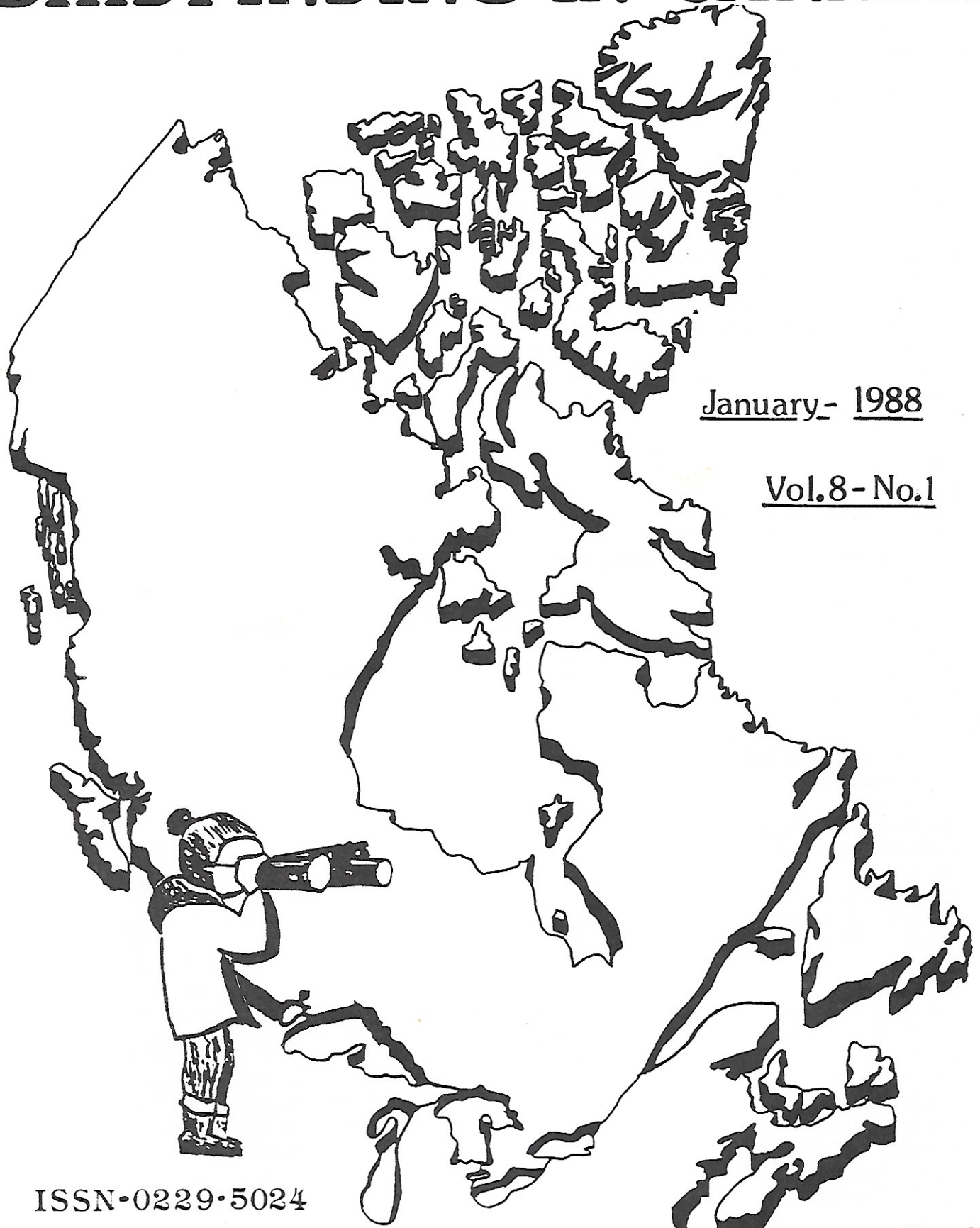


BIRDFINDING IN CANADA

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The Big Year

or, How Linda Van Damme Spent 1986

Those who read the Beginner's Page in this publication are well aware of our high regard for Project Birding as a means of enhancing one's enjoyment and knowledge levels to be gained from the study of birds.

One of the most popular projects among birders is maintaining a record of all species of birds observed in a calendar year. This can be made to fit any given location - the number of species observed in a year in Canada - in a certain province - your own lot - or whatever.

A year's list can be simply a written record of what species you've observed - providing a minimum of structure and order to one's activities - with no original intent to attain any specific total or achieve any preconceived goals.

But, the year's list is also used as a stimulus, or personal challenge to refine one's plans for the upcoming twelve months, with a specific objective in mind. The variety of goals is infinite.

