

A WELSH BIRDER ABROAD: THE STORY BEHIND A RECORD-BREAKING BIG YEAR IN NEW YORK STATE

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On New Year's Day, 2012, I invited an old birding friend, Philip Dempsey, to bird with me on the east end of Long Island. Our plan was to bird hard for a day and see how many species we could come up with, hopefully capturing some of the nostalgia of New Year's Days gone by, when we were young and rabid birders. Fact is that neither of us had done much birding in recent years; careers, relationships, and other hobbies (fly-fishing in my case, surfing in Philip's) had pushed birding to the back seat. So a bracing day of winter birding seemed a fun (and harmless) thing to do and that really, honestly, was the extent of the plan for 2012.

Our day went well and we found some good birds out east. It started with a pre-dawn Eastern Screech-Owl in my yard in Northwest Harbor and ended 73 species later with one of the last birds being a Snowy Owl at Shinnecock. We saw nothing particularly unusual or rare that day and perhaps the best bird was a Glaucous Gull we found at Sagaponack. We certainly saw nothing like the mega-rarity that Doug Gochfeld and Andrew Baksh turned up when they found New York State's first Grace's Warbler that morning at the other end of Long Island. Philip and I got that call from Angus Wilson but opted to stick to our original plan and stay local (would someone who was doing a Big Year skip a shot at a Grace's Warbler?). We had a good day, enjoyed our time in the field and even picked up six more species, including a staked out Mountain Bluebird, on the way back to the city the next morning.

Then an odd thing happened, the result, perhaps, of a mere series of coincidences. My partner Ryan had introduced me to eBird during the summer of 2011 and I had started to enter local birding records into the database. Back from our New Year's Day trip I entered the birds we'd seen and discovered that you could see real-time league tables of other birders' year-lists. And, almost certainly as a result of every other serious birder in the state abandoning their New Year's birding plans to go and chase the Grace's Warbler, it turned out that Philip and I were doing rather well on that list. In fact I think we were briefly number one and two.

So perhaps, I thought, I'll see if I can see 100 (soon adjusted to 150) species in January. And the rest, as they say is history.

JANUARY

The 'Winter that Never Came' allowed for a lot of birding time and I was able to run around collecting species that had been reported around the New York City area. In addition to the Grace's Warbler I was able to add a Rufous Hummingbird at the American Museum of Natural History, a Barnacle Goose at

Seatuck Creek, an Eared Grebe and a Eurasian Wigeon at Jamaica Bay, and a Black-headed Gull in Brooklyn. Soon enough though the supply of local birds dried up and so I had to look further afield.

In late January Philip and I headed up to the Adirondacks where we met up with Joan Collins and did two days of winter birding. Philip was between girlfriends at the time so could be talked into such a trip given copious assurances about unseasonably mild temperatures. While we didn't get everything we wanted, we did add 14 year birds, including Boreal Chickadee and Gray Jay. That put me in range for my 150-species January target and I got there with a Long-eared Owl at Hunter Island in the Bronx on January 31st. All done....

FEBRUARY

Or perhaps not. Having got back into the habit of birding I ended up adding another 31 species in February to end the month at 181. I finally caught up with the Barrow's Goldeneye at Jamaica Bay after multiple attempts and added a White-winged Dove on Staten Island. I also cleaned up on local wintering birds now that I'd learned how to search eBird and had set up a 'Needs Alert' for New York State.

February, being mild, also allowed two more trips to the north. A second Adirondack's trip with Joan Collins added Black-backed Woodpecker and an American Three-toed Woodpecker, one of New York State's superstar, hard to find residents. The other trip was my first real foray to the northwest of New York and, after picking up two Western Grebes on Cayuga Lake and a King Eider at Sodus Bay, I met up with Greg Lawrence for a Niagara gull trip. Greg and Joan were not people I knew before this year and in both cases I reached out to names I saw on eBird, looking for help in areas I didn't know well. Joan turned out to be a professional bird guide (I had no idea) and Greg turned out to be a college student. Either way, I managed to press both into service as unofficial regional helpers, the first of what became a network of new friends across the state helping me keep abreast of goings-on bird-wise.

