

WILDLIFE

The wing nuts

Drive for miles, spot a bird. Drive for miles, spot a bird. Repeat obsessively for a year. Jon Feenstra and others did just that. It's a frenzied rush called the Big Year, **Sue Horton** reports, and it's all for a glorious featherweight title.



LOW BEACH FOR THE TIMES

"IT'S so nice to be able to go birding again just for pleasure," says Jon Feenstra, pausing under a California live oak to watch a foraging ruby-crowned kinglet. His words seem odd given the circumstances. It's a little after 7 a.m. on a February morning, and it is cold and gray and raining steadily. But compared to the way Feenstra birded during 2003, this is a pleasant outing.

You see, 2003 was a big year for the Caltech PhD student. More precisely, it was a Big Year.

The whole thing started with a bet. In New Jersey visiting friends and family over Christmas 2002, Feenstra bragged about the huge variety of species near his home in Pasadena.

One thing led to another and soon he'd made a wager with an old birding friend that he could see more birds in a year in Los Angeles County than the other guy could see in three eastern states of his choice during the same period.

A shot at the record

At first, Feenstra's sole goal was beating his buddy. But by midyear, the friend had moved to Arizona and abandoned the challenge, and Feenstra was beginning to realize he might have a shot at something more: a Big Year.

The idea of a Big Year in birding is simple. A birder, usually a very serious and knowledgeable one, sets out to break the record for the most birds seen in a given geographic area in a single year. The area can be as small as a city or as large as the world.

The best-known kind of Big Year is one in which a birder attempts to break the record for the most birds seen during a calendar year in the American Birding Assn.'s listing area: Canada and the United States, except for Hawaii.

In Los Angeles County, the record Feenstra faced was 344 species, set by a South Bay birder named Kevin Larson in 1993. That's a daunting number.

The county has fewer than 300 native species, so to break the record Feenstra

would have to see nearly all of them and pick up dozens of casual vagrants that had gotten off course during migration and ended up outside their usual ranges.

Feenstra quickly devised a strategy. The Los Angeles Basin is well-covered by devoted birders. Whenever they spot something out of the ordinary, they're quick to let others know by leaving a message on a phone service called "the bird box," by posting on the Internet or both.

Feenstra knew that he had a good chance of piggybacking on the sightings of others if he checked frequently what had been seen in the basin. He would spend the rest of his time scouting areas that were less well-covered, bird-rich locales in the desert and mountains that might produce rarities he couldn't count on others to spot.

"I made a list of every bird it was vaguely possible to see and where it would be likely to show up if it came," he recalls.

"As the year went, I constantly recalculated my odds of seeing something, and went where the odds were best. In September, say, I'd hit the coastal migrant traps. In August I went to Plute Ponds [on Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert] twice a week."

Birders are a supportive bunch, and people wanted to help. Larson, the previous record holder, was particularly helpful, both in his ability to help plot strategy and in his willingness to call with unusual sightings.

Still, Feenstra says, the stress was intense, particularly because the pressures of being a graduate student in one of the country's best chemistry programs kept him from devoting as much time to birding as he would have liked.

A good ear

FEENSTRA'S attempt raises a question: Why would anyone subject himself to such a grueling regimen for a record that brings little beyond respect from a small community of serious birders?

But on this rainy morning in Easton Canyon, above Pasadena, Feenstra doesn't have to explain. He is birding with a sympathetic companion, Mark Obmascik, a Denver Journalist whose recent book "The Big Year" (Free Press, 2004) chronicles the attempts of three men to break the North American Big Year record during 1998, a remarkable year for birding because of a strong El Niño current, which brought numerous rarities to North America.

Obmascik's subjects were even more obsessed than Feenstra.

One, a wealthy New Jersey contractor, spent more than \$100,000 and logged 270,000 miles chasing every remarkable sighting in the American Birding Assn.'s listing area that year. Another, a young computer programmer addicted to junk food and caffeine, went deeply into debt in his run for the record. The third, a retired corporate executive, had always wanted to bird until he got his fill. And he finally did.

