To See Every Bird on Earth


Dan Koeppel tells the story of his father, Dr. Richard Koeppel, a chronically unhappy medical doctor with two overwhelming obsessions: to see as many species of birds as possible, world-wide, and to read, cover to cover, every novel that was short-listed for or won the Booker Literary Prize.

Each chapter begins engagingly with a postage stamp that features a bird from the collection of Chris Gibbins who has amassed stamps depicting 2950 species (a record list!), and a paragraph from Richard Koeppel’s notebooks telling of a numbered addition to his life-list.

One learns about the methodology of listers, particularly the rules laid down by the American Birding Association (pages 195-197). Dan explains, in lazier person’s terms, “lumping” and “splitting” of species. Despite the ever-escalating CPB (cost per bird), Dan fully realizes that the listing process is “intensely arcane, fascinating, and absurd.”

This is a quick and easy read, but in no way uplifting. Dan’s brutally frank, very personal psychoanalysis of his father and mother is somewhat excessive and distracting. Dr. Richard Koeppel, it seems, entered medicine to please his parents, and sadly failed to find a solace in excessive use of marijuana, alcohol and nicotine. Most of his career was in emergency medicine, where roughly half his time could be spent birding. When his bad habits caught up with him in the form of larynx cancer, Richard Koeppel’s personal list was at 7080 species.

I most enjoyed the behind-the-scenes accounts of Jim Clements, who compiled the first one-volume list of birds of the world, and has amassed a personal life list of 7200; Victor Emmanuel, who began the first field trips designed to add maximum numbers of birds to each customer’s life-list; and Bret Whitney, who, without ability to identify the bird himself, would check off a bird when a guide called out its name (he reached nearly 8000); Michael Lambarth and Sandra Fisher of England (Michael quit when his beloved partner died); Joel Abramson, a medical doctor who hired top birders to lead endurance-test expeditions; Stuart Keith, founder of the American Birding Association, who was recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records when his list reached 4300; Roger Tory Peterson, who reached the “half-way total” of 4800 in the 1980s; Bill Rapp, nearing 7000; Jim Plyler, a retired oil executive at 7200; Peter Winter and John Danzenbacher, military men, at 7800 and about 7750, respectively; Peter Kaestner, with 7958; Tom Gullick, leader of those still alive, with 8114; Phoebe Snetsinger, still tops, who reached nearly 8500 before she died in a car accident in Madagascar in 1999.

What are the downsides to this book? The title is a bit misleading, since Dan Koeppel knows full well that no human will ever see every bird (of about 9600 species) on earth. An index to birder’s names would have been helpful. Worse, Richard Koeppel, the protagonist of this story, is a sad and pathetic person, lacking enthusiasm for his profession, with complicated marital and family situations. He is a perfectionist but on rare occasions does he show much feeling, even for birds. But Richard has made amends with his son, Dan, and has recently turned his attention to butterflies.

All readers of this review, especially the writer, are sinners. We claim to be environmentalists, yet many or perhaps most of us drive gas-guzzling vehicles to pursue our sometimes obsessive hobby. At least we fall short of the obscenely high travel expenses of certain of the Big Listers.

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Wildfire in the Wilderness


A woman who lives a solitary life in the wilderness of the British Columbian mountains, dozens of kilometres from her nearest neighbours, has not isolated herself from her community. Her life is a heart-warming set of tales explaining the connection she has to the community of mountain dwellers, outfitters, and bush pilots in her immediate neighbourhood as well as friends, publishers, fans of her books and international tourists in the wider community. The reader is introduced to her dogs, her history of publications, her ingenuity in building and maintaining a wilderness site and even the state of her bank account while following her stories of maintaining solitude in the mountains and contacts with the outside world.

A hiker, camper and outdoorsman would certainly relate to Chris Czajkowski’s stories and her descriptions...
Tale of a Great White Fish

By Maggie de Vries. Greystone Books, Douglas & McIntyre

Tale of a Great White Fish is a story of a giant white sturgeon. Through its long life, the sturgeon overcomes many obstacles in its battle to survive and reproduce. The story deals with the interaction between sturgeons and people, along the way providing the reader with a wealth of information and insight into the natural history of the sturgeon.

The story starts in 1828, when the sturgeon, named “Big Fish,” was a small and defenceless egg hatched in the Fraser River. She matures into a larva and then into a fry. As a fry she must eat thousands of other small water creatures to grow. Fry are also especially vulnerable to predators, and most of the young fry never reach adulthood. The fry that survive mature into adults before returning to their spawning ground to lay their own eggs.

There are many dangers that the sturgeon must overcome. For most of their long existence sturgeon have been around since the time of the dinosaurs, the threats have been natural: predators, natural calamities and disease. Today, human fishermen and the caviar industry are one of the greatest perils. Big Fish was hooked by a fisherman, but fortunately she was freed by some young boys and was able to escape. During the Hells Gate Slide in 1913 many migrating sturgeon were killed. Big Fish survived, but she was forced to find a new place to spawn. Later, Big Fish had to find a new home because the lake she was living in was drained. Later still, an unknown disease swept through the Fraser River and many sturgeon died and were washed up on the shores of the lake. When the story closes, almost a hundred years later, Big Fish is still surviving, but continues to face many challenges.

Scientists study sturgeons to help them survive. They keep track of their weight and size, and try to stop overfishing. There are now laws which prevent the fishing of these magnificent animals.

The book is written as a story and at the end there is a useful list of sturgeon facts, a labelled diagram of a...