Confessions of an Obsessive Bird Lister.

by Keith Taylor

In March, I was exercising our silly, aggra-vating, inherited miniature schnauzer in the backyard of my west-side Ann Arbor home. Hearing a loud, almost metallic hum that was repeated in rapid bursts, I looked up to see two mute swans fly overhead, snowy white against the gray sky. They were the 101st species of bird I have seen in or over our yard in the twenty years we’ve lived here.

I recognized the sound of their wings because just two days earlier, my daughter, Faith, and I had one fly not fifteen feet in front of us on the boardwalk next to Wildwing Lake at Kensington Metropark. Our friend Dan Minock, a semiretired professor of English at Washtenaw Community College, had taken us out to see the great horned owls that try to lay their eggs in the big heron nests on the island in the lake. For many years Dan has been recording the arrival of owls at the nests and their successes and failures at raising young there. The owls put on a good show for us, flying off to the woods and hooting at each other. They were the fifty-eighth species of bird on my year list, and the eleventh on my twelve-year-old daughter’s.

I’m not the type of person who lists everything in his life; the only other list I keep is the yearly one of the books I’ve read. But I admit that I share the obsession some people have with creating lists of birds. My life doesn’t allow me to take off at a moment’s notice to see rare birds in Texas or Newfoundland or even in northern Michigan, but I do what I can. I keep the list of species I’ve spotted in or over my yard and a life list of every bird I’ve ever seen. Now I’m trying to get back to making a list of birds seen in a given calendar year.

I keep the annual list partly to force myself to get out more often. I make what living I do hunched over a computer keyboard or sitting in chairs reading books, and I’ve never enjoyed exercise. Although I’ve been intrigued by the beauty of birds since adolescence, I’ve found that I seek them less frequently if I don’t have a goal. Recently I haven’t been setting annual goals, and I’ve also kept putting on weight. I realized I could justify watching birds without the owner’s explicit permission,” I thought I may have detected a charmed look crossing the faces of my teammates.

Like most listers, we do stop our compulsive collecting from time to time and actually try to learn things about the birds we see. For instance, I’ve learned that mute swans, the graceful S-necked birds that now ornament many of the ponds along the Huron River, are not native to North America. Some people contend that all of Alaska’s Aleutian Islands but not Hawaii. And in the upper level of bird listing, the ABA maintains the official records of sightings. Probably 700 to 750 species of birds nest in North America.

When I decide to set out for a respectable year of birding, I’m lucky enough to have a few acres in the hole. My first ace is a friendship with Macklin Smith. For many people in Ann Arbor, Macklin is a mild-mannered professor of medieval literature at the U-M. For others he is a courageous leukemia survivor who told his story movingly in Transplant, a sequence of poems published last year by Shaman Drum Bookshop. But for the world’s birding cognoscenti, he is a champion: the person who, according to the official records kept by the American Birding Association, has seen more species of birds in North America than anyone else. Given the spread of information via the Internet and the ease of transportation, he may have seen more birds in North America than anyone has ever seen. I have actually witnessed a local birder come up to Macklin, introduce himself, and then say in hushed tones, “It’s an honor to be in the presence of greatness.” Macklin looked uncomfortable.

The American Birding Association coordinates the activities of the country’s bird listers. Its mission statement highlights the conservation of birds and bird habitats and stresses its commitment to education. Some of the association’s Principles of Birding Ethics, like “Do not enter private property without the owner’s explicit permission,” might seem obvious. But excited people seeing something rare—like the cattle egrets that were reported in southeastem Michigan fields this spring—can get carried away unless they’re reminded that not everyone in the world shares their particular excitement. The ABA sets the rules for the “listers” and defines the region in which they compete—North America from the Rio Grande to the Arctic Ocean; all of Alaska’s Aleutian Islands but not Hawaii. And in the upper level of bird listing, the ABA maintains the official records of sightings.

September 2004 ANN ARBOR OBSERVER 1
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When I first contact Don Chalfant, one of the local legends in the birding community, he tells me, “I may be the worst lister in the history of the planet, but I still seem to get everyone giggling.” The voyeur jokes are obvious but still seem to get everyone giggling. This time by I’ve been outed as the guy doing the article for the Observer on bird listing, so at first I think they might be doing this for my benefit.

Several days later, Mike Kielb assures me that I had nothing to do with it. “I don’t even keep lists anymore,” Mike says, “except my copulation list. I still like that one.” He tells me a funny story about watching mottled owls (a bird I can only imagine or look up on the Internet) fall out of a tree in Mexico when they were carried away by avian passion. Mike teaches biology at Washtenaw Community College and used to guide birding tours locally, around this country, and in Mexico. He is a coauthor of The Birds of Washtenaw County, Michigan. He was the first city ornithologist, is past president of the Washtenaw Audubon Society, and for seven years we wrote a popular monthly column on birding for the Ann Arbor News. When I ask him why he has such a strange hobby, Mike responds, “I just love birds.”

