

# Clamorous Wings

## Confessions of an obsessive bird lister.

by Keith Taylor

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

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

They were the fifty-eighth species of bird on my year list, and the eleventh on my twelve-year-old daughter's.

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

I keep the annual list partly to force myself to get out more often. I make what living I do hunched over a computer keyboard or sitting in chairs reading books, and I've never enjoyed exercise. Although I've been intrigued by the beauties of birds since adolescence, I've found that I seek them less frequently if I don't have a goal. Recently I haven't been setting annual goals, and I've also kept putting on weight. I realized I could justify watching birds as a kind of diet! In 2004 I decided that I would try to make sure I saw and clearly identified 250 species of birds.

Two hundred fifty might seem daunting, but it is not really an overwhelming number. I've found that given my level of expertise—somewhere well above beginner but well below expert—200 species is easy. I can see that many birds without forcing myself to do anything more than the usual spring walks around Ann Arbor or Washtenaw County, a business trip or two, a spring trip over to Point Pelee on Lake Erie, a family vacation, and paying some attention to my backyard. A list of 300 species, on the other hand, might cause just a bit of tension on the home

front ("I'm sorry, darling. You must stay home and go to work and make sure our child gets to school and the dog gets walked, the cats fed, the bills paid, and the house cleaned. I must

go off to Florida now to see the long-legged waders for my year list"). So 250 is a good number for me. It demands some commitment, but it doesn't make me crazy.

**I** don't get competitive about it, partly because I know I can't keep up with the really serious listers. I can't afford to drop everything and fly to exotic locations just to see a rare bird (my wife would never forgive me, and I do have to save for my daughter's college). Still, the winter before last, I did join my friends Dan Minock and Macklin Smith in a morning competition with some other local birders. Each group found a road in Washtenaw County and pledged to "bird" only one mile of it. Then we would meet and compare lists.

Some of the groups had spent much of the previous week scouting out a good road and finding birds likely to reappear on the day of the competition. We were much more haphazard, driving around casually all morning, talking about birds—but also about books and politics and poetry—until we finally settled on a road in Superior Township. We walked our mile and then went to meet the other birders at the Flim Flam Restaurant on Plymouth Road. As we had feared, we were dead last. We had seen only thirty-eight species, and only one, a northern harrier, that no other group had seen. That

gave us a score of thirty-nine. I think the winners had close to sixty points. I didn't really mind, but I thought I may have detected a chagrined look crossing the faces of my teammates.

Like most listers, we do stop our compulsive collecting from time to time and actually try to learn things about the birds we see. For instance, I've learned that mute swans, the graceful S-necked birds that now ornament many of the ponds along the Huron River, are not native to North America. Some people contend that all the mute swans in this part of the continent descend from birds that escaped from a game farm up around Petoskey in the early years of the last century. They have expanded rapidly in Michigan even in the twenty-five years I've lived here, and now they are becoming a nuisance bird, driving out native geese and ducks. Still, as someone once said about horses (another introduced species), they can make a landscape look more beautiful. Those of us with literary preoccupations—and surprising numbers of "birders" (that term is much preferred these days to "bird-

watchers") have them—also know swans as the subject of William Butler Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole":

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.  
The nineteenth autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

Although Yeats doesn't have much of a reputation as an outdoorsman, it's clear he was, if not a bird lister, at least a bird counter. And I suspect his reason for counting swans at his rich friend's private park was much the same as mine is for listing the birds I see in my backyard and elsewhere during the course of an ordinary year.

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

say in hushed tones, "It's an honor to be in the presence of greatness." Macklin looked uncomfortable.

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

Probably 700 to 750 species of birds nest in North America. Any others are likely accidental visitors blown here by storms, or birds that have taken a wrong turn in their migrations over Asia or Europe. It is difficult to find these rare "accidentals," even with e-mail Listservs and frequent-flier miles. Yet Macklin Smith, number 1 on the



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ABA list, has seen 862 bird species in North America. I'm afraid my own North American list—442 species after almost thirty years—looks paltry in comparison, and marks me as an incorrigible dilettante.

Macklin Smith obviously loves birds, and in his soft-spoken way can go on for hours about the habits and distinguishing features of different kinds of sparrows or

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shorebirds. But he also realizes that most people might find the activity that fills his spare hours rather silly. "And it is ridiculous, of course," he says, and laughs. "But it's fun, and there are so many worse things I could be doing."

He started seriously looking at birds while he was a graduate student at Princeton. He would take long walks in the New Jersey marshes or along the coast to relieve the pressures of dissertation writing or to get some quiet time with his young daughters. At some point it dawned on him that he had seen more birds than many other people had. "It was an accomplishment," he says now. "And I decided it was an accomplishment I could be proud of." But then he adds in a typical aside, "Well, proud in a certain kind of way."

He began taking trips to different parts of the country to see more birds, even to see an individual bird that might be visiting from Mexico or Greenland or Asia (serious birders call this "chasing a bird"). At some point he was lucky enough to sign on as the cook on May birding trips to Alaska's Attu Island, the westernmost island in the Aleutian chain. Although Attu is closer to the coast of Japan than to Anchorage, ABA rules still include it in the North American region. Macklin readily acknowledges that twenty springs on Attu, almost a year of total time in a place where most visitors get to spend only a few hours, have given him the birds that make him number 1.

