

A Brotherly Love Big Year

Ted Floyd

Ed Fingerhood put the idea in my mind: a 1998 Big Year in Philadelphia, the city of Brotherly Love, the land of steel and asphalt. And a land of fabulous birding, which Ed proved convincingly during his own 1996 Big Year campaign, when he found 208 species within the 141 square miles that comprise the city. Early on, I got the impression that Ed really wanted me to break his record[†]. He would have liked to have done it himself, naturally. But he was tired, and his health was poor, and he didn't have the time. Ed was getting serious about writing the *Birds of Philadelphia*, his magnum opus, and a distillation of his immense knowledge of the city and its birds.

It didn't really bother me that Ed was rather proprietary about "my" Big Year. He coached me, and cajoled me, and even admonished me when I was falling behind schedule or going about it the wrong way. Ed was keen for me to surpass his mark, but I was in it for something other than chasing the record. The real appeal, for me, was the opportunity to explore the paradox of Philadelphia: a land of low-income housing and heavy industry, but also home to one of the most spectacular old-growth forests in Pennsylvania; a land of freeways and high rise office buildings, as well as bucolic grasslands and secluded lagoons. A Big Year, I would discover, was a chance to learn more about the city in a single year than I might otherwise have learned in a lifetime.

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January first, Andorra Natural Area. It was about 3:45 a.m., and stone cold, when Shoko Kuroishi and I arrived at this lovely little woodlot in the far northwestern corner of the city. Our quest was Eastern Screech-Owl, which we got with little difficulty. *One down, two hundred eight to go.* The rest of the day was forgettable: Rock Doves and European Starlings and their ilk. *I'd have to go back to my list to check.* But right at sundown I made an unaccompanied

impulse-visit to Roosevelt Park, in the shadow of Veteran's Stadium, where I found a Black-crowned Night-Heron—for all I know, the only night-heron in the entire state, that day. Looking back upon that New Year's Day, I realize that it was wonderfully emblematic of the year to come: a bunch of "junk birds", and a rarity; traffic jams and holiday shoppers, plus a magical encounter with a screech-owl; the sterility of the city, and the resourcefulness and bounty of its bird life.

January tenth, Northeast Airport. The day had been a complete wash. I was a participant in the annual Philadelphia Mid-Winter Bird Census, and my assignment was to cover the Torresdale section of the city—way up near the border with Bucks County. Nothing had gone right: a flat tire, locked gates, lousy birding, you get the picture. I was just going through the motions, then, when I stopped in at the Northeast Airport on the drive home. Yet the next ten minutes of birding more than made up for the preceding ten hours of disappointment: an American Pipit flushed from the runway; a tardy Common Yellowthroat emerged from a tangle of weeds; and a sleek Merlin roosted on a navigation structure. I would later learn from census organizer Keith Russell that an unprecedented and record-breaking 108 species were recorded in the city that day.

January eleventh, Warbler Woods. The fallen leaves were frost-covered and the ground was frozen solid, as Winston Moody and I crept through the darkness in the Warbler Woods area near the edge of Tinicum National Wildlife Refuge. Only the distant din of I-95 besmirched an otherwise silent, almost serene, winter night in the city. We were giddy with delight, if not completely surprised, when we heard the clarion tooting of a nearby Northern Saw-whet Owl—probably the same bird that Doris McGovern had seen the day before. It was still an hour before sunrise, but the whole day was already an unqualified

[†]Ed set a Big Year record for the "Modern Era". The all-time record belongs to the incomparable Johnny Miller, who found 225 species in 1966. That record will stand forever.

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success. On the long walk back to the car, an American Woodcock flushed, unseen and anticlimactic, and rebuked us with a few dispirited chirps and twitters.

February first, Spring Lane. I suppose Spring Lane will never make it into a book on Pennsylvania's birding hot spots. After all, there are probably ten thousand places just like it, on all the little family farms of Appalachia and Amish Country. But that's exactly the reason why Spring Lane is so special, and so precious, for Philadelphians. It's an escape to the country and a journey back in time, and it's entirely within the city boundaries. And it's a place where you can still find singing bluebirds and squawking pheasants and even a meadowlark or two—as Wendy and Winston Moody and I discovered on this sunny afternoon.

February seventh, Philadelphia Navy Yard. It was as unnatural a scene as you can imagine: graffiti emblazoned warehouses and hulking storage tanks in the foreground, a futuristic-looking petroleum processing facility off in the distance, and twisted scraps of circuitry and razorwire in the lifeless interstices of asphalt and concrete. And a Barn Owl—pallid and wraithlike—slipping silently by on gossamer wings. It was my first sighting in Philadelphia, and one of a tiny handful I had ever seen in Pennsylvania; for my companion, Pelopidas Nicolaides, it was his first Barn Owl since his childhood in Cyprus. There was a dreamy and evanescent quality about the whole experience, but this brief encounter with the owl was etched in our minds forever.

March twenty-seventh, Roosevelt Park. An oasis within an oasis. That's the situation with the tiny freshwater marsh in South Philly's Roosevelt Park—itsself an island of green in a sea of cement. The marsh can be a great place for wintering passerines, it is a notable migrant trap, and it is even home to a handful of hardy breeders. And it is always a fine place to poke around in on a warm afternoon in early spring. The star attraction this afternoon was a Common Moorhen in fresh breeding plumage. The bird ambled clumsily through the middle of the marsh, paused briefly on a grassy tussock, looked around and called loudly, and finally slunk into the cattails. Meanwhile, a surreptitious gang of Wilson's Snipes probed industriously in the ample and abundant goo.