Anyway, back to Niagara where Greg and I had a great trip adding Little, Thayer's and California Gulls to my year list. My first time ever at Niagara and I didn't actually see the Falls—my parents live in Wales, and even they've seen the Falls.

Oh, and another thing started to happen in February. People started to notice my year list—most assuming I was some kind of new birder but a few remembering me from 20 years ago when I was last seriously birding in the Northeast. And people started to reach out, including a chap called Richard Fried (who I'd never heard of but learned was the current holder of the New York State Year List record at 352 species) who messaged me via Facebook to ask if I was doing a Big Year. At the time I still wasn't sure.

MARCH

Is a dull month where, if you've birded hard you'll have seen all the winter birds and be waiting impatiently for migration to get underway. The month started off

in spectacular fashion though, with the discovery of a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch at Nancy Loomis's feeder north of Utica. After that star bird however, normal service was resumed and it went back to being...well, just March. While I added 12 year birds during the month it was quite the slog as I waited impatiently for more migrants and chased down early arrivals even though I knew they'd be abundant in just a couple of weeks time. My last bird in March was a Northern Saw-whet Owl in the 'Owl Woods' at Braddock Bay near Rochester and I had to work really hard for that bird. Still, with spring migration just around the corner and 193 species in the bag, I was actually starting to think I might actually do a Big Year.

APRIL

And the spring migration that I've been waiting for finally got underway. This isn't a time for rarities so much, but rather a 'mopping up' operation. Over the next six weeks I could get most of New York's migrant breeding birds without going too far from home, but each one that I missed required a trip to look for them in their breeding habitat. Too many misses and I'd be running around like crazy chasing breeding birds through June instead of focusing on the rare ones. So through April and May I found myself doing a lot of migrant watching.

I ended up getting 56 year birds in April, almost all from New York City parks and the State parks on the south shore of Long Island. Barn Swallow was my 200th species of the year on April 6th and other 'good birds' included a Yellow-throated Warbler at Riverside Park, a Prothonotary Warbler in Bryant Park, several Kentucky Warblers in Central Park and a Golden-winged Warbler in Crocheron Park in Queens. That bird turned out to be my last add of the month but things were looking pretty good as I headed into May with few misses to worry about.

Misses are an odd thing to think about as almost anything that I'd missed up until that point could feasibly be found later in the year in the 'second winter'. Come April though, a new class of 'permanent' misses appeared with spring overshoot migrants that might not show again and weren't going to give me a second chance. Fortunately there weren't too many of these that April; a Bullock's Oriole upstate was a one day bird and not chaseable, while being lucky enough to see one of the Swallow-tailed Kites that showed up was just that—luck. Those two were the worst of my April misses so I actually considered myself to have done pretty well.

MAY

Is my absolute favorite month of the year in Eastern North America (and large chunks of the Palearctic too for that matter). Migration is at full force and life seems to be flooding back to every habitat in our area. It's a month that I could happily be outdoors in nature every single day, and this year I think I might just well have been.

May started with a good vagrant bird for my 250th bird of the year—a breeding plumage male Yellow-headed Blackbird which had set up territory near Binghamton. It also included my 300th bird when I managed to levy my

local network out east to track down a calling Northern Bobwhite on the North Fork of Long Island. In total I added 57 new year birds in May, ending up at 306 and feeling really positive about breaking the record.

On the record front, by now I was pretty much openly acknowledging that I planned to try to break the New York State Big Year record and had even given an interview to Corey Finger at 10,000 Birds that said as much. Things seemed to be going well and once again I missed very few birds—a Swainson's Hawk and a possible Swainson's Warbler being the most notable misses. It was also a lot of fun racking up such big numbers of year birds day-after-day. You get a lot of endorphins from checking things off a list.