You might decide to record as many species as you possibly can, on your own property; in your own province; or anywhere in the world. Or, you might set an objective to find 10 species this year (or 100!) that you've never seen before. Perhaps your goals will relate, not to birds at all, but to places; you decide to visit a certain number of birding spots you've heard about, but haven't explored.

Whatever you plan, implementation is bound to result in adding to your knowledge of bird study.

More ambitious objectives, tied in to a one-year span, are those that include a specific arithmetic goal. A popular example that comes to mind is the "300 species in one year in Ontario" challenge. This has been accepted as a worthy challenge for the last couple of decades. You need only adjust the 300 threshold to fit any other province.

Perhaps the ultimate for a single year challenge is to aim for some sort of record-breaking result. One of the most ambitious and - as it turned out - highly interesting programs of this nature we've observed, was by Dave Mark (then of London, Ont.; now living in Tonawanda, N.Y.) who set out, in 1980, to observe more species of birds in one year in Canada, than had ever been done before. The levels of planning, pursuit and determination that Dave applied to this project were indeed remarkable. His ultimate success in recording 417 species (he also became the first to exceed 400) provided many rewarding moments which we're sure Dave remembers today, more clearly than the nagging and inevitable failures that also go with this type of exercise.

Now, to share the pure enjoyment that goes with the "Big Year" concept, let's hear from Linda Van Damme of Nelson, B.C. who, in 1986, "went for broke" in British Columbia and ended up with the second highest annual list ever recorded in that province - a Silver Medal! Here's Linda.

"August 30, 1986, Ucluelet Pelagic Trip. 'South Polar Skua,' yelled someone in the bow of the boat - and people scrambled to get a look before it disappeared in the sun. Breaking one of the cardinal rules of pelagic trips, I was inside answering a call of nature. Hustling to get presentable, I dashed on deck only to hear everyone asking, 'Did you see it? Did you see it?' 'No, I missed it.'

'South Polar Skua!' yelled someone, on our Sept. 27th Ucluelet trip and, with the deck awash, people slid to catch another fleeting glimpse. 'Did you see it? Did you see it?' 'No, I was draped over the rail offering the gulls my breakfast.'

The only reason this landlubber was 25 miles offshore, was a commitment to do a B.C. Big Year. That decision was made after Gary Davidson, of Nakusp, B.C. had decided to do one and I felt he needed some female competition to spur him on.

In mid-January, we did our first blitz to Vernon, where the late Jim Grant had informed us of a Brown Thrasher in the Lumby area. He arranged to have Phil Ranson escort us to a farm where we were warmly greeted by people who were so

delighted to have a rare bird at their feeder. We got the bird, and also became celebrities as the woman made a video of this motley group called 'birders.'

The following day, Jim took us around to the home of John Quirk who had an active feeder. We added a few new ones but the Harris' Sparrow we were hoping for didn't show. It was wonderful to share Jim's enthusiasm and be a recipient of such warm hospitality. Our Big Year was off to a great start!

'Snowy Owl!' 'Where?' I screamed, breaking the sound barrier inside the car and causing temporary hearing loss to my Vancouver birding guides. I wasn't really over-reacting; it's just that I'd waited so long to see my first one and sometimes enthusiasm is hard to control. Mike Force showed me the bird and took great delight in my ecstatic outburst. The owl was #100 for the year - and it was only the first week of February. I managed to suppress my vocal instincts when, after squishing through a field of rotting Brussels sprouts, we entered an ancient barn and looked at a sleeping Common Barn-Owl.

A Kittlitz' Murrelet created quite a commotion in Victoria as it was the first recorded Canadian sighting. The bird obligingly surfaced minutes after my arrival.

Mae Burroughs, of Robson, had difficulty convincing her winter Blue Jay to make an appearance when the big listers came for it. So, on Feb.23rd, Gary and I waited stubbornly at Mae's living room window, for the jay to come for his morning treat of peanuts. May walked her dogs and left us to our vigil. We were not disappointed.

After a full late-March day of birding with Peter McIver in the Creston area, we undertook the challenge of locating a Boreal Owl on the Salmo-Creston summit. The cold had penetrated our tape recorder batteries and the song sounded more like an owl being boiled (Ed.note: What does a boiled owl sound like?) than one trying to attract a mate. We warmed the batteries in the warm air from the heater. Frozen and disheartened, we made one last stop and an owl flew across the road. Minutes later, its song came to us through the crisp night air. We were elated!

