

*The joys and  
travails of  
a backyard  
Big Year*

# Go Big & Go Home





For yard birding, it is important to determine the best vantage points to see more birds. From this corner of the yard, a spotting scope makes it possible to view raptors and gulls over distant hills visible through the trees to the right of the house. Photo by © Rob Fergus.

**N**ot all Big Years require putting your whole life on hold. In 2015, while *Birding* Associate Editor Noah Strycker was pursuing his epic global Big Year, I set out to see how many birds I could see in the wilds of my own back yard. Now, at a time of global travel restrictions and sheltering at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the backyard Big Year may be an idea whose time has finally come. I offer here some ruminations on the ups and downs of my own extreme yard birding, with resources and ideas to enhance your own exploits.

## In the Beginning

I've always enjoyed the annual Big Sit! in October. The Big Sit! is pretty much what it sounds like: Individuals and teams around the world vie with each other to observe birds in 24 hours, all while staying within a 17-ft. diameter circle. The sewage ponds at the Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory were my Big Sit! spot in Austin, Texas. After I moved to Pennsylvania, I started doing the Big Sit! from home. In 2011, we moved to a 2.7-acre place in exurban Hunterdon County, New Jersey, and it proved a great place for the Big Sit! While enjoying my 2014 backyard Big Sit! I wondered how much fun it would be to do this all year long. How many birds could I find in my yard in a full year? It was one of those Babe the pig moments, one of those ideas I just couldn't shake, and so I started planning for the year.

Since 250 species is a good annual goal for Hunterdon County, I wondered if I could see 200 from my yard. I created spreadsheets of all the birds in the county, and when might be the best time to see them from my yard, and gave each species an ABA-style finding code ranging from one to five based on

how hard I thought it would be to see them from my yard. I set monthly goals, started a new backyard Big Year blog, and at 12:35 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2015, whistled up an Eastern Screech-Owl for my first bird of the year. Back outside at 5:35 a.m. that New Year's Day, I sat in darkness waiting for more birds to show up. It took longer than expected, but at 6:50 the first White-throated Sparrow called and I was off and running! By the end of the morning, I had seen 35 species, including three I had never previously seen from my yard—Lesser Black-backed Gull, Gadwall, and American Black Duck. I was super-excited and off to a great start. I was sure I would find many more surprises, and my goal of 200 for the year glowed brightly in my mind's eye. The next day I added flyby Common Mergansers to my list.

Then the reality of winter birding hit, and I didn't find another new bird until a lone Brown-headed Cowbird showed up 11 days later.

## Winter

Bewildered by the slow birding after such a strong start, I was outside each morning with my Kowa TSN-883 literally scoping the neighborhood for new birds. I watched the feeder constantly, sorting through hybrid chickadees and hoping for something unusual. Once during a snowstorm, I set up a Bluetooth speaker in the yard to play Common Redpoll flock calls in hopes of luring one to my feeders. Sure enough, one showed up for a few moments, grabbed some Nyjer seeds from the feeder, and moved on into the blizzard.

I discovered the best vantage points in the yard from which to see my neighbor's farm pond, and the distant gull flock that I could just barely see through a couple gaps in the trees, dispersing to the landfill each morning from their roost on Spruce Run Reservoir three miles away. The backyard Big Year turned out to be a great ID workshop for distant flying birds. I bought a 15-foot tripod deer stand so I could see even farther, including a small slice of the reservoir, which got me both Mute and Tundra swans. Years ago, Richard Crossley quipped that even Mute

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Shown here is the backyard Big Year command center, complete with spotting scope, bird feeders, and nocturnal flight call microphone. Photo by © Rob Fergus.

Swans can be tough to ID with enough distance, and he was right! But birds were starting to move, and the race was on to ID them as they moved north.

## Spring

One of my strategies was to listen with my Old Bird 21c nocturnal flight call microphone for birds migrating at night. Tough birds to find on the ground can be surprisingly abundant flying overhead at night. I reveled in the calls of American Bitterns, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Short-billed Dowitchers, Black-billed Cuckoos, and Gray-cheeked Thrushes—easy to miss in the county, let alone in my yard. Between my deer stand and the microphone, I was on a roll! Unfortunately, my neighbor complained that it made him uncomfortable to see me sitting up on my deer stand every time he took his new puppy out for a bathroom break, so I had to move it to the other end of my yard where the viewing wasn't as good. If you are going to spend a lot of time in your yard with what amounts to powerful surveillance equipment, it pays to keep a good relationship with your neighbors. By the end

of May, I had hoped to be at 160 species, but I figured my 139 wasn't too bad.