Other May highlights included a lot of time out at night on Long Island failing to find Black Rails but hearing lots of Eastern Whip-poor-wills and successfully tracking down one of New York State's few breeding Chuck-wills-widows. I also chased down Upland Sandpipers at Blue Chip Farms, Bicknell's Thrush at Whiteface Mountain, Henslow's Sparrow at Perch River, and Arctic Tern at Cupsogue Flats. On the vagrant front I finally caught up with a White-faced Ibis at Jamaica Bay after many, many hours of searching, only to have Pat Lindsay and Shai Mitra then find another one about 400 yards from my house in Northwest Harbor (!). I also got Mississippi Kites, a bird I was fretting about bumping into, when a pair showed up and started to build a nest at Sterling Forest.

Coming out of May I was in pretty good shape with a very defined list of breeding birds still to hunt down and a fair amount of time to do it before shorebird season kicked off in July.

JUNE

Involved a lot of miles as I slogged back and forth across the North Country trying to track down those scarce, or even semi-mythical, breeders that are often the envy of many a New York birder.

Spruce Grouse (a small and declining relict population hang on in the Adirondacks) became something of an obsession and 'Hunting the Snark' as I came to call it took me to these mountain bogs, and fed a lot of mosquitos, three times that month. I had good intel from local birders and research scientists, including the location of a breeding pair, but it still took me six long days of searching before I finally bumped into a mother and young at Spring Pond Bog.

Other long-haul trips netted me breeding King Rail in Western New York and Northern Goshawk near Potsdam, but I failed miserably in my attempt to track down a Gray Partridge that Chris Wood had seen in Amish Country near Perch River. Shorebirds also started a bit early with a Curlew Sandpiper at Pike's Beach and a Ruff at Montezuma. I felt really good about this last bird having raced up there as soon as I heard about it and getting the bird late in the day. Sure, it was a 14-hour round trip but surely this would be the only Ruff seen in New York this year ... and then Andrew Baksh found four or five this summer at Jamaica Bay (see Andrew's excellent blog for details of these and other discoveries: <http://birdingdude.blogspot.com/>).

Perhaps the best bird of the month though, and certainly the best bird that I found myself this year, was a total and complete surprise. I'd been debating how to get offshore to look for pelagic birds. Richard Fried, in his record breaking year, had been taken offshore several times by Angus Wilson and John Shemilt and had managed several really good birds. I was pretty sure this was not going to happen for me thought so I was pretty much on my own. While June was early for seabirds, in past years I had seen a lot of jaegers and shearwaters south of Montauk while fly-fishing for Mako Sharks (all catch-and-release). So, chartering a shark boat and captain, I headed offshore and spent a day chumming in and around the shark fleet about 30 miles south of eastern Long Island ... and we had quite simply the most amazing day of sea-birding that I've ever had in New York waters.

To cut a long story short we had all three jaeger species and hundreds of shearwaters often up close to the boat. By the time we had to head back to Montauk I couldn't imagine a better day of birding and then ... a Fea's Petrel flew close by the boat! Luckily the captain was able to pursue the petrel and I was able to get some shots, because no one would have believed me had I not got some decent photos. With Fea's Petrel, Spruce Grouse and Curlew Sandpiper in New York in the same week this truly was a 'purple patch' and perhaps the highlight of the year. The summer, and almost all the sea-birding I did after that, were certainly a bit of an anticlimax.

JULY

So I came into July at 322 species (only 30 shy of the state record) and with an epic June behind me. I was feeling pretty good about myself, and my prospects for breaking the record in the summer. After all, Richard Fried had seen a ton of Hurricane Irene waifs and strays, pelagic birds, and other vagrants in the summer. Visions of 365, or even 375 swirled in my head. And then ... well, I basically hit a wall and endured three months of pretty dismal birding. I put in huge numbers of hours and miles, and added very few birds. I guess Big Years aren't all fun.

In total I added only eight year birds during the month of July. Almost all of them seemed to be hard fought. A Sandwich Tern required multiple visits to the baking, fly-bitten flats of Cupsogue before it surrendered, and Whimbrel gave in only after an epic number of days searching the bays and flats out east. I did pick up a few shorebirds, with Stilt Sandpiper, American Avocet and Pectoral Sandpiper at Jamaica Bay and again have to thank Andrew Baksh for (practically living in the mud at Jamaica Bay all summer and) keeping me up to speed on the shorebird comings and goings.