Sometimes one gets the idea that birds actually want to be a part of this craziness - or so it seems. One late April day, while Gary and I were birding in Creston, five White Pelicans circled over our heads, got 'ticked' and spiralled into the clouds and were gone! These were the only ones I saw in '86.

On May 18th, we joined forces with Mike (no pun intended) and, as The Kootenay Koots, participated in the Okanagan Big Day Challenge which involved six birding teams afield over a 24-hour period. Mary Collins staged a spectacular brunch the following day for tally-up. Dick Cannings' group discovered a Gray Flycatcher. We dashed to the location, played a tape and the bird promptly appeared.

Two other highlights of the weekend were the sighting of a stunning male Williamson's Sapsucker on Anarchist Mountain and a Burrowing Owl near Osoyoos. The owl was especially noteworthy as it marked the return of migratory birds to a transplant location.

Slosh, squish, slursh, squeak. Not bird calls, but sounds of unprepared birders pursuing a Flammulated Owl, at dusk, in the pouring rain. Our guide, Rick Howie, of Kamloops, assured us he had night vision and could find his way around this soggy forest. Our reward for believing him was a lovely female owl peering at us from a nest hole.

The call of the North beckoned in early July and we found ourselves in the midst of a birding frenzy with Chris Siddle and Jack Bowling. Our week long camping trip turned into a campout on Jack's floors as it rained, day after day. We endured mud that stuck like crazy glue and clouds of Kamikaze mosquitos attacking spots where repellent had worn off. We sloshed through grassy marshes in water just over the tops of our rubber boots. Why do Le Conte's Sparrows live here anyway? We stomped around in spruce bogs where the unmistakable call of the elusive Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was heard. It was later seen - and ticked. In spite of the weather, Fort Nelson and Fort St. John turned out to be productive for most of our target species, primarily the eastern songbirds.

August slowed down our progress until the aforementioned Pelagic trip added 10 more species.

Camping out at 7,600 ft. in mid-September proved to be another endurance test, but the Cathedral Lakes Park was awesome beyond belief. At home, in this rugged grandeur were the White-tailed Ptarmigan and Prairie Falcon. Finding them on a ridge, at 8,200 ft. buffeted by 80 km/hr winds was not exactly a cakewalk.

Late in September, Rick Howie took us on a Sharp-tailed Grouse hunt, which was a success. Then I headed to Ucluelet for what I feel to be my last ever Pelagic trip. Anyone who has experienced seasickness of about 8 on the Richter scale will understand why. (Ed.Note: Amen! Would you believe 9?) I did see 3 new birds. But, were they worth it? Ask me when the memory has faded. Maurice Ellison has given me an article on the effectiveness of ginger (Ed.again - Imagine what that would taste like on the way back up!) in preventing seasickness. I am booking him on a Pelagic trip this year so he can report first hand.

On October 25th I attained my projected goal of 325 species when a Northern Pygmy-Owl surprised me with its call, then flew to a nearby tree when I was getting in the winter wood.

November was completely uneventful.

I jetted to Vancouver in early December for a weekend and three more 'ticks' but time was running out.

Dec.22nd found Chris Siddle, Gary Davidson, Mike Force and I birding around Vancouver and ticking off my final bird of the year - a Northern Mockingbird - #329. Gary finished at 325 and Mike had to top us both by setting a new record of 340.

My exciting big year ended with the addition of 75 new species (lifers), expanded knowledge, and the experience of seeing more of the province. The best part of the adventure was in meeting and sharing with dedicated, enthusiastic birders who know the passion.

I never did see a South Polar Skua, and probably never will!"

Linda's account of her Big Year clearly reflects the enthusiasm and enjoyment that go hand in hand on this type of project. Perhaps others will let us in on the results of similar quirks and quests.

We'd like to enlarge on at least two points to which Linda referred.

First, is the amount of new knowledge that the execution of such an exercise presents to the participating birder - learning all there is to know of habitat, range, migration dates and so on, so necessary in ensuring optimum success.

Second, perhaps most important of all, is the human relation element. Every time we have thrown ourselves into a "Big Whatever," we have met a host of new friends - and this is something that lasts over a lifetime.

Early in our birding pursuits, we were surprised to learn that there are birders with horrendous aversions to keeping any kind of records, especially when they're called "lists." We've never been able to understand that - except to recognize that in the human approach to any kind of endeavour, everybody's different.

Some do. Some don't.

And --- speaking of records --- on the next two pages, Life List totals for Canada, World and British Columbia are reported. Numbers shown reflect data on hand as of Nov.25th, from readers who have reported within the past seven months.

In the March and May issues, we'll report on all other provinces, plus some additional locations (e.g.North America). If you have updated totals you want included, please let us know by January 25th.

