

Birding

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AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION



The Next Big Thing:
Laura Keene's
Photographic
Big Year



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About *Birding* Magazine

Birding is the bimonthly members' magazine of the American Birding Association. Coverage in *Birding* extends to all topics having to do with the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of wild birds and their habitats. Identification, conservation, and basic biology are major thematic emphases for *Birding*. Along with *Birding*, all ABA members receive the quarterly magazine *Birder's Guide*, with each issue focusing on a particular theme or topic.

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Birding and the ABA provide a wide array of e-resources for the association's membership, as well as for the broader birding community. Get access to all ABA publications, including *Birding*, at aba.org/magazine. From there, you are just one click away from the current issue of *Birding* (including expanded online content) and a complete run of all recent issues of *Birding*. Also get access to *Birder's Guide* (all issues) and *North American Birds* (subscriber username required), plus The ABA Blog, the American Birding podcast, Listing Central, and classified ads.

Instructions for Contributors

Birding welcomes contributions from all members of the birding community. We solicit contributions on anything having to do with wild birds and their habitats, and we particularly favor contributions that focus on North America, the joy of birding, and nature study in the digital era. If you are interested in contributing, an excellent first step is to acquaint yourself with *Birding* and the ABA membership. Browse *Birding* Online (aba.org/magazine) to view recent content. Then contact Editor Ted Floyd (tfloyd@aba.org) with an idea or proposal, and we'll go from there.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



◀ **Laura Keene** is an avid birder and photographer from Mason, Ohio. A clinical pharmacist by profession, in 2016 she followed her dream and did an ABA Area Big Year, in which she set a record of 792 photographed species. Laura is the former Photo Editor of *The Ohio Cardinal*, and her wildlife photography has been published in multiple outlets.



Formerly a contemporary painter and instructor at the Rhode Island School of Design, **Catherine Hamilton** is now a full-time bird artist and a Birding Ambassador with Zeiss Sports Optics. Catherine is forever on the road, wandering far afield to study, paint, and protect birds.

She chronicles her continuing adventures at Birdspot (mydogoscar.com/birdspot). ▶

◀ **Eric VanderWerf** is the founder and Director of Science of Pacific Rim Conservation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to studying and conserving birds in the Pacific Ocean region. He holds a Ph.D. in Zoology and has authored over 100 scientific papers and books. An expert birder and bird photographer, Eric is Chair of the Hawaii Bird Records Committee.



Greg Neise got interested in birds as a kid growing up near Chicago's Lincoln Park. At the age of 13, he worked alongside ornithologist William S. Beecher, then Director of the Chicago Academy of Sciences. Greg is a web developer with the ABA, Editor of the *Big Day & List Report*, and a fanatical birder. ▶

◀ **John Weigel** has accumulated a lifetime of nature-related adventures—including a recent ABA Area Big Year—from his home base at the Australian Reptile Park, north of Sydney. When not birding, John devotes most of his energy to the development of ambitious conservation initiatives aimed at stemming Australia's mammal extinction crisis.

Noah Strycker (noahstrycker.com) is Associate Editor of *Birding* and the author of four books about birds. He broke the world Big Year record in 2015, and relates the experience in his book *Birding Without Borders*. Based in Oregon, Noah also works as a naturalist guide on expedition cruises to Antarctica and Svalbard. ▶



◀ **Tony Leukering** is an ornithologist based in the Tampa Bay, Florida, area with strong interests in bird migration, distribution, and identification. Tony runs the ABA's online photo quiz, is a member of the Colorado Bird Records Committee, and reviews Colorado and Wyoming eBird data. He is interested in most everything else that flies, particularly moths and odonates.



Benjamin Hack is a senior at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He has been birding for 10 years, and began birding by kayak five years ago. Benjamin has attended the ABA's Camp Colorado and is an active member of the Washtenaw Audubon Society, regularly leading walks and giving presentations. ▶

◀ **Ellen Paul** is Executive Director of the Ornithological Council, a consortium of 11 scientific societies of ornithologists in the Western Hemisphere. She lives to bird and regrets having wasted the first 31 years of her life engaging in non-birding activity. She plans to make up for it in her next life.