Considering I spent so many dozens of hours standing out feeding the biting flies and risking sun-stroke or drowning at Cupsogue, it's perhaps ironic that I wasn't there on the day that Derek Rogers and Arie Gilbert had a Brown Booby fly right over them on the flats. My attempts at pelagic-birding were also dismal failures with several charters producing very little in terms of birds and my resorting to whale-watching boats to get out to sea (they didn't produce much either).

To add birds I ran up to St. Lawrence and Jefferson Counties twice (it's an awfully long way to St. Lawrence County). One trip added a Black-bellied Whistling-Duck but another added Sedge Wren and Common Nighthawk only after literally days of searching. And I still couldn't find a Gray Partridge (!) despite serious hours and effort on my part.

AUGUST

So after the dismal July, I was hoping August would be better ... but it wasn't. I added only six species the whole month although I was out birding every day. With no summer hurricane, there just weren't a lot of birds to chase. I did run up to Niagara for a Franklin's Gull but missed it. I also spent a lot of time out on whale-watching boats, and while I did see lots of dolphins and sea turtles, I didn't add any birds.

The only adds for August were five species of shorebirds and an American White Pelican at Jamaica Bay. No vagrants, no seabirds, not all that much fun to be honest.

SEPTEMBER

So this month had to get better, right? Maybe some vagrants? Or a hurricane? Or some rare seabirds?

On the plus side a Fork-tailed Flycatcher caused a mad scramble and was a state bird for me—while I missed Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Say's Phoebe this year I can hardly complain after lucking into quick views of the short-staying, and infinitely rarer Fork-tailed. I also managed to finally get out to the Hudson Canyon for a real pelagic trip (after several other bookings on pelagics and fishing boats were cancelled). Audubon's Shearwater got to join the list at least, even if we didn't connect with any of the real pelagic goodies. On the shorebird front, Hudsonian Godwit finally made it onto the list after several misses and a lot of time spent searching for this species. I was getting through the list of expected birds, but it was just really, really hard work.

Even with these birds though, I still only managed six year birds in September. Ever willing to jump in the car for a 15-hour round-trip drive, I ran to Rochester for a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper but was a day late. I also started to get nervous about Brown Pelican as I stubbornly managed to miss the very few that showed up this year. Seabirds in general did not go well for me this year and by the end of September it became obvious that I'd botched my summer pelagic season and now missed a good handful of species that were possible with better planning.

Richard Fried had been kind enough to share his record 2011 list with me and I kept staring at this big cluster of year birds that he got in the summer, and that I simply wasn't replicating. It's not that there weren't birds around, there were plenty of birds and it was actually a pretty good shorebird season overall (and I did see 38 species of shorebird in New York State this year). I think it was more that the summer really highlights the downside of Big Years, and the flip-side of all those endorphins from year birds in May. Big Years are by their nature extremely goal-focused and it gets tougher and tougher to get new birds

as the year moves on. A great day of shorebirding where I saw 15 species of shorebird including a Ruff at Jamaica Bay would be a really great feeling in any normal year, but this year...no Hudsonian Godwit...no smiles. To be honest I really wasn't having a lot of fun with the whole project by this point and, if I hadn't already sunk so much time into it I would seriously have considered easing off. At the very least I went into October with 342 species, serious doubts about breaking the record, and really hoping for a change of luck.

OCTOBER

Is a very birdy month with lots to see and lots to hope for. I spent a lot of time (most days) on the barrier beaches and at the east end of Long Island hoping for Western Kingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Northern Wheatear and the like but really didn't turn up much in terms of new birds. I did chase, and dip, a Say's Phoebe, and did finally manage to connect with a Western Kingbird at Breezy Point. The kingbird was my only year bird from Long Island though, and one of only five that I managed to turn up all month.

