



The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession

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Every January 1, a quirky crowd storms out across North America for a spectacularly competitive event called a Big Year -- a grand, expensive, and occasionally vicious 365-day marathon of birdwatching. For three men in particular, 1998 would become a grueling battle for a new North American birding record. Bouncing from coast to coast on frenetic pilgrimages for once-in-a-lifetime rarities, they brave broiling deserts, bug-infested swamps, and some of the lumpiest motel mattresses known to man. This unprecedented year of beat-the-clock adventures ultimately leads one man to a record so gigantic that it is unlikely ever to be bested. Here, prize-winning journalist Mark Obmascik creates a dazzling, fun narrative of the 275,000-mile odyssey of these three obsessives as they fight to win the greatest -- or maybe worst -- birding contest of all time.

The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession Details

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David says

An awesome book. It took recommendations from several friends before I finally decided to give this book a try. The subject matter seemed so uninteresting to me.

When you're wrong, you're wrong, and I was totally off base on this one. It was fascinating from start to finish. What I realise now is that books like this one, which document someone's obsession (doesn't have to be the author's) often turn out to be completely engrossing, if the author (as Obmascik does) succeeds in conveying the inherent excitement in a topic that gave rise to the obsession in the first place.

Never thought I would say it about a book related to birding, but I just cannot give this book a high enough recommendation.

Bookslut says

What a great book. It's hard to say what I loved more, the book or the movie. This gives me a renewed sense of hope about nonfiction.

Juliann Wetz says

I doubt anyone would ever guess that I'd read this book. I found it on the clearance table at Barnes & Noble, and since I had a gift card burning a hole in my pocket, I thought - why not?

I am 100 pages into the book. It is part memoir, part travel expedition, part field guide, and part history. I found it interesting that James Audubon started out on his birding journey from right here in Cincinnati, Ohio. I'm surprised that's not played up more around here.

I chuckled just a few pages in when it described "warbler's neck":

Komito tilted back his head to scan the highest mesquite branches. His neck was so accustomed to this exercise that it had bulged in size from fourteen and a half inches to seventeen inches. Among birders, this peculiar condition was known as warbler neck -- spending too much time looking up at treetops for darting songbirds.

That's when I knew I was hooked. I may not have much interest in birds, but I absolutely love learning about subcultures I never really knew existed.

Pat says

I have a new respect for the sport of birding and the people who devote themselves to it. Now I get to see the

movie!

Robert says

Liked this book a lot. Very close to 5*. One of those rare books where really want to see the film. Feel maybe better

Gustine says

The topic of the "big year" is really quite compelling, and I thought this book would take its place on my shelf right next to *The Orchid Thief*, in the section reserved for obsessives who focus solely on one aspect of the natural world and seek that single thing with complete devotion. Unfortunately, the writing in this book is nowhere near the quality of *The Orchid Thief*, and doesn't deserve a spot on my shelf at all! First, the good things: The three birders featured are exactly right for the book. The author sort of succeeded in teaching the reader about birds, their environment, and birding. (He's about 70 percent there.) Most importantly, he clearly explains why 1998 is the year that MUST be covered, even though it was a decade ago.

But the writing! He needs to learn how to describe an animal without using ANY references to pop culture. He needs to understand that in a book about birding, the reader does NOT want constant references to media and commercialization.

Here are specific examples of bad writing that distracted me so much I almost didn't finish the book:

1. The pygmy owl "weighed less than a pack of cigarettes." Is the author a heavy smoker with no concept of the fact that most nature lovers (his market for the book) think smoking is disgusting? It's especially disgusting in nature. Now he has combined, in my mind, the image of a cute little owl in a tree with a rude creep blowing smoke next to the owl's tree, with a disgusting, overflowing ash tray next to him. There are SO many other, far less distasteful, ways to describe the owl's weight.

2. "...the keel-billed toucan, that screeching, big-honkered bird made famous by Froot Loops." I almost threw the book across the room right here. I am mortally offended that the author thinks I, or anybody else who would buy this book, might not remember what a toucan is without a crass comparison to a stupid commercial for a repulsive product that nobody should be eating anyway. This is a book about BIRDS. I really, really don't want to be reminded of commercials! And everybody buying this book knows what a toucan is! Don't worry, we're not complete idiots! Also, the word "honker" is unnecessarily disrespectful. Toucans have beautiful and correctly sized beaks, and there is no need to use a disparaging, fifth-grade insult such as "honker." Things like this make me think the author doesn't like birds. That is a serious problem for an author writing a birding book.