Charlotte Wasylik has been a birder since age nine, when American Goldfinches at the feeder sparked her interest. Formative experiences were Young Ornithologists' Workshops at both Long Point Bird Observatory, Ontario, and Beaverhill Bird Observatory, Alberta. Having recently completed her post-secondary studies, Charlotte is working in international agricultural marketing but always keeps her binoculars handy. ▶



◀ Birder by passion and environmental scientist by training, **Dragan Simić** is an ecotourism consultant, a field researcher, and a nature blogger at *10,000 Birds*. He's a bird guide and a guy who always thinks that birding must be better around the next bend in the road, and that the best bird ever is...the next lifer.





Records Broken, Friends Made, Places Visited, Birds Seen

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Reflections on an ABA Area Big Year in the Age of the Internet

By keeping his foot firmly planted on the accelerator pedal right through the year and making sleep the first casualty of every “should I?” decision, John Weigel managed to hang onto a lead in the all-important count of ABA Code 3–5 species. At the same time, he had to whittle away at the imposing list of relatively more common species. Here he photographs a White-tailed Ptarmigan, a regularly occurring species that nevertheless requires considerable time and effort to track down.

Photo by © John Weigel.

Every New Year's Day, a subset of overly enthusiastic birdwatchers starts out on a yearlong mission to encounter as many bird species as possible within set geographic areas. These zealots typically grab their binoculars and kiss their partners goodbye well before sunrise to optimally kickstart their year lists within the bounds of their chosen patch or region. Big Years are most often restricted to counties or states, but can comprise any designated area—up to the size of planet Earth. Perhaps the best-known of these endeavors is the ABA Area Big Year, in which contestants attempt to encounter a maximum number of bird species within the ABA's defined region.

The 2016 ABA Area Big Year contest proved to be particularly poignant with the annexure of Hawaii into the ABA Area in late October of that year, expanding the region to include all of the U.S. and Canada. Of additional note was the exceptional level of competition, with four serious participants in the running. The decision to throw my own hat into the ring came on the back of my two Australian Big Years in 2012 and 2014, when I searched the great island continent, its offshore waters, and scattered territorial islands for a treasure trove of bird species, yielding a record 770 species in 2014. Exploring wild places for birds had become something I just couldn't seem to get enough of, and I cast my gaze across the Pacific to my North American homeland.

Making my way to the U.S. Customs counter at Los Angeles International Airport two days in front of the New Year, and on the back of a 14-hour flight from Sydney, Australia, I was tired, but buoyant. My long-planned North American adventure was about to commence. This, I anticipated, would be my year of years, and I was quietly confident of giving the ABA Area Big Year record of 749 species a decent nudge. After all, when Neil Hayward set that mark three years earlier to eclipse Sandy Komito's 15-year-long record, he did so in challenging circumstances. He hadn't made the decision to ramp up his early year birding activities to a full-blown ABA Area Big Year until well into April—too late to tick off a number of early short-stopping rare vagrants, and too late to plan for a springtime Attu Island trip, generally thought of as essential for serious ABA Area Big Year birders. Komito's record run had benefitted from a spectacular influx of off-course Asian migratory bird species during his lengthy springtime sojourn on the remote Aleutian island.