The other four year birds all came from road trips. After dipping Franklin's Gull once in Niagara County I was a bit gun shy about chasing another one up there, but when one showed up at Montezuma NWR I took the risk and managed to get the bird the day after it was found. Montezuma also gave me my only Ross's Geese of the year on rain-challenged trip to the Rochester area. I also managed to add Cave Swallow and Lapland Longspur at Hamlin Beach SP, and even though I subsequently saw both species down on Long Island, seeing Cave Swallows migrating along the shore of Lake Ontario was a very memorable experience.

October also brought us Hurricane *Sandy* which did not bring me any birds; a single Leach's Storm-Petrel was the only bird I could legitimately call a 'storm bird'. It did, however, bring a lot of destruction and misery to many of the low-lying coastal areas of Long Island, and effectively closed large areas of the barrier beaches for the balance of year. We actually got off pretty lightly out in Northwest Harbor with no real damage other than some downed trees. It did create a sort of 'lost week' phenomenon though, as we hunkered down with no heat, or power, and with limited gasoline supplies keeping me close to home. I spent weeks looking for my Brown Pelican, but still no luck.

NOVEMBER

So into 'rarity season' at 347 species. It seemed like I was close to breaking the record back in June and then had crawled along, seemingly no closer to the record, ever since. I still needed six more species, and perhaps a couple of spares just in case. As I looked over the prospects, absent pelagic birds (which I never got in any case), I'd really need a spectacular crop of goodies to show up in New York if I was going to break that 352 mark. And we did indeed get a spectacular crop of November rarities....

On the vagrant front I ran up to Canastota for a Harris's Sparrow, and to Athens for a Western Tanager. I got Virginia's Warbler (!) and Painted Bunting in Queens, and Northern Lapwing and Brewer's Blackbird at Montauk. Both

ends of Long Island were producing at once, and who knows what we might have had if the *Sandy*-damaged beaches had been open to birders.

Ironically, with all these high profile vagrants, my 352nd species (tying the record) was Pine Grosbeak and my (record breaking) 353rd species was Dovekie. Both good birds, but neither a vagrant per se. The Dovekie, part of a very good year for this species at Montauk so far, came on November 24th and was a huge relief. I was birding with Derek Rogers and we 'high-fived' in the parking lot at Montauk Inlet. After slogging away all summer/fall, the November spurt hurled me over the record very quickly so it felt very strange to not be chasing that number after so many months of looking at it stubbornly staying out of reach.

DECEMBER

And so into the home stretch with 356 species and still time to add a few more to 'put it out of reach'.

I did try to get out to sea on fishing boats but had four December trips cancel for lack of bookings. Pelagic birds really did become the big gap in my list this year with five or six additional species left on the table due to my less than impressive pelagic effort. I did, however, manage to catch up with a Brown Pelican (no-one expects to get their year Brown Pelican in December) thus avoiding an embarrassing miss for the year. I also got to catch up with another long-time nemesis bird, one which I had chased and dipped often including two painful missed already this year, when Corey Finger gifted me a LeConte's Sparrow in Queens.

With the year waning, and my enthusiasm fading as thoughts turned to next year, I did still manage to summon the energy to chase a few more things. A Tufted Duck in western Suffolk County was a quick run, but a Townsend's Solitaire in Seneca County wasn't. Finally on December 28th I ran up to Lake Placid to add Hoary Redpoll, giving me my 361st and last NYS year bird of 2012.

And so I was all done and I wondered what it will feel like on January 1st not having a New York Big Year to work on. Although I'll be honest and say that this project was a bit of chore at times, especially during the summer, overall it was a wonderful experience. I saw a lot of really neat birds, got to visit some great places, and met a lot of really interesting people. It was a terrific way to get back into birding in the Northeast after years where my only serious birding was done on vacations to the far-flung corners of the world. I learned a ton, and was slowly getting back up to speed in terms of birding skills. Was it worth doing?...yes, absolutely. Would I do it again?...hell no.

—Monday, December 31, 2012

Some random stats, thoughts and observations from the 2012 Big Year.

I birded (as in posted one or more eBird checklists) on 285 days in 2012. This may be a bit of an understatement as I wasn't always as good an eBirder as I should be.

I saw 361 species in New York State.