Then summer hit.

## Summer and Fall

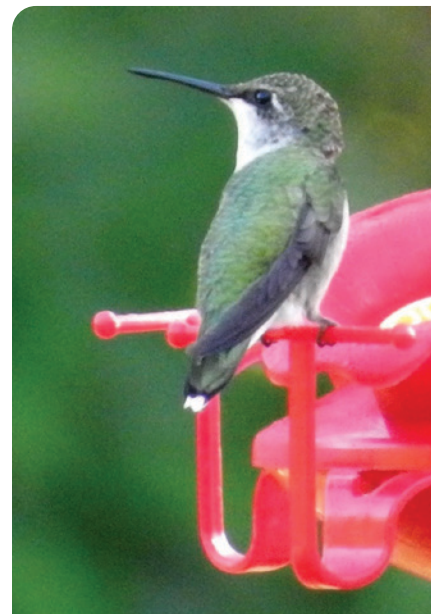
Summer in Pennsylvania is lovely. But not many birds are moving in June and July, so during those two months when I had hoped to get 12 new birds, I only managed to get one, a flyover American Kestrel that had somehow eluded me during spring migration. Fortunately, fall migration starts up again in mid-August, and between my morning circuit around the yard and listening in to my microphone, I started picking up Bobolinks and other early Neotropical migrants heading south. Uncommon migrants such as Yellow-bellied Flycatchers and Philadelphia Vireos made an appearance as the season wore on, and by mid-October I had picked up most of the possible new species one could expect—my last expected Code 2 birds for the year were Golden-crowned Kinglet and Winter Wren, leaving Great Horned Owl as the final holdout unseen by the end of the fall.

Watching hawks is a lovely autumn pursuit, and you don't have to go to the Cape May Bird Observatory or Hawk Mountain Sanctuary to have a good season. From my yard I was able to pick up most of the raptors that migrate through the region, including Golden

Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and late in the season a rare Northern Goshawk.

## Birding to the Bitter End

By the end of October, I was kind of spent. I was well behind where I had hoped to be, with only 156 birds for the year. I had a backlog of many, many hours of microphone recordings



A backyard Big Year involves getting to know your local individual birds very well, such as this Ruby-throated Hummingbird, and identifying it over and over every time you see it. Make sure it isn't a new year bird that has slipped into your yard. Photo by © Rob Fergus.



to go through from the spring and the fall, potentially harboring a bounty of new species to add via flight calls, but my energy flagged. I still birded the yard for at least an hour each day, but nothing new appeared. My last new bird of the year, species number 159, was a pair of Great Horned Owls that I was finally able to call up on Dec. 20. And with that, the year came to a close.

## In Retrospect

Hanging out in my yard for a year was a blast. Learning to identify distant specks in the sky or faint chip notes in my microphone was a joy. At the beginning, I had hoped local birding friends might join me to keep watch in my yard, but I was kidding myself. The path of the backyard Big Year is a lonely road. I kept hoping to find a rarity in the yard that would draw in a crowd of other birders, but the rarities I saw were mostly flyovers or birds mak-

ing only brief stops in the yard. I also found myself becoming frankly obsessed, afraid of what I might be missing at any given moment, if only I could be outside all the time! Boundaries, people! If you embark on this perilous yard birding path, be sure to nurture the other parts of yourself and your relationships. The backyard Big Year can be as emotionally taxing as Kenny Bostick's mad romp in *The Big Year*. If you find yourself comparing your eBird yard totals and mounting a one-sided competition with Michael O'Brien's yard in Cape May or Van Remsen's yard in Louisiana, you are probably taking it too far. Everyone's yard is different, so the lists can't really compare. But there are always more birds to find if you simply look and have a plan for finding more birds. I never did review all those hours of bird recordings, preferring to enjoy the mere possibility of Dunlin and Long-tailed Duck calls that are almost certainly recorded on there, rather than grind them out to push my 2015 yard list total higher. Yard birding, even extreme yard birding, is for fun. There is joy in mounting a Herculean effort to meet up with all these birds passing over and through your yard, but serenity in letting some of them slip by in mystery.



This Old Bird 21c microphone on a homemade stand was crucial for recording nocturnal migrants such as bitterns, rails, shorebirds, cuckoos, and thrushes that are otherwise almost impossible to find in the yard. Photo by © Rob Fergus.