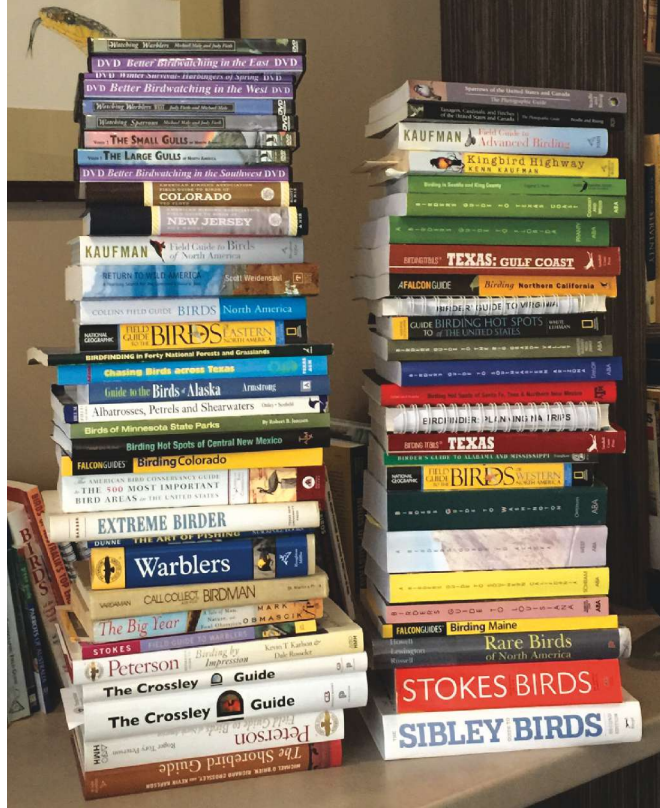
The polite demeanor of the U.S. Customs agent descended to a scowl after scanning my passport and studying his computer screen. Maybe it was my ex-pat status—I'd surrendered my U.S. citizenship decades ago as a wide-eyed 23-year-old in pursuit of the Australian dream. Or maybe it was the lengthy one-year travel visa stamped in my Australian passport—twice the usual limit. Whatever the reason, as would happen twice again in the coming months when returning to the U.S. from brief birding trysts to Canada, my reception was less than cordial. On each occasion, I was escorted to a private room and asked to explain my citizenship history—and what exactly a “Big Year” of birding is.

“So, there’s no cash prize or trophy if you win?” I tried to make the best of the undeniable triviality of the thing: “Ever seen *The Big Year* movie—the one with Jack Black and the two other funny guys? Yes? Well, that’s what I’m doing, only maybe not so funny.” I was eventually cleared on each occasion to board my connecting flights on time.

Pumped with excitement and purpose, I commenced my North American birding odyssey six hours into the new year, at Riverside Park in Yuma, Arizona. I hadn't slept much in my two-star "downtown" Yuma lodging overnight owing to the sporadic launch of fireworks, seemingly straight overhead, that extended well past midnight. I parked and joined a growing assemblage of anxious birders in near-dark conditions.

"Seen it?"
"Not

“Not yet.” I kept to myself and scanned the dull red horizon while my mind wandered far away, as is my wont. This was Yuma, after all, of *3:10 to Yuma* fame—the film in which



During his travels across the ABA Area, the author celebrated many of the wild and varied places that he'd read about in Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher's extraordinary *Wild America* in his youth—and more recently in all of the books and blogs subsequently produced by ABA Area Big Year birders. *Photo by © John Weigel.*

Russell Crowe's cool-headed, gun-slinging character meets every challenge head on with deadly aim. A covey of Gambel's Quail shuffled between clumps of shrubbery in the dim light. With the lead male captured in my binocular view, I imagined Crowe's lightning-fast draw: *bang bang!* A small flock of American Robins flew overhead (*bang bang!*). Sunrise brought with it a surge of bird activity among the park's shrubs and trees, from a tiny Anna's Hummingbird to a Gila Woodpecker, while

House Finches and White-crowned Sparrows hopped about on grassy patches below. With the realization that my North American Big Year was finally under way, I began to relax and have fun.

"Here it comes!" I turned and locked onto the incoming brightly colored missile, just as it swept up and landed in a mulberry tree, 50 feet ahead. The flush of excitement was electric, as was my relief that the persistent overnight fireworks hadn't chased the itinerant Streak-backed Oriole back to its native Mexico. Views of the orange, black, and yellow bird in the bright morning sun were rea-

With the addition late in 2016 of Hawaii to the ABA Area, three of the four Big Year birders headed out to the Aloha State. Laura Keene and John Weigel joined forces on the islands in early December to accomplish a 10-day whirlwind frenzy of Hawaiian birding that yielded 52 species. Left to right: John Weigel, Christian Hagenlocher, Laura Keene.

Photo courtesy of John Weigel.



sonable, and the gallery was pleased. Stakeout birding mightn't be widely accepted as *real* birding, but the thrill of the payoff is undeniable. Before moving on, I looked around and wondered if any of the other high-fivers might be launching their own dedicated year of North American birding. After all, Arizona was the only U.S. state currently flaunting three ABA Area rare bird species (Codes 3, 4, and 5 on the ABA's 1–5 scale). The Streak-backed Oriole is a Code 4 species, signifying that it is reported less than annually, but at least once every 10 years or so.

