course, too simple. The lure of the list may lead some to slight aesthetics and ornithological science in favor of raw competition, but to become a competent lister one must accumulate an enormous amount of information about birds—what kinds appear where and when; how to find them when they are there; how to recognize them at rest, in flight, or by their calls; and how to distinguish them from birds whose only difference may be a slightly longer bill or a white eye ring or three tiny bars on the tail. It is unlikely that anyone without an uncommon interest in birds would go to the trouble to master such details simply for the sake of a game.

In fact, a dedicated lister may have little interest in matching his list against that of anyone else. Arlie McKay, who is Noel Pettingell's only Texas peer at keeping meticulous records and who has spent much of the last seventy-

six years looking at birds, has shown a remarkable lack of concern for competition. "That is just not my hobby," he explained. "My hobby is to keep a list for what has come to be known as the Cove area, the part of Chambers County west of the Trinity River. I commenced to keep records on September 5, 1934. Since then I have kept a daily record of every bird I have seen for forty years." McKay means *every* bird, *every* day. At regular intervals, he has summarized his records and transferred them onto a 1938 election tabulation form that he converted for the purpose. The master list stops in 1970 because the form had spaces for only thirty-two years. McKay had foreseen this and had picked up two of the poll lists, but "it takes a good bit of work to set one up, and I kept postponing it until it got to be too big a problem. Now my eyesight is so bad I probably never will fill it out." But just in case, he still faithfully records every bird he sees. "I have to. If I didn't write it down, I might not remember when I saw it and I couldn't fill it in on my big sheet. If you know why people collect stamps or things like that, why, you will understand."

FEW SERIOUS BIRDERS are as concerned with competition as Jim Tucker and Noel Pettingell or as unconcerned with the bird life beyond walking distance from their homes as Arlie McKay, but they hold a great deal in common. They have no secret handshakes, yet their sense of fraternity is real enough. Few things seem to please them more than sharing a bird with a friend. Their magazines publish the names of people all over the world who are willing to serve as unpaid guides for visiting birders. A new bird in town quickly becomes the subject of extensive telephone conversation, complete with details on how to find it that are accurate to a degree astounding to the neophyte who imagined the birds themselves had only the roughest notion as to how they would spend their day. When birders meet, they say things like, "I think this is the first time I've seen you since we got Ross's Goose at the Anahuac Refuge. No, I take that back. It was when we saw the last of the Brown Pelicans off Galveston."

Among Texas birders, the surest sign that one has been fully accepted into the inner circles is the taking of a bird name. Not a joke name like the Bleary-eyed Bald Ego or the Garbled Nitwit, but the name of an actual bird, assigned because of some real or imagined connection with its owner. Ben Feltner, for example, is the Blue Jay because jays are his favorite birds. Victor Emanuel is the Hooded Warbler because of his slight size and high metabolism. Noel Pettingell's repetitiveness has earned him the title of Whippoorwill. This practice was begun by Edgar Kincaid, an eccentric scholar who

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roosts in the basement of the University of Texas Press, where he has finally completed the thirteen-year task of updating and editing Harry Church Oberholzer's 3.2-million-word manuscript for *The Bird Life of Texas*. Kincaid is a confirmed misanthrope who would prefer a world that resembled Aristophanes' Cloud-cuckoo-land, a utopia of, by, and for the birds. In such a world, his choice for Secretary of Law and Order would undoubtedly be his own namesake, the Great Cassowary. "Humans have killed off birds by the millions, even billions, either for food or just by poisoning them. That is all so one-sided. The cassowary has three toes, and the middle one is long and sharp like a dagger. In Australia some of the natives try to keep the birds as pets, and sometimes, if they get too familiar, the cassowary will jump forward and rake down with these sharp claws and rip open their bellies, and their intestines just pop out on the ground. It still doesn't even the score, but the cassowary at least gets back in a small way for the horrible crimes people have committed against birds."

Given his hostility to *Homo sapiens*, Kincaid's decision to bestow a bird name on an acquaintance ranks as a great compliment. "Birds are the highest form of life," he insisted. "They are the most alive. The normal temperature of a hummingbird or a swift is 108. If it gets excited, it runs up to 109 or 110. That's really living. Also, birds are just the right distance away from people, biologically. Monkeys, or even dogs or cats, are too close to us humans, with all our Watergates and our monstrous crimes. And even though it is growing and all that, you can't really have any rapport with a plant. But birds are just right."

AFTER TAGGING ALONG on a Christmas Count and spending several days of apprentice birding in the Yucatán, I managed to convince my friends that my interest was sincere, and wangled an invitation to attend the annual meeting of the Texas Ornithological Society, in Beaumont. Finally, I would get a good long look at birders in their natural habitat.

We gathered early in the morning at a local motel whose manager said he had seldom been host to a less raucous group of conventioners. As we stood around squinting into the morning sun, I observed that most birders are not obsessed with style. In general—there were, of course, notable exceptions—their appearance ran to "sensible." The women wore rubber boots, blue sneakers with green socks, brown oxfords with thin white socks, shapeless jeans, forgettable shirts, and caps or large straw hats. Hairstyles were plain, with a preference among older women for the shingled look that goes with the watch turned to the inside of the wrist.