A friend of his was running bird tours in Venezuela, the kind of tour that North Americans with interest and money to spare would take to see exotic birds. Mike’s friend spent days trying to find an Agami heron, one of the most spectacularly colored but most secretive members of the heron family. He finally located the bird and his tour group back into the tropical marsh to see it—walking chest deep in snake-infested waters.

	

O f course birders and bird listers are not immune to the usual kinds of human jealousies and pettiness. In a recent book about competitive birding titled Big Trouble in Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Mark Obmascik describes the adventures of three men who set out to see more birds in one year than any other people had. “It was an accomplishment,” he says now. “And I decided it was an accomplishment I could be proud of.”

But then he adds in a typical aside, “Well, proud in a certain kind of way.”

He began taking trips to different parts of the country to see more birds, even to see an individual bird that might be visiting from Mexico or Greenland or Asia (serious birders call this “chasing a bird”). By this time I’ve been outed as the guy doing the article for the Observer on bird listing, so at first I think they might be doing this for my benefit.

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Shorebirds. But he also realizes that most people might find the activity that fills his spare hours rather silly. “And it is ridiculous, of course,” he says, and laughs. “But it just seemed more important than some of the worries that I could be doing.”

He started seriously looking at birds while he was a graduate student at Prince- ton. He would take long walks in the New Jersey marshes or along the coast to relieve the pressures of dissertation writing or to get some quiet time with his young daughters. At some point he saw that he had seen more birds than many other people had. “It was an accomplishment,” he says now. “And I decided it was an accomplishment I could be proud of.”

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I show him a list sent to me by Mike Sefton, the vice-president of the Washtenaw Audubon Society. It’s a list of the members of the group who have the highest life lists of birds for the county. Local birding legend Don Chaillant is number 3 on this list; national birding celebrity Macklin Smith is number 4. Number 1 is Mike Kielb.

I think I detect some pride as well as amusement in Kielb’s response: “Well, yes, I’m a field naturalist, after all, so I keep good notes every time I go out in the field. If someone asks for a list, I can create one.”

Two weeks later, he sends me an e-mail. He admits having been just a bit disingenuous when we talked before. “Of course I keep lists,” Kielb writes. “I have about twenty of them!” Maybe in our earlier conversation he was trying to show that he was above the fray, or maybe he was thinking he was a physician who could heal himself. He doesn’t elaborate.

Mike Sefton, who sent me that list, works as a vendor liaison representative at the Borders corporate offices on the south end of town. He admits to being an avid lister, “having caught the disease from my birding cronies, particularly exacerbated by meeting Don Chaillant a number of years ago.” On his lunch hour, Mike goes out looking for birds in areas on the south side that others might overlook, like the Ann Arbor Airport (where people—although I’m not among them, despite trying several times—have been seeing an upland sandpiper this year) and the former Ann Arbor landfill at the corner of Platt and Ellsworth. Mike Sefton can get down-right passionate about the old landfill. “It is the only reliable grassland and shorebird habitat in Ann Arbor,” he tells me, “with nesting bobolinks, meadowlarks, Savannah sparrows, and other goodies, and it has entertained a number of rare gulls and shorebirds over the years.”

The city is just beginning to think about what to do with the site, but Mike Sefton already has a definite opinion: “I’m really concerned that it may be turned into athletic fields or a dog park. Not that I mind athletic fields or dog parks, but they should be built on old cornfields or the like rather than on habitat that’s in short supply.” In this case, the obsession for listing has turned into a particular kind of environmental advocacy. There are some, although certainly not all, who would find that development admirable.

Mike is a professional book person and a former English major, so he is more than willing to discuss the aesthetic questions of bird listing. Just off the top of his head, he came up with a parody, the lister’s version of Shelley’s “To a Skylark.” Mike writes:

Heal thy soul, birdie Spirit! Bird thou art, To wit, Number 3 on thy Yorkshite annual list. Maybe it’s a joke only a bird lover could love.

Mike Sefton knows several local birders who do not keep lists, or choose to keep them to themselves, to avoid any hint of competition. He tells me that several professional birders, including David Sibley, author of the exquisite Sibley Guide to Birds, do not keep lists. He says that one of the best birders he knows is a local woman who “feels the list takes away from her time birding.”

But most local birders do list, and for most of us, there is at least a whiff of obsession to our passion. In June Macklin Smith, Don Chaillant, Mike Sefton, and other Ann Arbor birders took a pelagic birding trip off the coast of North Carolina. Two chartered boats took the group more than thirty miles off the coast, to see the birds that live on the open ocean. Although these birds come to land only to breed and nest, you can count them if you really concerned that it may be turned into something else, but mostly I am just concerned that it may be turned into something else.”

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