With the hope of locating the second of three desired Code 3+ birds for the day, I pushed my midsize rental car to the legal speed limit on eastbound Interstate Highway 8 toward Tucson. The “stay right” handwritten note taped to my dashboard would accompany me through my first two weeks on the road while I made the transition to American driving conditions. My next stop was Catalina State Park, an outstanding patch of Sonora Desert habitat with impressive stands of giant saguaro cactus. Although the park supports a wide range of bird species, my singular focus was a Rufous-backed Robin that had been sighted near the main parking lot regularly over the past two weeks. Like the Yuma Streak-backed Oriole, this species is only irregularly reported north of the Mexican border. However, because it is reported within the ABA Area annually, it carries the lower rarity classification of Code 3. Perhaps due to the distraction of the sizable crowds, the robin wasn't at



A **Black-throated Blue Warbler** pauses on migration at Fort Jefferson at the end of the Florida Keys. *Photo by © John Weigel.*

its established patch at the start of the popular Nature Trail. I searched the surrounding area for nearly two hours before another birder told me he'd just seen the bird. He directed me to a brushy area that I'd searched earlier, and this time I had no trouble finding the Rufous-backed Robin mixing happily with several very similar American Robins in the pleasant mid-afternoon conditions.

Considerably later than planned, I embarked on my third

The author, with wife Robyn, rode out the final days of 2016 searching the scenic countryside of Alaska's Adak Island. *Photo by © John Weigel.*



mission of the day, heading south to Madera Canyon, miraculously escaping traffic infringement notices, as they are euphemistically termed in my adoptive Australia home. Anyhow, I arrived at Florida Wash with almost a full hour of sunlight remaining. This final objective was a pair of Code 3 Black-capped Gnatcatchers that had reportedly taken up permanent residence at the site. Although I managed to find and photograph a furtive gnatcatcher in the failing light, later examination of the images revealed the extensive under-tail markings of a Code 1 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. Still, I was confident of connecting with the desired species the next morning (I didn't), and remained more than pleased with the two ABA Area rarities that I'd encountered. My first day species count stood at a paltry 23—a humbling indictment of my inexperience with the overwintering Southwest birds—something I vowed to work on in the coming weeks.

By nightfall, I'd checked into my motel room and poured myself a celebratory glass of Fireball—the addictive cinnamon-flavored whiskey that perhaps fortunately hasn't yet become affordable in Australia. Life was good! I'd made the transition from a long and uncertain year of planning to the start of a huge and promising adventure doing the very thing I loved most.

My strategy for the early weeks of the year was simple: devote all available energy and resources to chasing coded bird



Throughout the year, the author faced his demons and got out to sea as often as possible. From outboard punts to the elevated decks of cruise liners, he saw many incredible birds, headlined by 20 species of alcids, from tiny elusive Whiskered Auklets to adorable Tufted Puffins. Photo by © John Weigel.

species that would be new to my list, responding quickly to all credible reports. The resulting period of intensive and almost nonstop travel continued well beyond the two-to-three-week timeframe I'd anticipated, delaying my Stage 2 plan to seek out a high proportion of the common overwintering species within the region. That pursuit would have to wait until the end of the year. This unblinking prioritization of rare bird species had been the foundation of Sandy Komito's 1998 ABA Area Big Year record run, as recounted in his book *I Came, I Saw, I Counted*, and was a principle first suggested to me by birding guide John Puschock during my early planning.

At the close of January, my year list stood at a modest 248 species, well behind the leading mark of competing South Dakota medical doctor Olaf Danielson, who had amassed an impressive 406 species. Crucially, though, my list included 27 coded species, seven in front of the competition, and nearly double the hitherto best first month result by an ABA Area Big Year birder. My continuing resolve to not miss rare bird opportunities set the tone of what would unfold as the biggest of Big Years.