3. "The yellow rail was the Greta Garbo of the bird world." This means nothing to me. I know she was a movie star (1950s? '60s? '40s?), but that's the extent of my knowledge. That is the crux of the problem. When an author relies on constant references to outdated movie stars to explain a concept, he leaves behind all the readers who don't share his media obsession. Five sentences later, "the yellow rail would never win any Miss Congeniality contests." Is this an unnecessary reference to that stupid movie years ago by the same name? Or is the author being mean and insulting to birds again?

4. "Maybe this really was a Bud Light commercial." Please leave all the commercials out of the birding book! Likewise, please note: brand names cheapen a book, they don't add "authenticity" or "flavor" or whatever it is that some inexperienced teachers call it in their writing classes. The following brand-name plugs all insulted me in the short space of just ten pages: Snickers, Wal-Mart, Spam, Wonder Bread, Jif peanut butter, Lipton, Mr. Salty pretzels. And if that's not bad enough, I later suffered this, probably the worst sentence in the entire book, or any other book I've read in the last year: "Miller clicked his Netscape Navigator back over to www.travelocity.com."

5. The bird was "...as tall as a Coke can but without the fizz." With regard to comparing a bird to junk food, I'm thinking again that the author doesn't really respect birds. With regard to putting in a plug for Coke, see #4. With regard to "the fizz," I have no idea what the author is trying to say. That completely mystifies me.

6. "He wasn't supposed to feel like Evel Knievel every time a bill came due." What the hell?!

I was particularly disappointed because there's actually a great deal of potential for this book due to its subject matter and characters. If I could have offered advice prior to its publication, it would have been this: The author should first decide whether or not he loves birds. If so, he should show that in his writing. Then, he should remove every movie star, media reference, and brand name. He should add more background information on specific birds and their environment. He should provide the American Birding Association's list of rules for the Big Year (I was wondering about this throughout the entire book). He should read *The Orchid Thief* and learn from it. Then, this would be a fabulous book!

Melki says

Welcome to the world of Competitive Birdwatching!

Nope, I didn't know there was such a thing either.

And not to sound sexist, but leave it to MEN to turn the gentle pastime of enjoying our feathered friends - into a pissing contest!

This book chronicles the adventures of three men competing to get the highest bird count in one year. From the Dry Tortugas to Attu, these guys spare no expense - braving horrific weather and gut-churning boat trips, all in the hopes of catching a glimpse of a rare bird.

The author does a nice job of introducing the men and explaining how they became interested in birdwatching. He also touches briefly on the history of birding, though I'm not sure even *Audubon* and *Roger Tory Peterson* were as obsessed as these guys.

The book is fast paced and it's easy to get caught up in the excitement as the year draws to a close and the counts grow ever higher. All the same, I think I'll stay home, and stick with watching whatever happens to show up at my back yard feeders.

Don Osterhaus says

I was browsing a nonfiction table at a used book sale a couple of years ago and the cover of *The Big Year* caught my eye: a cerulean sky, a beach, and a weird, spiky-headed sea bird perched on a pair of binoculars. It was fifty cents. I bought it.

It was an unlikely purchase. It's about bird watching, for crying out loud. How interesting can a book about bird watching be? Apparently it can be downright compelling. I couldn't put it down.

First things first. The term "bird watching" is taboo. Practitioners of the art refer to themselves as "birders." Birders are passionate about their avocation. Author Mark Obmascik provides a concise summary of the upside of birding, "Birding is hunting without killing, preying without punishing and collection without clogging your home." Obmascik was not a birder when he began writing this book. Now, in his own words, "When somebody cries, 'Duck! I look up.' His enthusiasm for the subject infuses every page. The settings are so painstakingly rendered, the tension is so excruciatingly recreated that you'd swear he was there every step of the way. He wasn't.

The book is the result of interviews that Obmascik had with three birders: Greg Miller, Sandy Komito and Al Levantin. In 1998 each of these three gentlemen, unbeknownst to one another, decided to take on a "big year." For the uninitiated, a big year is dedicating one calendar year to personally observing as many species as possible within the confines of the continental United States. To have a really good big year, that's about two new species each day. The record on January 1, 1998 was 721 species recorded in 1987 by Sandy Komito.

