

**Birding Without Borders: An Obsession, a Quest, and the Biggest Year in the World**

Noah Stryker. 2017. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, MA. ix + 326 pages, 8 page color insert, ISBN 9780544558144. \$15.99 (Paperback).

Noah Stryker's *Birding Without Borders* is a personal account of the first major modern attempt at a world big year. Written in a straightforward, narrative style, this book details a journey across 41 countries with the express intent of seeing over 5000 species of birds in one year. This book will be a joy to read for birders, ornithologists, and the general public alike. The book is written mainly for the non-birding public and does well by assuming that the reader does not know much about birding or ornithology. It is fun and will be educational for amateurs, hardcore birders, or professional ornithologists, both for its account of an incredible undertaking and its well-researched tidbits on the history of bird listing, conservation, and global travel. The book has 16 chapters that generally follow the journey through the year, and each chapter usually concentrates on a major country or area that Stryker birded. I can imagine that after such a unique and intense year, it would have been tempting for Stryker to include every great bird, interesting story, and helpful person he encountered, but he does a good job of moving the narrative along and focusing on the major points and experiences. He did well to avoid what could have been a monotonous series of stories about birding in different places. The chapters detailing birding were also broken up with chapters or half-chapters covering peripheral topics such as bird conservation, global travel, and human interactions with nature. I found the history of year lists, as well as the account of research into variable ratio schedule rewards and its implications for the popularity of birding to be particularly well researched and informative.

Stryker is about my age, and most of the birders my age grew up reading Kenn Kaufmann's book about a North American big year, *Kingbird Highway*. Kaufmann's foreword notwithstanding, the parallels and influences on Stryker's writing style, with accounts of adventure mixed with often heartfelt or philosophical tangents, was evident. Stryker also

looks for opportunities to deliver the poignant one-liners that so memorably peppered *Kingbird Highway*, with perhaps varying degrees of staying power, though my favorite by far was this: "A list, in other words, is a personal account of dreams and memories." This is a wonderfully profound summary of what it is like to look back on years of looking for and keeping track of birds. Stryker's love for the birds themselves is obvious, and every chapter about a leg of the journey included at least one in-depth look at a bird from that area. The accounts of both the Harpy (*Harpia harpyja*) and Great Philippine (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*) eagles especially conveyed the deep sense of wonder about birds that drove this undertaking.

As much as I enjoyed this book and believe others will too, I was occasionally distracted from the story by the knowledge that this big year was undertaken not for its own sake, but specifically to produce this book. It is very impressive that Stryker was able to convince a publisher to fund this big year and it speaks greatly to his writing and birding skills, but I occasionally found myself thinking that parts of the trip were undertaken purely for the sake of the story. For example, the three-day mule ride in the rain in Jujuy, Argentina, to target three species of birds was probably unnecessary given that all three can be seen from a number of good highways in northern Argentina and southern Bolivia. Anyone who has put in a few days of late nights and early mornings can only be impressed by this all-out marathon of birding, but occasionally, when Stryker was discussing his reasons for keeping going, it was hard not to think to myself, "Well, that and having to give back a massive book advance." Another problem was the failure to connect current research with the conservation that he so frequently and eloquently discusses. With advances in genetic and computational techniques for natural history specimens as well as rapidly increasing interest in systematics, we are in the middle of the greatest explosion of research into the structure and distribution of bird populations ever, and this research is essential for knowing where and how to conserve birds. Stryker calls museum research "musty" and only finds it mildly interesting that his lists will fluctuate occasionally. I found myself wishing that Stryker would make the connection between

the field guides he posed with and the museum collections upon which they were entirely based, as well as the connection between the active research into avian systematics and the conservation that he so deeply cares about.

As a lifelong birder, I suspect Stryker had some idea of what to expect during this big year, novel as the places he went to must have been. In my opinion, his best writing came out when he encountered the unexpected, from car problems to exhaustion and sickness. The best part of the book was his account of hearing about and dealing with the death of a friend in the birding community. As the internet makes the world smaller, we have all felt our own personal birding community expand, and one unavoidable consequence of knowing more people is knowing more people who die. Stryker could have easily avoided this topic, but when a birder he was supposed to meet in Honduras died, he admirably tackled this subject head-on. Now that we know or are friends with people we may never meet, it is extremely difficult to know how to deal with the death of someone you may feel very close to, but have never met: a struggle I have felt in the birding community many times. Stryker does a fantastic job of soberly reflecting on this situation as well as his feelings and troubles in an outstanding bit of writing that, for my money, stands out from the rest of the book.

More than a story of birding, this is a story of birders. It is a story of why Stryker wanted to see 5000 species of birds in a year, and the

people who helped him along the way. It is a story of how birding truly bridges cultures and languages, and the excitement and enjoyment people get from birding across the entire planet. I cannot imagine a similar book being written about any other pastime, and for that this book is unique. It is very well written, and fun to read. Birders will like it, and it will be an especially good read for the birder who has travelled the world a little or not at all—I found myself living vicariously through many of the chapters about places I have not been to, as well as reminiscing about countries and birds I know well. I would especially recommend it for beginning birders, novices, or non-birders. It explains why we bird, and covers topics like conservation, risks associated with birding, and different reasons people bird. If I had a friend who expressed interest in starting birding, this is one of the books I would give them to read.

*Ryan Terrill, Moore Lab of Zoology, Biology Department, Occidental College, Los Angeles, California, USA, ornithoterrill@gmail.com*

#### LITERATURE CITED

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doi: 10.1111/jof.12250