After mid-March, when the rare bird reports mercifully slowed, I was finally able to spend more satisfying periods birding in the iconic American birding hotspots that had drawn me to that crazy year of



The 2016 Attu Island enthusiasts included (left to right): John Weigel, Puk Uk Captain Billy Choate, Brandon Reo, and Neil Hayward. Photo by © Christian Hagenlocher.



The **Atlantic Puffin** is breeding in increasing numbers at Eastern Egg Island, Maine, where the species was artificially re-established in 1973. *Photo by © John Weigel.*



This red diamondback rattlesnake struck the boot of Johnny Bovee while he and the author were stalking Lawrence's Goldfinches at the San Jacinto Wildlife Area, California. *Photo by © John Weigel.*

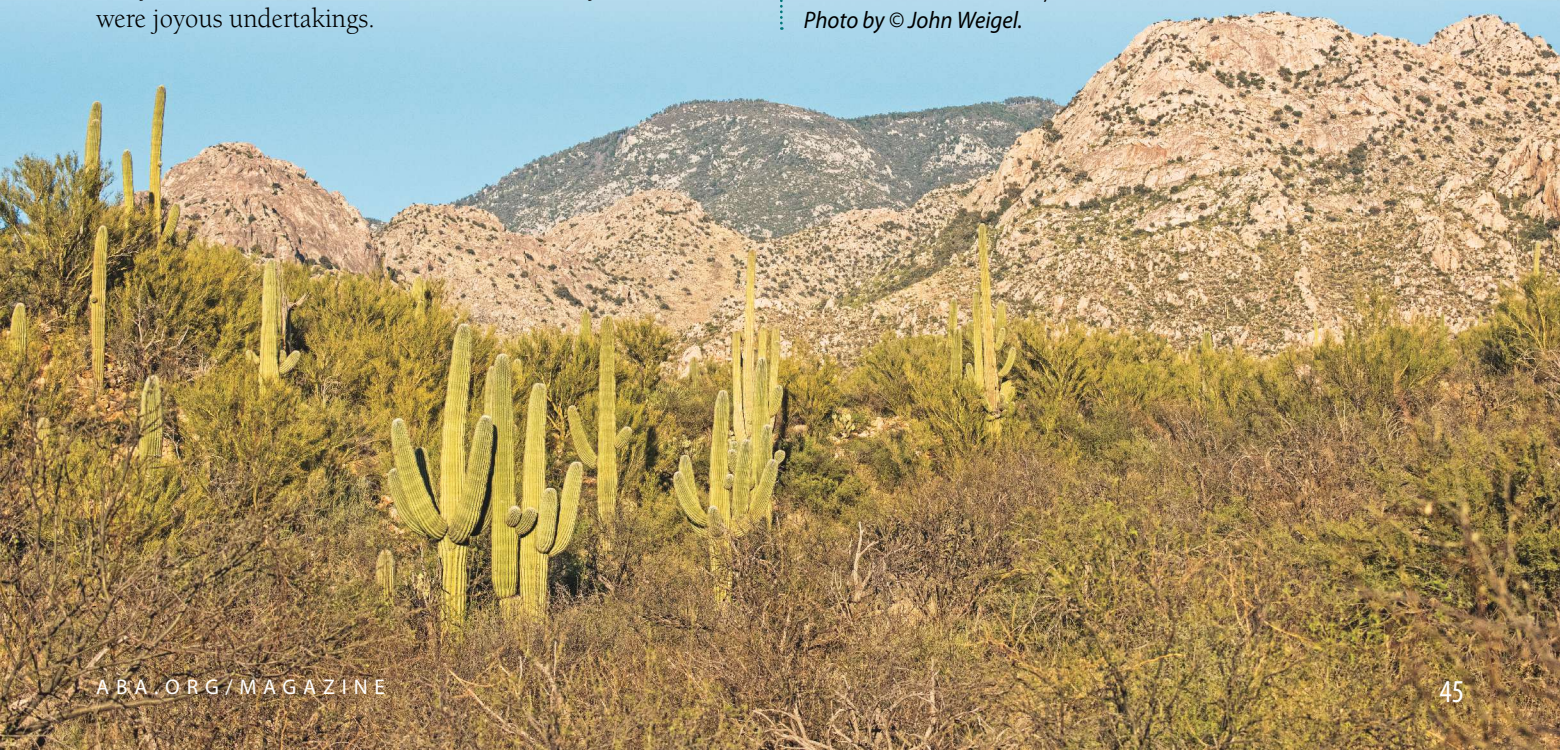
birding in the first place. These were the places highlighted in the books and blogs of earlier Big Year birders. I'd read so much about these wild places during my year of preparation that my first visits sometimes felt more like happy reunions than explorations. The depth and diversity of birding hotspots in both Texas and Arizona could justify year-long birding missions on their own. California, with its mountains, deserts, and chaparral, was chock full of Western bird species, and the northward drive into the Pacific Northwest yielded plenty more. Throughout the gamebird havens of Colorado, the rugged landscapes of Alaska, and the species-rich bogs and prairies of Minnesota and the Dakotas, the birds and their magnificent habitats captured my spirit. I took whatever time was available to soak in the character of these wild places, while my year list grew. Traditional single-bird missions, like the hike into Big Bend National Park in west Texas to connect with seasonal Colima Warblers, and the pre-dawn climb to the elevated lakes of the Ruby Mountains of Nevada in search of Himalayan Snowcocks, were joyous undertakings.

