

MY BIG YEAR (2000)

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In the summer of 1999, I read *Kingbird Highway* (Houghton Mifflin 1997) by Kenn Kaufman, which held me spellbound throughout its 318 pages. For me, it was not just a great story, but posed an intriguing possibility. I knew for quite sometime that I would be able to take the year 2000 off from work, to travel or simply pursue my interests. My wife and I had discussed this at length, and we both thought it was a good idea. I hoped a sizable portion of the year would include some birding, and maybe I could even organize a two week trip to Texas in late April to tally some new Lifers. This was the plan, until I read Kaufman's book.

Kaufman's *Odyssey*, taken to identify as many species of birds as possible in one calendar year, seemed quite daunting. After all, he hitchhiked across the country to accomplish his goal, even going as far as northern Alaska. I knew I couldn't hope to mimic his efforts and attempt a nationwide Big Year. As much as I would love to try this, I would end up single and destitute after the first week! In the autumn of 1999, a much better idea took shape. Why not try a Big Year confined simply to New York State? This seemed much more feasible, and I began planning my strategy in earnest.

The winter of 1999 was shaping up to be quite mild. A big bonus was the large numbers of COMMON REDPOLLS and other winter finches that began appearing in November. If the start of 2000 was to include these birds, a group of normally difficult-to-find bird species would be readily observable. I decided to make a list of all species I thought would be possible to see in NY in one very good year with the major effort being put in to see the really rare ones. Poring over various NY State checklists, I compiled a list of 325 birds. I decided to call my little endeavor "The Race For 325."

While counting the days until New Year's Eve 1999, I began a small side project. My mother, Nancy McFarland, offered to design a web page to track my efforts. In this fashion, birders from around NY State could check in, see what I was observing, and follow up on rarities for their own pleasure. Similarly, advisories could be posted to me if rare birds turned up in the far corners of NY State. The web site would also serve as an archive of my efforts, and document my attempt long after the 2000 year had passed. Successful or not, I would have my observations posted for peer review, and names of other birders that were present would also lend legitimacy to my sightings. A full list of the birds I observed in 2000, along with field notes and a list of other observers is still available for review online at my web site:

<http://members.fortunecity.com/mattv2>

New Year's Eve 1999 was spent quietly at home awaiting the drop of the ball and the Y2K nonsense to begin. The world did not end that night, as some had

hoped, so I set out at 1:30 AM to a local hotspot and Important Bird Area (IBA) called Whiskey Hollow in the Town of Van Buren. My first bird for the Big Year would NOT be a European Starling, I was determined to find something native. Shortly after I turned off my car's engine, I heard the haunting duet of two GREAT HORNED OWLS. The year was off to a great start! By the end of the day, 1 Jan, 2000, I would also relocate and identify a male DICKCISSEL that was coming to a feeder in Oneida Castle and a HOARY REDPOLL that was making similar forays to a feeder in Lafayette. The day list would reflect a total of 36 species, with two of these being whopping rarities! A great start indeed.

A trip to Niagara Falls in the first week of January turned up LITTLE GULL, THAYER'S GULL and LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL. A visit to the Tug Hill State Forest found both PINE GROSBEAK and RED CROSSBILL. Three trips to Montauk Point that first winter yielded KING EIDER, COMMON EIDER, HARLEQUIN DUCK, BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE and DOVEKIE. Cape Vincent held the elusive GRAY PARTRIDGE, although I had to make five attempts due to lack of sufficient snow accumulations. On the last day of February, I traveled to the Adirondack Mountains and Bloomingdale Bog. Here, I found GRAY JAY and BOREAL CHICKADEE. On the trip back to Syracuse that night, I realized I had seen 141 different species of birds in just two months! The year was going quite well.

Thus far, the list of 325 species I was working towards seemed prophetic. Nothing had appeared in the first winter that I had not counted on seeing (I knew about the Dickcissel and Hoary Redpoll weeks in advance, so they were not surprising). When spring arrived, some genuinely rare species that no one would have predicted began to appear. There was an AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN in Ellenville, a WESTERN MEADOWLARK in Dryden, and a LARK BUNTING in Alabama. Fortunately, all were content to stay and be viewed (over the course of several weeks in some cases) by many avid birders. When the much anticipated month of May arrived, I spent nearly every day at the Niagara Mohawk Energy Information Center (NIMO EIC) in Scriba on Lake Ontario. Many hours spent performing diligent searches with the aid of talented local birders turned up huge rarities like NELSON'S SHARP-TAILED SPARROW on 4 May and an adult HARRIS'S SPARROW on 9 May. Other good finds in May at the NIMO EIC included SEDGE WREN, YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT and BLUE GROSBEAK. Later in the month, I made a trip to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge and saw a BLACK-NECKED STILT and a guided excursion into Spring Pond Bog in the Adirondacks with Gary Lee found a SPRUCE GROUSE. On the last day of May, I was still searching for migrants along the lakeshore. On Long Pond Rd. near Rochester's Braddock Bay, I was elated to find a singing CONNECTICUT WARBLER! The year's total at the end of that day was 293 species.