The men seemed to favor khaki trousers and plaid shirts or jump suits—red jump suits, aqua jump suits, green jump suits, tan jump suits, all with pockets large enough to hold Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds of Texas*. Most wore caps, but left the bills flat rather than shape them the way a baseball player would. Still, they displayed an odd sort of athleticism. They were hardy men, built for the long haul. They did not walk with the smooth gait of men who played conventional sports as youths, but they looked as if they could walk forever.

On the first two mornings, we visited swamps and mud flats in search of shorebirds. When the group split into two sections and one contingent piled straightway into the water, I fastened myself to Sidney Gauthreaux, who headed for higher ground with the observation that he regarded it a matter of skill to see what he could find without getting wet. Gauthreaux was an ideal companion. A natural teacher who takes time to explain things to the intelligently ignorant, he was not above turning aside from the path to avoid confrontation with an unpromising incompetent. "Stay away from people with too many bird-club patches on their clothes," he cautioned, "especially when they wear them on their caps." He also introduced me to the joys and ploys of birdmanship. At a crude level, birdmanship may amount to nothing more than wandering off from a group and claiming to have sighted a rare bird while the others looked at starlings and grackles. More sophisticated and gutsy birders sometimes make confident assertions unlikely to be challenged, such as distinguishing between the sounds of finches flying overhead at night or, at the sight of a flock of several virtually identical shorebirds, calling attention to "the Dunlin about a third of the way from the front."

In the afternoon we went to Smith Woods, a small patch of trees at High Island, about thirty-five miles east of Galveston. The TOS meetings had been timed to coincide with the spring migration, a six-week period during which millions of birds migrate from as far south as South America all the way to the Middle Atlantic states and New England. Smith Woods is one of the first patches of greenery the birds see as they fly in from over the gulf; though most fly farther inland, a small proportion—perhaps one-tenth of 1 percent—will stop there, making High Island an excellent birding location. On days when the migrants have encountered rain or strong wind resistance offshore, a much higher percentage drop into the woodlands exhausted, to rest and bathe in several small ponds before continuing the journey north.

Until they start to drop, the birds cannot be seen flying overhead, even with the aid of binoculars, because they fly at heights in excess of a mile. Professor Gauthreaux, a leading expert



on transgulf migration, has demonstrated that wind currents are a major factor in the distribution of small birds, and that they fly at such heights because that is where they find the wind currents that will take them where they want to go. "Over the eons that warblers have been migrating," he observes, "they have been taking the path of least resistance. If you are a warbler weighing less than twenty-five grams and have to fly more than 2,000 miles, why buck the wind?" From time to time, Gauthreaux would peer into the sky with his binoculars, then single out a tiny dot plunging to earth like a black hailstone. "It's a catbird, and it's going to come in close to us." A few moments later, the dot would become a bird, and, as it braked itself and landed in a nearby tree, the bird would become a catbird. I have finally learned to distinguish the silhouettes of a number of flying birds, but I seriously doubt I shall ever be able to determine the difference between the dot of a catbird and the dot of an Indigo Bunting at 3,000 feet.

The final day was to have been the most exciting and would, I was certain, serve as the central focus for my story. Victor Emanuel and Noel Pettingell had assembled a team whose other members were Fred Collins, Dan Hardy, and Elric McHenry, and we were going after Jim Tucker's Big Day record. But the high winds that met us at 5:30 Sunday morning made it clear we did not have a chance. We saw some fine birds, and Noel almost broke his one-day woodpecker record, but we fell fifty species short of the mark Tucker's party had set.

We played out the string, but, with the record out of reach, discipline broke down and a giddy exhaustion set in. As we headed back to Houston my companions turned from talking about what might have been to what yet may be. Some day, they reckoned, the major Christmas Counts would vie for the services of highly paid professionals, and perhaps a team that finished last in one year's count could draft a Kenn Kaufman or a Floyd Murdoch to help them the next year. More militant birders would become angry when sportswriters called them by their given names instead of the White-winged Dove or The Common Potoo. Eventually, a special television channel would be dedicated solely to birding. "When someone reported a bird," Victor fantasized, "the station would punch a button, and a tape would come up, presenting a life history of the bird, with all the details about previous sightings. By this time, a mobile crew would get to the site and interview people who had seen the bird. Then the bird itself would be shown live on the screen.

"And," Noel exulted, "we could set up a category of people who had seen the most species of birds on their TV screen without leaving their armchairs. Wouldn't that be tremendous?" □

ON THE WAGON

by Patricia Goedicke

With the diffidence of a whip
Ill-used, or never
Or only against herself

Her voice is a beehive,
Her skin is made of rice paper
The color of sandy apricots.

Thin as a toothpick or a straw,
Having decided she was Evil

Painfully, at thirteen, she left home,
Then drilled around the world
Picking up whatever she could find,

But behind her whalebone family's back
She developed her own spine:

After hundreds of years on the bottle she stopped
Stone-cold, she climbed out of the mud
Entirely on her own, but now

Everything is too dry
She says to herself, dangerously

The whip coiled in the corner
Twitches secretly, in the dust

She feels like an empty cornhusk
Though she is not, ever:

With spices from the Orient, with red pepper
And salty nasturtiums at the core

She turns herself into a book:
Bitter as black coffee but brilliant,
Scribbled all over with fine print

Her hair is like dried honey,
Her children are plump as apples

And she broods over them
Like a squirrel

She feeds them rich blond raisins
From her store.