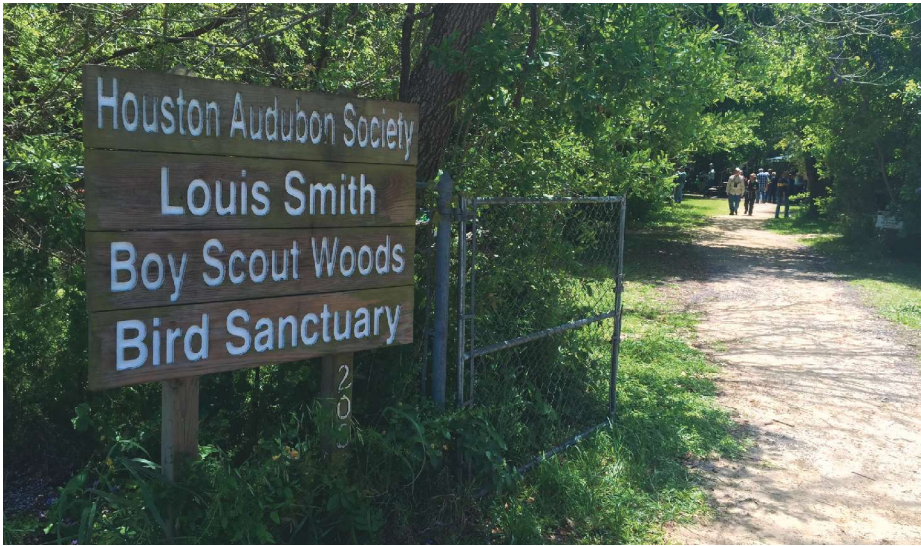
One of the harsh realities for ABA Area Big Year birders is the brevity of spring migration, when concentrations of northbound birds fleetingly and unpredictably stop to rest and feed along the southern and coastal boundaries of the ABA Area. To complicate matters, this is also an important time to visit the westernmost Alaskan islands in order to intercept wayward Asian migrants and vagrants. This relatively short period, from early April to mid-June, is a make-or-break time for year listers, who must cover a frightening amount of ground (and water) within a constricted timeframe. During my own springtime birding blitz, I grudgingly sacrificed flexibility in my plans to accommodate scheduled pelagic birding trips off both coasts, along with participation in organized birding trips to the Bering Sea islands.

To my good fortune, a rare springtime opportunity to visit

Big Year birding in the ABA area means spending time in many of North America's most spectacular places, such as scenic Catalina State Park, Arizona.

Photo by © John Weigel.





A birder's paradise during spring migration, this is the legendary Boy Scout Woods on High Island, Texas. Photo by © John Weigel.

Attu Island popped up during the second half of May, courtesy of Zugunruhe Birding Tours. This gave me the best chance for encountering predominantly Asian bird species, and proved to be a highlight of my birding year. The extraordinary mix of gutsy birders led by John Puschock and Big Year record holder Neil Hayward included two other birders on the ABA Area Big Year trail: pharmacist Laura Keene and 27-year-old biology teacher Christian Hagenlocher. By the time we'd safely returned to the mainland, I counted all four of these above-named characters as friends and kindred spirits, and was thrilled to occasionally

cross paths with each of them through the remainder of the year.