I intended to go birding every day, such was the obsession with my goal. However, in June, I took a position with National Audubon of NY State to conduct searches of IBA's and survey for species of "Special Concern." None of these investigations found any rarities. However, the geographic locations I was sent to did assist me in finding some very rare nesting species in NY State. By the end of June, I had seen BARN OWL and CHUCK WILL'S-WIDOW on Long

Island, a YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER in Sterling Forest, and a KENTUCKY WARBLER in North Tarrytown. The final rare nesting species discovered ended up being a Life Bird, a BICKNELL'S THRUSH atop Whiteface Mountain. In mid-summer, I took a brief hiatus for the month of July to plan my autumn and determine what I would need to see during migration.

Also, I knew I had to go to sea.

Certain bird species in NY State can only be seen out in the ocean. Up until August, I had been fortunate to view many WILSON'S STORM- PETRELS and even a SOOTY SHEARWATER from the secure comfort of the beach at Shinnecock, Long Island. However, skuas, jaegers and their kin all favor the vast open sea, so I booked a trip with FONT tours in New Jersey. Our vessel, the Atlantis, would depart from Brielle, NJ but at some point would cross into the NY waters of Hudson Canyon. Since there were no signs or billboards out there, a handheld GPS unit would be consulted to determine when the trip was 'officially' entering NY. This sounds foolish, but rules are rules.

Thus, we set to sea on 2 Sep. The day was flat calm and quite hot. The trip lasted 14 hours, six of which were spent in NY waters. The birds observed that day included staggering rarities like AUDUBON'S SHEARWATER, RED-NECKED PHALAROPE and BRIDLED TERN. It seemed we could not have picked a better day, and my first pelagic trip ever was an incredible success. To fully document the enormity of this trip, there is an account on my web site under 'Field Notes' for the month of September.

After the pelagic trip, a major change in home life quickly usurped my birding time. We finally purchased some property, and planned to build our first home. The excitement and procedures we needed to follow kept me pretty busy during autumn migration. Still, I was able to get out a bit to fill some gaps in my Year List, including a PARASITIC JAEGER from the bluffs of the Derby Hill Bird Observatory (my 325th Year Bird!), GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH at Braddock Bay, and ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge (MNWR). As the final winter months of November and December approached, I succeeded in chasing and observing new birds like CALIFORNIA and SABINE'S gulls in Niagara Falls, SNOWY OWL in Fairhaven, a female SUMMER TANAGER in Tift Nature Preserve in Buffalo. Finally, another pelagic trip from Brielle was taken on 9 Dec. This trip was just as exciting, but conditions were much rougher. Highlights included a DOVEKIE, ATLANTIC PUFFIN, , and a murre species. The murre dove and swam away too quickly, so an exact identification was not possible.

My final Year Bird, an ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER, was observed in Alley Pond Park on 10 Dec.

The grand total of bird species observed in 2000 ended up being 334. I had hoped for 325, and was quite pleased with the results! Besides keeping track of what I did see, I also kept notes of what I missed. Most notable was the Western Kingbird, a species that regularly appears in NY State each autumn. Unfortunately, I have yet to see one, and missed at least four different individuals during my 2000 Big Year. In addition to the Western Kingbird, a list of 39 additional species that were all reported in NY during the Big Year attempt can be found on my web page (see 'Big Misses').

After my Big Year ended, I was informed that 334 birds represents the greatest number of species reported in one year in NY State to date. I am very pleased that I was able to pursue such a laborious endeavor, but I would never have been successful if not for the assistance and aid of a great many NY birders. Folks like Andy Baldelli, and Orhan Birol on Long Island, Mike Bochnik in Yonkers, and John and Mary Yrizarry in Tuxedo all gave me invaluable assistance. Gary Lee and Rich MacDonald in the Adirondacks, Bill Lee and Jane Graves in Albany, Willie D'Anna in Buffalo, David Tetlow in Rochester, and Nick Leone in Watertown all kept their eyes open for me. Gerard Phillips and Mickey Scilingo were my birding partners and shared in the strategy,. Bill Purcell, MA Koencke and Dorothy Crumb were similarly very knowledgeable and helpful locally. The biggest thanks and loudest praise must go to my wife Cynthia. Anyone who can allow someone to spend so much time and dedicate so much effort to their favorite pastime surely deserves major recognition! Perhaps even a nomination for sainthood...

I wish anyone trying a NY Big Year in the future a lot of luck and success! I hope that the method of making the final tally and field notes available to the public by means of a web site becomes the standard and will be employed by others as well. In this fashion, many other avid birders can follow in future attempts, and delight in reading the trials, tribulations, and ultimate successes. If anyone wishes to perform a 2002 attempt, feel free to contact me. I will be very happy to assist with strategy and have no issue with divulging any locations where I found birds. I am very grateful for the opportunity to recount my efforts, the race for 325 was an experience I will definitely remember long into my twilight years.