Think of it as extreme birding. The demands are ridiculous. Climate runs the gamut from tropical to arctic. Terrain ranges from desert to swamp to prairie to woodland to mountain. Beyond that, there are the pelagic birds – avian species that essentially spend their lives at sea. One memorable incident finds Greg Miller, who is prone to motion sickness, missing a pelagic bird sighting because he is throwing up over the side of his boat.

Not challenging enough? Consider, then, that many of these birds are not permanent residents. They can only be viewed along seasonal migratory routes. Sometimes the window for observation of these species is unreasonably small. And what about travel? What happens when you are in North Carolina and you get a rare bird alert for a sighting in Oregon? How do you get there pronto? How do you pay for it? What about families, friends and careers? The challenges of a big year are formidable.

Which brings us back to 1998. Without spoiling the end of the story, all three competitors surpass the coveted 700 mark. The reader can't help but pull for all three of these guys. Sandy Komito, a hard-nosed, often abrasive building contractor is the reigning champion trying to best his best. Al Levantin is an affable, wealthy retiree. He has considerable resources at his disposal and is more than capable of giving Komito a run for the money. The wild card is Greg Miller. Miller is an overweight computer programmer. He has maxed out six credit cards and borrowed money from his parents to finance this endeavor. He needs to work forty hours a week to (almost) pay the bills. This severely cramps his birding style. The advantage that he does have is a birder's ear. He can instantly identify virtually all of the 675 species normally found in the United States by their calls. He can reproduce many of those calls as well.

The travails of this trio kept me turning the pages. Readers can expect to learn more than a little ornithology and to be amused by Obmascik's low-key, deadpan humor while waiting for a victor to emerge. I found myself choosing a favorite and cheering him on. Ash-throated flycatchers, flammulated owls, northern wheatears, and Xantus's hummingbirds make for excellent reading companions. All in all, an enjoyable and satisfying book. Go figure.

Jolina Adams says

Really, really enjoyed reading this book! Well written - it was a short easy read. Parts are very funny - we've seen a few of those "birders" when we got to Spring Wings Migratory Bird Festival in Fallon. I understand the appeal of seeing a life list or rare bird. And I like nothing better than a good book in my back yard looking at what flies in, but I just can't wrap my head around why someone would go to such lengths to compete in a Big Year. Interesting stuff - made me curious to search out more information about a Big Day, a Big Year and the folks in this story. Steve Martin is starring in the film adaptation of the book - slated to come out this fall. I think it will be worth the price of the ticket!

Jen says

Witty and engaging. Who knew that competitive birding could be so riveting? Journalistic in style, Obmascik does a great job of making 3 men's quest to be top birder an effort you want to see to the end.

Kressel Housman says

For those of you who haven't seen the charming movie adaptation of this equally charming book, the Big Year is a competition in which birders try to spot as many species of bird as they possibly can in the U.S. and Canada in one calendar year. Note that I use the term "birder," as opposed to "bird-watcher." In the movie, Steve Martin's character bristles when his co-workers use the term "bird-watching," but the book explains the difference. *I am a birdwatcher.* I own a field guide and I use it to identify all the species that land on my deck. I let the birds come to me. A birder goes out to find the birds. And Big Year contestants will spend a fortune of money seeing birds wherever and however they can, whether by boat, by helicopter, or on a remote island of Alaska called Attu. These guys are all about the chase.

Because of that, the book reads like an adventure story. It follows the top three winners of Big Year 1998: Sandy Komito, the record-setting champion, (played by Owen Wilson and named Kenny Bostick in the movie); Al Levantin, a newly-retired former CEO, (played by Steve Martin and named Stu Preissler), and Greg Miller, a computer programmer who held down a job *and* placed second in the Big Year, which is an amazing accomplishment. (He's played by Jack Black and was renamed Brad Harris.) Though Steve Martin and Jack Black have both played their share of obnoxious characters, they're the likable ones in the movie, and Owen Wilson is the jerk. Though the real Sandy Komito is actually quite a bit older than Owen Wilson, the book presents him in the same (mostly) negative light.