That was 95.5% of the 378 species seen this year in New York State (per eBird at year end). Which means I missed 17 species seen by others.

With a little more effort and organization, I should have been able to get four or five more. With luck, who knows?—I do believe that 375 is possible in a year in New York State.

I cheated on New York State only four times—Brown Booby and Crested Caracara in New Jersey, Wood Sandpiper (dipped) in Rhode Island, and a week in the Turks & Caicos.

I birded in 34 of New York State's 62 counties and drove through a bunch more.

Even though I got around a fair bit, the bulk of my birding time was really concentrated in three areas—New York City/Long Island, the Adirondacks/St. Lawrence, and the Montezuma/Rochester area. Almost all the birds I saw this year were in one of these three 'corners' of the State.

I drove approximately 40,000 miles by car, and took 10 boat trips in search of birds.

I stayed in a lot of Marriott Hotels, and ate way too much food at service areas on I87 and I90.

I have still never seen Niagara Falls or been to the Statue of Liberty.

THE MISSES

Despite everyone seemingly thinking that I "saw everything" I actually missed a lot. Some birds I couldn't really try for but there were plenty of "dips" where I drove, often many hours, and failed to see a bird reported previously by others (Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in Rochester, Franklin's Gull in Niagara, White Pelican near Buffalo, Slaty-backed Gull at Newburgh, Brown Pelican on Staten Island, Le Conte's Sparrow in Brooklyn, Le Conte's Sparrow near Ithaca, Say's Phoebe on Fire Island, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on Jones Beach, Gray Partridge near Perch River, etc., etc.). There were also birds I spent a lot of time looking for and did not see; three in particular absorbed huge numbers of miles, hours, and mosquito bites (Yellow Rail, Black Rail and Gray Partridge). And then there are the birds that I could have seen but didn't get to for logistical reasons (Red Phalarope, Northern Fulmar, Atlantic Puffin, etc.). No one can see everything but I certainly had my share of heart-breaking misses....

THE 'NON-BIRDS'

During the year I did see quite a few other vertebrate species (I really don't keep lists on invertebrates). Among the mammals I saw a Northern Right Whale, several Humpback Whales, a Minke Whale and lots of Common and Bottle-nosed Dolphins. I also had a Black Bear, several Coyotes, Red and Gray Foxes, and lots of smaller critters. I saw surprisingly few herps, which suggests perhaps that herp-watching requires a different focus from bird-watching. Among the best things herp-wise were four species of sea turtle (Leatherback, Green, Loggerhead and Kemp's Ridley), my life (!) Wood Turtle, and the scarce Eastern Tiger Salamander. I didn't really keep a 'fish list' but several breaching Basking

Sharks were quite a spectacle as were a group of Bluefin Tuna feeding on baitfish on the surface.

THANK YOU

In no particular order, big thanks to the many people who helped in some way with the Big Year. So thanks Andrew Baksh for finding me a bunch of birds and keeping on my case as I flagged this summer. To Greg Lawrence for the Niagara Frontier, and Joan Collins for the Adirondacks. To Richard Fried for being such a good egg all year as I chased and then beat his hard-fought record. To Corey Finger, Benjamin Van Doren, Angus Wilson, Shai Mitra, Patricia Lindsay, Tom Burke, Isaac Grant, Peter Polshek, Jim Ash, Hugh McGuinness, Andy Guthrie, Derek Rogers, Bob Adamo, Willie D'Anna, Paul Guris, Jacob Drucker, Larry Master, Mark Manske, Chris Wood, Jay McGowan, Matt Young, Luke Tiller and the many, many other birders who shared information or helped with advice and counsel. To the eBird reviewers for putting up with my onslaught of records from all over the state and my utter lack of expertise in all sorts of places. To Steve N. G. Howell, Ned Brinkley and Michael O'Brien for the seabird help. To Philip Dempsey and Michael Duffy for being enablers and producing bourbon and bacon at strategic moments. And last of course to my partner Ryan for putting up with the insane goat-rodeo that a Big Year inflicts on a home and family life—I promise, I'm done.

