

THE BIG YEAR: A TALE OF MAN, NATURE AND FOWL OBSESSION

By Mark Obmascik. Doubleday, 2004. 268 pages. ISBN 0-385-60532-3. Hardback, £12.99.

Bird races are probably the most tongue-in-cheek 'brand' of birdwatching, and therefore not everyone's cup of tea. They are a North American invention, which, axiomatically, means that extreme examples of the genre abound. So there are Big Days, Big Sits (use your imagination), 'World Series' team-sponsored 24-hour events and, forming the basis for this book, Big Years. Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher luxuriated in non-stop, day-after-day birding for three months in 1953 and published the tale of their 30,000-mile odyssey as *Wild America*. Peterson added a seemingly innocuous one-liner as a footnote stating that his 'year's list' amounted to 572 species. Well, that did it!

In the same way that no-one remembers the name of the second person to walk on the moon, the guy who racked up the next North American year list has long since been forgotten. He was Stuart Keith, a 25-year-old graduate fresh out of, wait for it, Oxford! His score? 598 in 1956. Since then efforts at attaining ever-higher totals have smacked of attempts on Everest. In 1973, 18-year-old Kenn Kaufman thumbed 69,200 miles across the continent, survived on cat food, sold his blood for cash, and saw 669 species – alas, still three less than a motorized rival, Floyd Murdoch.

Mark Obmascik's book follows the fortunes of three combatants who devoted every second of 1998 to a North American Big Year. For each, the planning was of a moon shot degree of thoroughness even though, to begin with, none of them knew that an opponent had entered the field. The results were dizzy-high tallies, tinged with end-of-an-era sadness. How come? Well, two factors strongly suggest that the 1998 totals will never be bettered. First, trips to Attu Island, the most westerly of the Aleutian Islands with a regular supply of Palearctic spring migrants, have come to an end since the US authorities closed the island to visitors in 2000. Second, sweaty dashes to airports to board flights at the last minute following news of a rare bird are likely to be dogged by security red tape in a post 9-11 world.

What is the book like? You might be tempted to guess that it is splattered with exclamation marks and puerile, twitcher-esque prose of the 'expletive deleted' variety. Far from it. Nor does it wallow in any navel-gazing introspective, setting birders apart from the rest of *Homo sapiens* as though we are 'tribe members' worthy of literary psychoanalysis. To be honest, I expected both. Instead, I got one of the greatest breaths of fresh air to be published as birding narrative. This book is so good that I gave up birding time to read it. I could not put it down and, when I had finished, I desperately wanted more. Mark Obmascik writes about the three central characters in a way that makes you think you are reading fast-paced crime fiction. He spent huge amounts of time with each and builds character portraits that, over the course of the story, make them live in the book's pages as much as Wayne Rooney comes alive on a television screen.

This is book about people more than just birds. No cobwebs seem to be outside the reach of Mark Obmascik's broom, and each character emerges as likeable – or at least absorbing and forgivable. Into the bargain, the book is an Aladdin's Cave of homespun anecdotes. Wide-ranging topics are showcased – the history of military campaigns fought on Attu, the

processes that cause El Nino – yet the author manages to top chunks of knowledge with sparkles of humour. Here’s one example: ‘All told, the El Nino of 1997 killed at least 2,000 people and caused at least \$36 billion damage of economic damage. It did, however, make for excellent birding.’

I hate to spoil such richly deserved praise with a quibble. Moreover, I bet my gripe has nothing to do with the author. It is this. Publishers, please use initial capitals for bird names. Please do not belittle the things that fascinate us by reducing their species names to a demeaning and confusing lower case. Finally, back to first impressions. Logically, this has to mean the cover design. Yes, like the rest of the contents, it is also funny and memorable. So much so that, in future, I think we will all know the name – Obmascik!

Anthony McGeehan