Not only does the book give you much more back story about the three men, it includes the history of birding in North America and a fair bit about the birds themselves. As a bird-watcher now inspired to try to some birding, I was already interested in the subject, but even if you're not wild about birds, there's enough human

story here to interest anybody. Sandy Komito and Al Levantin were both children of the Depression, and determined to overcome the poverty they knew in childhood, both became successful businessmen. (Both became bird lovers through the Boy Scouts.) Greg Miller was raised a Mennonite in the “Land of No,” so now he spends his life saying “yes” and “playing like a ten-year-old.” What that teaches me is that people end up driven by the thing they feel they lacked the most in childhood. I also learned lessons from the brief bio of Jean Jacques Audubon. He failed at every business he ever tried, but made his name by pursuing his favorite hobby: drawing birds. So ultimately, the book is about doing what you love with the utmost zeal. Ask yourself: if you could spend one year pursuing one goal, what would it be?

Tim Martin says

The Big Year by Mark Obmascik was a fun and engaging look at the world of bird watching (or birding). More specifically, it was a look at a particular event in the world of birding, a spectacular competitive event called a Big Year, an event in which participants try to see the most species they can in North America north of Mexico during one calendar year. In 1998, three men battled for a new North American birding record and *_The Big Year_* chronicles their struggle.

A Big Year is a very interesting competition with as the author put it "few rules and no referees." Birders simply fly, drive, or boat all over the country and try to see the most number of species in a year. Though they often try to photograph the birds they see and often have witnesses with them, they usually just jot down in their notebooks when and where they saw a particular species, forward their totals to the American Birding Association, and hope that their competitors and the birding world believe them. Much of the competition is built upon credibility and honor and once someone is suspected of cheating just one time that person is finished, though cheating or accusations of cheating are quite rare. Indeed, so strangely honor-bound are the participants that Obmascik recounted several times when the three competitors actually helped one another, alerting each other to rare bird sightings in various parts of the continent and even in some cases showing their competitor the bird in person.

Obmascik profiled the three birders who competed that year, interviewing them and visiting the places that they birded in order to win the competition. Each individual had a different starting point to begin their Big Year, had different networks of informants to tell them when rare birds showed up in various parts of the country (accidental strays from other parts of the world, be it Asian birds in Alaska, Mexican birds in Texas and the American Southwest, or Caribbean birds in Florida), and had varying types of experience to bring to bear on the competition.

The three Big Year men were Sandy Komito (a New Jersey industrial contractor, to many a rather unlikely birder), Greg Miller (a nuclear power worker in Maryland who birded deeply in debt and greatly surprised the other two birders who had much greater resources; also the only one of the three to do a Big Year and still work a full-time job), and Al Levantin (a semi-retired corporate chief executive who lived in Colorado). The author followed their progress throughout the year and discussed their lives and what had brought them into birding in general and to competing in the Big Year in particular.

Obmascik discussed the history of the Big Year, covering Roger Tory Peterson's revolutionary 1934 book *_A Field Guide to the Birds_* and the author's later famous book, *_Wild America_*, published in 1955, a book in which the author traveled the continent and noted in a footnote that he saw 572 species in his travels in 1953. This inspired a man by the name of Stuart Keith to repeat the feat in 1956, who reported in *_Audubon_*

magazine that he had seen 598 birds in a year and that his life-list (birds he had seen his entire life) of 625 was second only to Peterson's reported list of 633. Within weeks of his 1961 article it became clear that Keith was in fact ten among overall life-listers, the champion having seen 669 birds. In 1973 Kenn Kaufman, hitchhiking and spending only \$1000, traveled 69,200 miles and saw 666 species, not winning the contest but writing a well-known book called *Kingbird Highway* and inspiring others, including in 1979 James M. Vardaman, a timber consultant who while not an expert birder hired guides and consultants with his vast financial resources to help him plan a Big Year (the complete opposite of Kaufman), ending the year with 699 species and having spent \$44,507 (and writing an influential book, *Call Collect, Ask for Birdman*) and setting the stage for more formal networks to be set up to report rare birds.

