The Washington Post

Animalia

America's toughest record in competitive birdwatching was shattered last year

By Karin Brulliard January 10

Last summer, something very unusual happened in the world of birdwatching: Two men broke a big record within days of each other, each having spotted 750 bird species in North America in a calendar year.

Then they promptly gathered their binoculars and kept racing across the continent to find more birds. Both were after a record known as the North American "Big Year," which is built on seeing 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. Sound familiar? If so, you're probably a birder or one of the few people who saw the 2011 Steve Martin/Jack Black/Owen Wilson film "The Big Year."

By mid-July, Olaf Danielson of South Dakota and John Weigel, a U.S. native who lives in Australia, had surpassed the previous record of 749, which had been reached in 2013. By September, they and lots of other hardcore birders were on a frigid Alaska island in the middle of the Bering Sea, hoping to tally some "vagrants" — birds that aren't typically found in North America but sometimes stop on the island as they migrate south from Siberia. Their travels throughout the year involved a frenzy of planes, boats and automobiles, as well as lots of cash and, it goes without saying, an obsessive zeal for sighting birds.

So who won the year?

For the official results, we turn to the American Birding Association, which is a polite enough organization that it didn't announce a "winner," but rather congratulated Weigel and Danielson, as well as two other people — Laura Keene and Christian Hagelocher — who also beat the 2013 record.

But the ABA did provide the final tallies — and the highest was Weigel's.

Weigel chalked up 780 birds on the official checklist, and Danielson ended the year at 776. Keene and Hagenlocher spotted 759 and 750 species respectively. All four competitors also saw a few birds that aren't yet on the ABA list but are being considered; if

they're accepted, the entrants' final results will be amended, according to the association's Nate Swick.

But it seems clear that Weigel — who was promoting his effort to help raise money for a Tasmanian devil conservation breeding program — will stay on top. "It was a roller-coaster ride full of ups and downs, chock full of corresponding mood swings and overreactions, all crammed into a sleep-deprived blur. Next stop, Betty Ford Clinic," Weigel wrote on his blog last week. But, he continued: "I know that I was driven to far greater efforts knowing that the other guys were as focused and dedicated as they were."

Danielson — one of those other guys — reported on his own blog that he'd finished the year having flown 253,800 miles, driven 46,735 miles, visited 39 states and spent $95,200. He also had two "near bear/death experiences," he wrote. Danielson, who has authored books, also noted that he is working on a "birder mass-murder mystery," but not one about his 2016 quest.

"Thinking about it with a detached reflection on what was. . . . I had basically wasted a year of my life chasing and counting birds," Danielson wrote. "If I had expected some added sort of epiphany or revelation about the year or life, it wasn't forthcoming. I knew it would never come."

Competitive birding, it seems clear, is not for everyone. But if you are intrigued, it might help to know that the record probably won't stand for long. The ABA recently added Hawaii to its official area, and with it the association expects to approve 100 or more new species to its official checklist later this year. More birds = more chances for victory.

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