As the months gradually passed, the list of potential ticks for my bird list shrunk correspondingly, and was at last extinguished in mid-December with the sighting of a small flock of Smith's Longspurs outside of Norman, Oklahoma. My wife, Robyn, had joined me for the last two weeks of the year—her fifth visit of the year. We decided to risk missing any last-minute rare bird arrivals to the mainland in favor of seeing out the year on remote Adak Island—a thousand miles out along the chain of Aleutian Islands. John Puschock had relayed a story from an Adak local that an

all-white swan had been seen on one of the island's many lakes in late November. The hope was that this might be a super-hot Code 3 Whooper Swan—not a nearly identical, but much more common Tundra Swan or Trumpeter Swan. There was cause for optimism, because Whoopers had been known to overwinter on the island in small numbers—most recently in late 2013.

There are only two weekly flights to Adak Island (from anywhere), and these are often cancelled due to wild weather. Fortunately for Robyn and me, Adak's final scheduled flight of the year overcame pessimistic weather forecasts to set out from Anchorage on time, giving us a bit over two days to search the accessible portions of the island. Clear and calm conditions, rare at that time of year, persisted throughout our stay, yielding



A rare visitor to the "Lower 48," this **Ivory Gull** made a winter visit to Duluth, Minnesota, to the delight of many ABA birders. Photo by © John Weigel.



The Ohio-based *Biggest Week in American Birding* provided an unforgettable highlight to the author's big American birding adventure. Photo by © R. Bruce Richardson.



A visit to Beatty's Guest Ranch, Miller Canyon, Arizona, yielded this **Spotted Owl**. Photo by © John Weigel.



The aptly named **White-crowned Sparrow** proved relatively easy to identify. However, the author faced a steep learning curve with the 34 other species called "sparrow" he identified during his Big Year. Photo by © John Weigel.

stunning views of snowclad mountains with associated rivers and lakes, within the backdrop of the dark and ominous Bering Sea. Although I couldn't think of any better place to end my ABA Area Big Year, optimism for a *eureka!* finish faded with the completion of each three-hour circuit of the island's accessible lakes. By late afternoon on New Year's Eve, it looked as if the mystery swan of Adak had moved on.

As the final sunlit hour of our swan search commenced, things weren't looking good for Team Australia. One last approach to Clam Lagoon gave a tantalizing but too-brief look at a hovering kestrel before it disappeared behind the massive roadside sand dune, most likely a Code 5 Eurasian Kestrel. This was the last thing I'd expected, and it took too long to gather my wits, binoculars, and camera, and climb to the top of the dune. A dedicated search of the area the next morning also failed to relocate it. By the time we resumed driving, the setting sun

threatened to end my epic year with an empty feeling arising from the missed kestrel. A drive up the western edge of Clam Lagoon yielded a raft of 70 Emperor Geese near the shoreline and a range of other waterfowl species, but no sizable white spots on the water. Onward for a final scan of Palisades Lake: nothing. One last scope view across Haven Lake: nothing. A final drive up the western side of Lake Andrew, and: swans! As a final reward for a year of perseverance, three otherworldly Whooper Swans, a pair of adults with one juvenile, glided majestically, and I thought befittingly, near the middle of the two-mile-long lake during the closing minutes of daylight for 2016.

The Whooper Swans represented my 111th ABA Code 3, 4, or 5 bird species encountered within the continental ABA Area, 25 ahead of Sandy Komito's 1998 result—a statistic that was once considered unsurpassable. My total species tally for the year, including all of the Codes 1 and 2 species, was 783—a crazy 34 ahead of the previous record, but only narrowly