All three spent the year chasing rarities as they were sighted throughout North America. Each finished having seen more than 700 birds, a feat not accomplished by any birder since.

In the course of his research, Obmascik struggled to understand the drive many birders feel to keep lists and break records. One lifelong birder he interviewed, a Northern California man in his 80s, couldn't get into the field very often

because of health problems, so he decided to do a Big Year on television. "He'd just click through the channels watching and listening for birds," Obmascik says. "He had a good ear, and he could pick up even some of these international birds just by call." By the end of the year, after the man had watched and taped nearly 1,800 shows, his list totaled 1,136 species.

Obmascik, an avid but casual birder himself, was at first surprised by the depth of his subjects' knowledge and devotion. The first time he went out in the field with computer programmer Greg Miller, he couldn't believe his ability to identify birds by their calls.

"He just started calling out names, and he hadn't even raised his binoculars. I thought he was putting me on, but it was all by ear," he recalls. "Some people know the first three chords to every Rolling Stones song, but he knows 600 bird calls."

Feenstra, who is also acutely attuned to bird calls, has a hard time fully explaining his drive to break a record. But after spending a year documenting the 1998 Big Year, Obmascik thinks he gets it. As he wrote in the introduction to "The Big Year," "The truth is that everyone has obsessions. Most people manage them. Birders, however, indulge them." It's really that simple.

Honor among birders

ASIDE from "why," another question Feenstra and Obmascik say they frequently field is: How can it be known that people don't cheat in compiling Big Year lists? Again the answer is simple: because they wouldn't. For Feenstra, it seems obvious: "You bird because you really want to see the birds," he says. "When you're contributing something to a scientific record, you have to put it out there accurately so other people can build on that. When I publish a [chemistry] paper, I publish the evidence as well. I have that same impulse birding. Of course, with birds you can't always repeat the experiment."

"It's a question that strikes at the heart of the sport," adds Obmascik. "There's no collecting, so birders don't end up with trophies, like hunters. Birders have only their word, and their reputations are extremely important to them."

Still, Obmascik did as much check-

ing as possible. All his subjects kept careful notes of their sightings, and Obmascik checked the accuracy of small details in their notes, like when the sun had set on a particular day. He also checked his subjects' reputations with other birders. "I even talked to people who saw my guys seeing some of these birds," he says.

To nail a thrasher

TOWARD the end of the year, having put 13,000 miles on his car and having seen some remarkable birds, Feenstra was worried. In late December, with just a few days to go before he had to leave Los Angeles for Christmas in New Jersey, he was still one bird short of Larson's 1993 record. But then, on Dec. 18, he got his 345th bird — and the record — with an unusual winter wren in Malibu Canyon.

Still wanting a cushion, he called all his contacts in the county to see if any other rarity had been spotted. A call to Larson, the former record holder, paid off. In a Gardena park, he had just seen a prairie warbler, a bird not normally seen west of Texas. Feenstra was there at dawn the next morning. Five minutes after convincing a work crew to let him into the park, he had his 346th and final bird of the year.

The only native species Feenstra didn't see during his L.A. County Big Year was a sage thrasher, an uncommon desert dweller that's nevertheless fairly reliably seen in the Antelope Valley. "I just couldn't seem to get one," he says.

Even though Feenstra's Big Year is over, he would still like to see a sage thrasher in the county, but his desire is less urgent now that he's not trying to break any records.

While birding in the Antelope Valley last weekend, he saw 71 species of birds, a good day by any measure even without the thrasher or anything else particularly rare. He is glad he can again enjoy such an outing.

"I don't ever again want to think of birding without a new bird as a wasted day," he says. But he acknowledges the adjustment hasn't come easily. "It's still not quite out of me," he says. "I'm still not entirely readjusted to birding as an escape instead of a fight."

Sue Horton is the editor of the Times' Opinion section.