Of course birders and bird listers are not immune to the usual kinds of human jealousies and pettiness. In a recent book about compulsive bird listing, *The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mark Obmascik describes the adventures of three men who set out to see more birds in a year than anyone else ever had before. Each spent tens of thousands of dollars and most of the year traveling, flying rapidly from desert to Arctic and back again

in the hope of seeing rare visitors. The "winner" (although there was no prize other than bragging rights) was Sandy Komito, a businessman from New Jersey who saw 745 birds in one calendar year. To see these birds he had to visit Attu Island, where he ran into Macklin Smith.

Here is how Obmascik describes their relationship: Smith was "a poet and professor of medieval English at the University of Michigan who could read and write the language of Beowulf and Chaucer. Smith was the only person who reported a bigger North American life list than Komito.

Komito, however, believed that the professor's list was rife with poetic license. Smith had a knack for discovering rarities that were seen by him and only him. . . . For his part, Smith thought Komito should stuff a sock in

it and vouched long and often for every bird on his list. . . . Komito, Smith said, was simply jealous, a claim Komito has vehemently denied."

Although I've assured Macklin that Komito's characterization bears no resemblance to the quiet, careful birder known by the people who have actually spent time with him, he chooses not to discuss Komito, Obmascik, or the book. He has admitted, however, that his new nickname for his detractor is Iago Komito.

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago's poisonous slanders end in murder. The stakes in birding aren't quite so high. Still, I think it is important to note that in my experience, Macklin has the ability of the best birders to know a bird quickly. Long experience with particular species has created a kind of gestalt in which size, color, song, shape of wing, speed of flying, and any of a hundred other features combine quickly to lead to what is usually an accurate identification.

Often he has spent lengthy periods of time taking me step by step through the identification of a bird, and—as I said earlier, with just a hint of pride—I am not a complete novice. This spring we saw a large shorebird flying over Crosswinds Marsh in southwestern Wayne County. I couldn't see the bill, so I assumed I couldn't identify it. But Macklin talked me through his identification process with this bird, eliminating species after species until we were left identifying a whimbrel, a member of the curlew family that only occasionally visits the interior of the continent. It was the first one I had seen in Michigan, and I admit to being pleased. It was the 102nd bird on my list for 2004.

Obmascik stresses the compulsive and competitive aspects of bird listing. In *The Big Year*, he spends some time talking about how sick Macklin was that spring, implying quite strongly that Macklin was driven beyond rational boundaries by his obsession. Macklin was indeed sick. This was his first trip back to Attu Island after his treatment for leukemia. Even though he had been approved by the trip leaders, cleared by his oncologists, and given three kinds of medicine to fight off infec-

tions, he still came down with a life-threatening case of pneumonia and had to be flown more than 1,000 miles back to Anchorage. "I thought I had the right medicine to do it," he says now. "And I was back in great shape. I wasn't trying to do anything stupid."

Macklin is quite articulate about the pleasure he takes in seeing birds. "I don't care about how many birds other people see," he told me. "I just care that I see them." In *Transplant*, the vitality of birds often serves as a moment of hope contrasting the devastation of the illness. "They prepossess us with their otherness," Macklin writes in a poem called "A Mystery":

It rests in them, beyond our effort  
Reaching them: the otherness  
Of wings and nest-weaving, the grace  
That holds them hidden, still  
So easily mortal.

That doesn't sound like a man overwhelmed by listing mania.

Birders have their own pleasures. I can see it in their eyes when they identify a glaucous gull on a frozen lake in January, or find a Blackburnian warbler with its luminescent orange throat at Dolph Park in May. That bird might be eating one of the hundreds of mosquitoes who have just feasted on the person making the list, but the blood sacrifice always seems worthwhile. Still, like Macklin Smith, almost all birders realize that their passion might seem a bit ridiculous to the rest of the world.

When I first contact Don Chalfant, one of the local legends in the birding community, he tells me, "I may be the worst lister around. I have bird lists for almost everything: life lists for three counties, fifty states, USA, ABA Area,



and Lower Forty-eight. In addition I keep annual lists for Washtenaw County, Michigan, Florida, and ABA. So, yes, I have the listing compulsion." And when I ask if I can follow up with more questions, he writes in an e-mail, "You may call or write, or some might suggest you refer me to a psychiatrist." He gives me a few of his numbers—Washtenaw County life list, 273; Michigan life list, 353; Florida life list, 354; ABA life list, 744.

Despite Don's jokes, the retired elementary school teacher has a great reputa-

tion for sharing his bird lore. Ann Arbor city ornithologist Dea Armstrong calls him "my mentor." My first chance to see him in action comes on one of the free Tuesday evening birder tours that Dea runs every spring. These are not part of her duties as an employee of the city's natural area preservation division; she volunteers to do them through the Washtenaw Audubon Society.

