

F O C U S

Listing for Life



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Rich Stallcup, PRBO Conservation Outreach

BUILDING BIRD LISTS, at any level, can be a great pastime and even the passion of a lifetime. My friend Phoebe Snetsinger, a wife, mother of four, and retired school teacher, set out to bird the world virtually nonstop some 17 years ago—right after being diagnosed with an “imminently” fatal disease. Her life list reached about 8,500 bird species, nearly 2,000 more than anyone else’s and 85% of Earth’s known avifauna. She was 68 years old and birding strong when she died in a van crash in Madagascar last November.

Most birders and even ornithologists keep some kind of running lists—life, world, lower 48 states, state, county, yard, patch. Lists are ways to categorize, collect, and organize real-life successes connecting with different kinds of free and wild birds. Listing is a great game, maybe the greatest. For some, it becomes an obsession that drives all conscious thought and action. (Perhaps a “listers anonymous” group would save a few marriages and friendships.) For some it is a fanciful game of fill-in-the-blanks. For some it becomes a blueprint for scientific investigation.

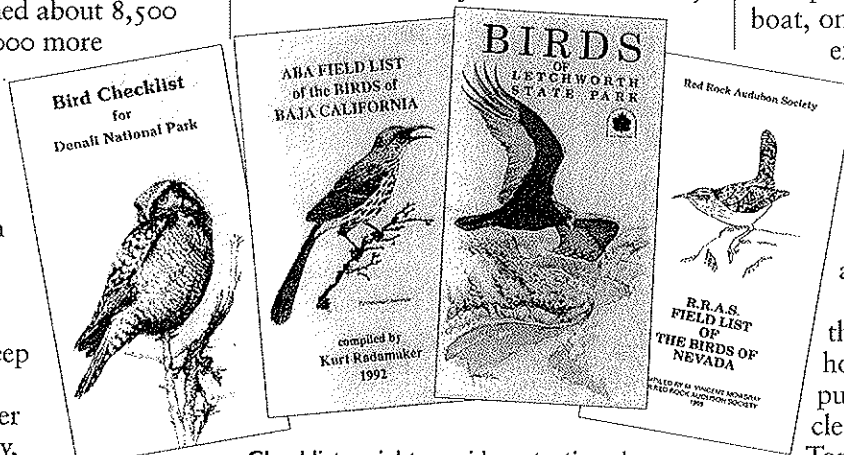
Geographics

NOT EVERYONE can excel at global or continental endeavors, but scaling down spatially (even barely leaving home) can provide equally great inspiration. Many feel that finding a new bird in their own patch (a place of any size where you specialize) is as fine as seeing ten species somewhere far away.

Keeping track of all species you find in your own state is fun and educational, so keeping track in every state is 50 times as great! The smaller the area, the more meticulous and

thorough one may become. Whether yard, park, city, county—for competition or simply to record—it should all be with joy.

In the early 1970s, a (very) few of us, wanting a change from predictable revisits to our usual California birding haunts, decided that it would be fun and educational to go find 100+ species in *each* of the state’s 58 counties. Not only



Checklists might provide a starting place....

can such a discipline cause you to visit places otherwise overlooked and become a geography wizard en route (you will know where *all* the cemeteries and sewer ponds are), but by the conclusion you’ll have first-hand knowledge of avian distribution.

Yard listing can be great if you have a great yard. One yard at Bolinas, California, has a list of 276 species, and one at Cape May, New Jersey, has just over 300. Those are huge, but it’s really OK to be proud of your 20-year yard list of 33 species. Keep watching!

Games and the Big Gasp

ADDING A TIME CONSTRAINT in any geographic area creates even more listing challenges. *Year lists* are the rage, be they North America, state, county, or patch, and you get to start with a clean slate every January first. So far, *month lists* have not caught on, but they certainly will with the ever-growing legion of birders seeking new challenges. Month listing will sharpen knowledge of arrival dates for migrants.

The *Big Day* is cool and a great challenge: 24 hours anywhere you care to go for the highest possible species total. Careful planning and military-like execution are crucial for success, whether that means defeating competition, breaking a standing record, establishing a personal best, or raising money for Bird-A-Thon. Big Days with transportation limits—on foot, by boat, on camel, etcetera—are just as exciting. Once, four of us found

159 bird species on a late-April day while walking ten miles from Olema, California, to Limantour Beach in the Point Reyes National Seashore. Wisely, we had left a car at the far end.

Another Big Day variation is the *Big Sit*. It too is limited to 24 hours or less, but the listers stay put inside a 12-foot-diameter circle and watch the show. At Tomales Bay in coastal Marin County, California, we once established a Big Sit record with 114 species but were soon soundly throttled by sitters at Point Pelee, Ontario.

Some players do *Big Hours* or *Big Foot Hours* mostly for the excitement and to compete against themselves. The *Big Minute* doesn’t take much preparation, and you don’t have to pack a lunch, but it’s important to be in a really good spot at the word “Go.” In the 1960s we experimented with the *Big Gasp*—hyperventilating before saying “Go...” Luckily, the idea died before any of the participants did.

Listing birds is what you make it. Some people are obviously over-listy, caring more about numbers than the actual animals and their habitats. Others decry listing as trifling folly (just before exclaiming how they reached 700 species in North America on their recent Alaska trip). But most are somewhere in between—having fun at what they love and spending spirited time in the field, where the birds are.