The playing field for the author's backyard Big Year included the yard itself (house at the end of long driveway at bottom left) and surrounding neighborhood, including fields, woodlots, and a stock pond (right) visible from the yard. Photo by © Rob Fergus.





## Backyard Big Year Strategies and Resources

I've already mentioned a few of the strategies I employed in my backyard Big Year. These provide a real challenge and opportunity to up your birding game, all from the comfort of your own home. Here's a tip sheet:

■ **Get High**—The higher you can get, the farther you can see, and the more birds you can pull in. I used a tripod deer stand. Try upstairs windows, balconies, and other heights. But be safe. Sitting atop a 20-ft. ladder or on the edge of your roof might not be a good idea!

■ **On the Fly**—A lot of birds will be seen only briefly as they fly over your yard or through your neighborhood, so start paying atten-

tion to birds in flight. It is easy to identify a Rusty Blackbird if it is hopping around on the ground, but can you pick it up in a flock of other blackbirds streaming directly over your head as they move out for the day from a communal roost? Good resources for flight identification include the flight illustrations in the Sibley and Crossley guides, as well as a plethora of hawkwatching guides, including *Hawks in Flight*, *Hawks from Every Angle*, and *Hawks at a Distance*.

■ **Go the Distance**—Speaking of distance, some of those flying birds will be very, very far away, like my Mute Swans over a distant reservoir. Learn to take your time with distant birds. Many can be identified, but may require different identification marks than you are used to. If you haven't used your spotting scope much at home, it is as valuable here as it is at the hawkwatch or shore. *The Petersen Reference Guide to Seawatching* will help you with distant waterfowl and other birds, and *The Shorebird Guide* can help if you are lucky enough to pick out some distant shorebird flocks moving high overhead or off into the sunset.

■ **Let it Go**—Some birds will get away. You won't see them very long or very well. It is

When every bird counts, it is worth trying anything that might bring more birds to the yard—such as this spruce tree laden with orange halves to attract frugivores like this Northern Mockingbird, or, if you are lucky, overwintering orioles. Photo by © Rob Fergus.



The author's tripod deer stand was indispensable for obtaining a bigger view of the neighborhood, including swans on a reservoir over three miles away. Photo by © Rob Fergus.

always tempting to pin an identification on birds that aren't really seen well, to string the identification. Cut the string. Be honest about your limitations—and the limits of your perceptions and the views you get. You will have plenty of miracle IDs of birds seen well over a mile away or brief good looks right in the backyard. Let the others go.

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As with any Big Year, there is a lot of strategy involved in deciding where to bird at any given moment—in the case of the backyard Big Year, where in the yard to sit in order to find the most birds. *Photo by © Rob Fergus.*

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■ **Fly-by-Night Birding**—There are many birds going over your yard at night, so get a microphone and start listening in. The world of nocturnal flight call ID can be tough, one of the frontiers of bird identification. But the first time you hear a cuckoo calling in the dark, or a Whimbrel going over your house, hundreds of miles from any ocean, you will be addicted! If you are new to this realm, OldBird.org and the Nocturnal Flight Calls Facebook group are good places to get started.

■ **Listen Up**—If you are rusty on your vocal bird ID skills, the backyard Big Year is a great opportunity to brush up in the privacy of your own home. Being able to identify that warbler chip or distant vireo song can make or break your yard list. There are birds you will never see, but you can still claim them if you can

hear them (and identify them). There are lots of good resources here, including the *Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds*, bird ID apps such as Sibley Birds and Merlin, and the Larkwire bird song learning game.

■ **Geek Out**—Nothing feeds an obsession more than stats, and Big Year birding can generate stats to rival those of any other sport. Get to know when each and every bird has been seen in your county and the surrounding region. You may not have good rail habitat anywhere nearby, but those rails that breed north of you have to get there somehow; they aren't tunneling their way to Canada. If you know when each bird is passing through, you can make your plan for intercepting them as they fly over or through your yard. Of course, eBird

is the main tool for this. Make sure to check out distributions within 100 miles or more of your yard, especially for those birds that have to fly over the region, but may not find much stopover habitat where you live. 🌍



Got three young children in your life all day long? Bridget Butler, a.k.a. The Bird Diva, describes a “family style” backyard Big Year that was productive and educational. Go online for the story and helpful tips: [aba.org/magazine](http://aba.org/magazine).