My favorite part of the book was the description of the places the three went to and the birds they saw. They went to Attu, "the Holy Grail of serious birders", a "treeless Alaskan spit seventeen hundred miles from Anchorage but just two hundred miles from Russia" to see rare Asian migrants pushed eastward by the region's harsh storms. A vital stop was the Brownsville, Texas Municipal Landfill, the only reliable place in the U.S. to see the Tamaulipas crow (the site nearly as hostile as Attu in its own way). To check off the rare Baird's sparrow, a secretive bird of native-grass prairie that breeds only in the Northern Great Plains, they had to make a special trip; "[a]mong birders, the Baird's separates the men from the boys." High Island, Texas was another vital stop, a prominent birding spot along the Gulf coast, "a green oasis that can be seen for miles offshore," such a popular spot to see arriving spring migrants like hummingbirds, warblers, and tanagers that the Houston Audubon society had built bleachers. To add Pacific pelagic birds, the Big Year men had to contend with the highly influential Debi Shearwater (formerly Debi Milllichap, who had legally changed her name in honor of a type of seabird), who ran the best pelagic birding charter on the West Coast; if one wanted to see Pacific seabirds, one had to be on her good side (and one of the Big Year men wasn't). In order to see the Colima warbler, one had to hike to its only breeding area in the U.S., the 5,900 foot high Chisos Mountains in Big Bend National Park in Texas. The only place to see otherwise tropical seabirds like the sooty tern and the masked booby was the isolated, desolate Dry Tortugas, arid islands that were once a prison in the Gulf of Mexico.

Ruth P says

I LOVED this book and wanted to give it 10 stars!.One of the most wonderful books I have ever read and now want to go right back to the beginning and start again.I am a bird looker....I like searching for them then love looking at them...these guys are the storm chasers of the avian world....utterly obsessed to the point of madness...and Mark O has taken the tale of three of them and their search to be the record holder of most birds seen in North America in one year and made the funniest,most entertaining and informative account of twitching that probably exists.It is a masterpiece ...if you have ever been seasick on a pelagic tour,just missed a rarity seen by dozens of others or simply love birds then this is the book for you.

Judy says

I have to admit that I'm interested in bird watching--I know, I know, it doesn't fit into my Devil May Care attitude--and always felt that I had a decent life list. That is until I picked this book up. Who knew that there is Competitive Birdwatching? Certainly not me. And A Big Year? That was a completely new concept to me. Apparently you start on January 1st and count the number of bird species that you see during a calendar year. Prior to 1998, the record Big Year was 721 species. In 1998, three men, Sandy Komito (who held the 721

record), Greg Miller, and Al Levantin found themselves in a neck and neck race to spot the most birds that year. Individually, they traveled thousands of miles from the Dry Tortugas off Florida to Attu in the Aleutian Islands and endured unbelievably harsh conditions in order to score sightings of additional species. Since North America has only 645 naturally nesting species, the lists had to be augmented with rarities and accidentals--birds that normally were not seen in North America. While the birder I was rooting for didn't win, the winner set a new record with 745 different birds. A fascinating book about a little known competitive event. I'm never going to view bird watchers the same way again.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Mark Obmascik's style here is playful and almost conversational. He really plays up the competition among the three contenders. I discovered, however, that I'd much rather read about birds than about bird chasers.

I'm generally content to observe the more common species of birds sharing the habitat close to my home. I can be thrilled by a robin feasting on fall berries, barn swallows building a nest in spring, hundreds of crows gathering in a huge pine for an evening confab, or a winter wren singing his heart out, putting on a concert just for me. I do enjoy the challenge and excitement of identifying a bird I've never seen before, but I've never kept a "life list" and never will.

To me, the concept of "competitive birding" is absurd. Birdwatching is not a sport. People who race around the country checking off species as quickly as possible are not *watching* birds. They are bird *chasers*. We may as well put them on a reality TV show and forget about the enjoyment of nature for its own sake, as a meditative pursuit.

All that said, I did enjoy the book. I learned a lot about how the national and international birding communities operate, and there's some fascinating information about birds and migration. Chapter 9 was particularly excellent in that regard. Obmascik also includes some history of famous birders---much more interesting than modern-day fanatics.

There were three competitors for Big Year 1998. Al Levantin and Greg Miller seemed like pretty decent guys. I found Sandy Komito so odious that I had a hard time reading about him and his exploits. He's one of those guys who goes out of his way to be obnoxious and offensive just to get attention and amuse himself. I might have been impressed by his bird knowledge if he had used it for anything other than to stroke his oversized ego and outdo other hopefuls. He had already won the Big Year competition several years before. He could have stepped aside and let someone else have a chance. The author seemed to genuinely *like* Komito, though, while still doing a perfect job of showing what a complete jerk he was.