CANADA

Norm Chesterfield, Wheatley, Ont.	498	Peggy Lehmann, West Hill, Ont.	395
Alex Gray, Mississauga, Ont.	479	Barb McGrenere, Victoria, B.C.	394
Hue MacKenzie, Surrey, B.C.	478	John Miles, New Hamburg, Ont.	393
Jo Ann MacKenzie, Surrey, B.C.	477	Margaret Bain, Whitby, Ont.	392
Dave Mark, Tonawanda, N.Y.	470	Bill Zufelt, Orillia, Ont.	391
Roger Foxall, Halifax, N.S.	467	Terrie Woodrow, Port Ryerse, Ont.	390
Gerry Bennett, Woodbridge, Ont.	464	Martin Edwards, Kingston, Ont.	389
Peter Hamel, Toronto, Ont.	455	Rob Walker, Alma, N.B.	388
Al McTavish, London, Ont.	455	Fred Bodsworth, Toronto, Ont.	387
Eric Tull, London, Ont.	453	Guy Gendron, Rimouski, Que.	387
David Stirling, Victoria, B.C.	452	Audrey Viken, West Vancouver, B.C.	387
Luke Fazio, Mississauga, Ont.	442	Richard Klauke, St. Paul, Alta.	386
Mike Force, Vancouver, B.C.	440	Andrew Slater, Calgary, Alta.	385
Bill Clark, Ottawa, Ont.	438	Stefan Zaremba, Burnaby, B.C.	382
Wayne Neily, Winnipeg, Man.	434	Mike Austin, Friendswood, Texas	381
Bruce Mactavish, St. John's, Nfld.	433	Gordon Bellerby, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.	381
Doug Kragh, Vancouver, B.C.	431	Reuben Ware, Victoria, B.C.	381
June Smith, Willowdale, Ont.	431	Ben Feltner, Seattle, Wash.	376
Wayne Weber, Vancouver, B.C.	431	Brian Gibson, Cobourg, Ont.	376
Edge Pegg, Claremont, Ont.	429	Bob McDonald, Halifax, N.S.	376
Ron Pittaway, Minden, Ont.	429	Jim Houghton, Montreal, Que.	375
Mabel McIntosh, Pointe Claire, Que.	425	Kevin McLaughlin, Hamilton, Ont.	374
Bill Crins, Vancouver, B.C.	424	Daniel St. Hilaire, Hull, Que.	374
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Roger Burrows, St. John's, Nfld.	417	Gordon Grief, Dugald, Man.	368
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Roger Taylor, Ottawa, Ont.	411	Robert Eakin, Aurora, Ont.	355
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Pete Read, Komoka, Ont.	409	Doug Whitman, Riverview, N.B.	353
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Blake Maybank, Rocky Harbour, Nfld.	398	Michael McEvoy, Oshawa, Ont.	335
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Ron Tozer, Dwight, Ont.	396	7 others over 325	

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Martin Edwards, Kingston, Ont.	4601	Wilf Botham, Cottam, Ont.	1354
Paul Mackenzie, Kingston, Ont.	2864	Gerry Bennett, Woodbridge, Ont.	1348
David Stirling, Victoria, B.C.	2650	Roger Taylor, Ottawa, Ont.	1302
Luke Fazio, Mississauga, Ont.	2354	Alex Gray, Mississauga, Ont.	1300
Barry Attridge, London, Ont.	2342	Art Rusnell, Kleinburg, Ont.	1291
Hue MacKenzie, Surrey, B.C.	2331	Margaret Rusnell, Kleinburg, Ont.	1291
George Scott, Oshawa, Ont.	2300	Reuben Ware, Victoria, B.C.	1279
Jo Ann MacKenzie, Surrey, B.C.	2264	Robert Tymstra, Sarnia, Ont.	1274
Peter Hamel, Toronto, Ont.	2170	Peter Gilchrist, Toronto, Ont.	1208
Lorelie Mitchell, Oakville, Ont.	2006	Mabel McIntosh, Pointe Claire, Que.	1208
Ron Scovell, Rexdale, Ont.	2001	Richard Cannings, Vancouver, B.C.	1179
June Smith, Willowdale, Ont.	1872	Herb Elliott, Toronto, Ont.	1150
John Keenleyside, Mississauga, Ont.	1748	Tony Mason, Toronto, Ont.	1150
Hugh Currie, Toronto, Ont.	1494	Andrew Slater, Calgary, Alta.	1088
Helen Inch, London, Ont.	1488	Jim Slimmon, Saskatoon, Sask.	1080
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