On an evening in late May, we are walking through an old field behind the U-M's East Ann Arbor Health Center on Plymouth Road. Dea has guaranteed us a sedge wren (perhaps one of the most secretive and difficult to find of the wren species that nest around here), so several well-known local birders have shown up, in addition to the beginners for whom Dea designs these trips. Don Chalfant is the first to hear the distinct call of the wren, and then he and the other "experts" all make sure everyone, even the youngest of the children, has a good look at the little bird clinging to the top of a thin stalk of dry grass. The sedge wren is my 185th bird for the year; it is my daughter's 117th.

Later that evening Dea and Don hear the call of a black-billed cuckoo. We all find it hiding in a scrubby little autumn olive, one of the few bushes in the field. Just as we have our binoculars on it, another cuckoo arrives and, amid much flurry and trembling, climbs on the back of the first one. "They're copulating!" someone calls out, just about the same time as the birds have finished doing what they're doing. Immediately several people start joking about their "C lists," their lists of which birds they've seen "doing it." The voyeur jokes are obvious but still seem to get everyone giggling. By this time I've been outed as the guy doing the article for the Observer on bird listing, so at first I think they might be doing this for my benefit.

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

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

PHOTOS: DAVID ROEMER

fested water, pushing the canoe for the paying customers. It took hours to get to the right spot where they had a good look at the rare and reclusive bird.

After just a couple of minutes, one member of the group who had proudly identified himself as a “lister” said, “Wow, that’s great. What’s next?” He didn’t spend even five minutes enjoying the bird. Mike’s friend never took another tour group to Venezuela.

“You see,” Mike says, “now I can enjoy the bird and not the list. And that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?”

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

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

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

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

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

Mike is a professional book person and a former English major, so he is more than willing to discuss the aesthetic questions of bird listing. Just off the top of his head,

he came up with a parody, the lister’s version of Shelley’s “To a Skylark.” Mike writes:

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou wert,  
To wit,  
Number 3 on my Yorkshire annual list.

Maybe it’s a joke only a bird lister could love.

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

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

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see them in U.S. or Canadian waters.

Macklin Smith and Mike Sefton were in one boat. The second one, with Don Chalfant and others, not only saw but got verifying photographs of a black-bellied storm petrel—a bird from the southern Atlantic that had never been seen in the Northern Hemisphere! Macklin Smith and the others in the first boat missed the bird.

“Of course I was depressed,” Macklin told me. “I missed a great bird. Part of me felt that I deserved it. I’ve done my time out there. I’ve done hundreds of those trips, and yet I missed that great bird.” He acknowledges with a laugh that at sixty he might still sound like a kid in middle school saying, “But it’s not fair!”

When he came back home, he read online that many people had been seeing a black-headed nightingale-thrush down along the Rio Grande in Pharr, Texas. This

bird, in the same family as the robin, has a startling orange eye ring and bright yellowish legs, and it is usually seen much farther south in Mexico. None had been sighted north of Mexico before. Macklin immediately used some of his frequent-flyer miles, went to south Texas, and saw the bird, as did several hundred other people, many of whom had come from places much farther away than Ann Arbor. I tease him that this is what Emerson called “Compensation.”

I ask city ornithologist Dea Armstrong whether she thinks bird listing is just a “guy thing”—yet another manifestation of too much testosterone. We’ve both witnessed competitive encounters of the my-binoculars-are-bigger-than-your-binoculars type. While it is probably too easy to label bird listing as some postmodern variation of the hunting instinct, we’re tempted by that explanation. Dea admits that most of the listers she knows are men, and that she knows many good women birders who choose not to keep lists. “But I do,” she says. “I even enjoy the competitions.” In fact, she says, she’s a bit worried about all the birds she has missed or overlooked in Washtenaw County this year. Her county list for 2004 is only at 175 species.

I’ll admit that I was worried too. The spring migrations—when birds are most easily seen and identified—were over. It is much harder to check off new species during the rest of the year. As of Memorial Day, after I finally saw the great crested flycatcher that I had been trying to see for a month, my year list was at 190 birds, still sixty hard ones away from my goal. Luckily a writing project took me to Alberta for most of July. By the time I came back, my list was at 248. The last Saturday in July, I went down to Pointe Mouillee on Lake Erie with Dan Minock and Macklin Smith. We were looking for shorebirds that had already finished breeding in the Arctic and had begun their fall migrations back to South America. We weren’t disappointed. I saw a semipalmated plover, a Wilson’s phalarope, and a stilt sandpiper for the first time this year, taking my list to 251 by July 31. I felt a small but palpable sense of relief.

My daughter had an easier time of it. She decided she wanted to see only 100 birds this year, and she was already at 118 by the end of May. If we’re competing, I guess she’s won. Great. I can give her that, for this year anyway. But maybe I’ve given Faith something better. Or stranger. When her mother woke her up the other morning, she said in her half sleep, “I want to go bird-watching.” It sounded just a bit obsessive. ■



#190-great crested flycatcher



#249-semipalmated plover



#250-Wilson's phalarope



#251-stilt sandpiper