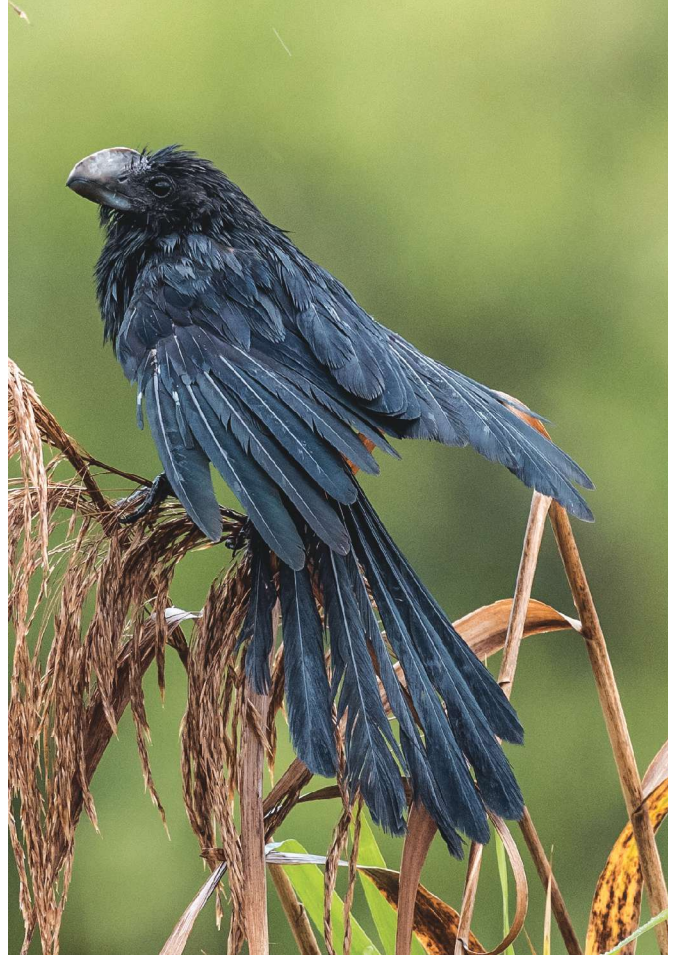
This is the legendary birding mecca of Attu Island—and the man who put it back on the ABA's birding radar: John Puschock. Photo by © John Weigel.



Bird or dinosaur? This **Smooth-billed Ani** from Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, Florida, was trying to dry itself between intermittent rain showers. *Photo by © John Weigel.*

staving off Olaf Danielson's final tally of 778 species. With my Hawaiian sightings ratified in late 2017, the inaugural record for the new ABA Area was set at 835 species, with Danielson just six species behind. In addition to the big South Dakotan and me, both Laura Keene and Christian Hagenlocher also surpassed the old ABA Area Big Year record. Keene's 763 species for the old ABA Area, as impressive as that total is, perhaps is overshadowed by the fact that she managed to photograph 747 species—obliterating the previous record by well over 100 species! With the inclusion of Hawaii, she saw 815 species, of which she photographed a mind-blowing total 792. Hagenlocher finished the year with a tally of 752 species, surpassing the previous record by three. This is an especially impressive result

The introduced North American population of the Himalayan Snowcock is confined to the rugged and stunning Ruby Mountains, Nevada. *Photo by © John Weigel.*





The author poses atop the world, at the Puu O Kila lookout, Kauai, Hawaii, after the ABA membership voted the Aloha State into its defined area. Photo by © Laura Keene.


considering that he achieved it under the duress of the severe financial constraints of a young man, and the need to periodically shelve his birding progress to take on odd jobs to keep his head above water.


I'm able to look back now through the intensely demanding 366 days of 2016 and fully identify with the compelling accounts of earlier ABA Area Big Year birders like Neil Hayward, John Vanderpoel, Jay Lehman, and Lynn Barber, who described their special years in terms of great adventures, amazing wildlife, and treasured new friendships. Despite the unrelenting constraints of time, the birds, which I inevitably fell in love with, drew me to many extraordinary wild places within the ABA Area, and, ultimately, to lasting friendships. This was a truly Big Year, perhaps the biggest of my life, and I am deeply grateful for having been blessed with the opportunity to live it. Although I still have much to learn about identifying an embarrassing proportion of the sparrows and gulls, and might casually pretend to not notice *Empidonax* flycatchers when in the company of better birders, I feel a genuine affinity for the birds of North America. I've already made four return trips! And I plan on making many more.

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