April seventeenth, Upper Wissahickon. The neighborhoods of northwest Philadelphia—Roxborough, Manayunk, Germantown, Chestnut Hill, and Mount Airy—are well known for their cobblestone streets, sidewalk cafes, and corner shops. And here in the heart of Philadelphia's famous "Mainline" district is to be found one of the finest forest remnants in all of Pennsylvania. A warm drizzle was falling on the woods this morning, when Michael Pratt and I arrived at the Bell's Mill Road parking area. It was barely light, but a Louisiana Waterthrush was loudly declaiming from the bare branches of a sycamore overhanging the banks of Wissahickon Creek. We caught a glimpse of the bird, but it flushed—around the bend and out of sight. The drizzle developed into a downpour, and we parted company with this will-o'-the-wisp of the Wissahickon, still singing in the rain.

May twenty-fifth, Fort Mifflin. It's the sort of place that attracts the notice of only a handful of dedicated history buffs: modest, out of the way, and largely unrestored, Fort Mifflin was the site of a long succession of rather undistinguished ("ignominious" might be more accurate) campaigns in American military history. It happens, however, to be a great place for birding—offering as it does a potpourri of weedy thickets, wooded swamps, and best of all a retention pond. For several days now, the retention pond had provided refuge and refueling to a small flock of mud-colored Least Sandpipers; and today they were accompanied by a single gravel-colored Semipalmated Sandpiper. Is there a difference between mud and gravel? You bet there is!

June twenty-first, Tinicum. The summer doldrums in Philadelphia confront the enervated birder with the double whammy of oppressive heat and ornithological ennui. It's a psychological challenge that saps the spirit of even the most dedicated city birder. Indeed, the only thing that got me out to Tinicum this buggy, hazy morning was the prodding of two out-of-town, and as yet unjaded, visitors to Philadelphia. Tree Swallows skimmed the loosestrife-infested waterways, Marsh Wrens chorused from the *Phragmites*, and a family group of Yellow Warblers cavorted about the lush foliage of a streamside catalpa. In other words: the usual suspects. Tinicum is always good for a surprise, however, and this morning's was a bombshell: a beautiful Bald Eagle, wheeling in broad circles over the main impoundment.

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July twenty-sixth, Torresdale. The status of the Purple Martin in Philadelphia is curious. The species shows up annually, but only at a certain place (the Delaware River waterfront in the Torresdale neighborhood of northeastern Philadelphia) and only at a certain time of year (for a few weeks starting in late July). My knowledge of this phenomenon is owed entirely to Ed Fingerhood. Or as Ed put it more bluntly: it was to him alone that I owed species #179 on my 1998 city year list. There was something, though, about this sighting, this statistic, that transcended mere phenomenology. That is because there is a ritualistic aspect about the return of the martins each year. They are an antidote for the entrenched lassitude of summer in the city. They are the harbingers of a new season.

August third, Sun Oil Pond. On still summer mornings, you can smell it all the way from South Street. On the drive to the Philadelphia International Airport, you get past it as fast as possible. To be sure, the putrid Sun Oil Plant does not leap to mind when one thinks of leisure destinations within the city. Yet it is a favored layover for migrant waders, and a natural magnet for area birders. The *pièce de résistance*—if I may use that term in connection with an oil refinery—is a shallow holding pond ringed by concentric circles of slime, sludge, and pond scum. Today the pond was teeming with shorebirds, including two brand new arrivals: a Western Sandpiper out in the water a ways, and a rather dopey-looking Semipalmated Plover standing off to the side.

September thirteenth, Carpenter Woods. There is a temptation to think of spring and fall migration as mirror images, as equal and opposite. Just press REWIND each fall, and watch the spring migration in reverse. Or in modern parlance, simply *toggle* between the seasons. Problem is, the analogy is faulty. There are qualities about a September morning that find no counterpart, no meaningful comparison, in the month of May. The leisureliness, the expansiveness, the casual majesty of early autumn instead arises full-formed from the fecundity of summer. That was the morning's lesson at Carpenter Woods—where the tipsy, top-heavy joe-pye-weed stood tall as a man, and the amethyst-colored ironweed taller still. And where a luxurious grove of jewelweed and nettle harbored a medley of migrants, including two that I had missed earlier in the year—a lovely lime-colored Tennessee Warbler and a mucus-colored (and not unlovely) Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.

October third, Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. A sprawling second-growth woodlot in northwest Philadelphia, the Schuylkill Center is still home to breeding Kentucky Warblers and Acadian Flycatchers, to wintering waxwings and accipiters, and to myriad migrant passerines. Today's offerings included a smart-looking White-crowned Sparrow and a scruffy Lincoln's Sparrow, both of them perched in plain view atop an unkempt tangle of cuttings and compost. The Schuylkill Center, created some twenty-five years ago, was an idea whose time had not—and still has not—yet come. It is a privately held, pay-as-you-go wildlife refuge, and as such resented by area birders. Were it a strip mall or supermarket, would there not be an incognizance of environmental wrongdoing, borne of complicity and consummated by complacency? The implication is that home accessories and processed food are more greatly to be valued than sparrows in a brush pile.

November eleventh, West Philadelphia. Darkness had fallen, and we hurried home, barely noticing the sounds of the city at night—the crackle of a police radio, a bus rumbling by, the wailing of a distant siren. And the mournful, melancholy chatter of migrating Tundra Swans—so evocative, so emblematic of wilderness, so seemingly out of place. We barely caught their form in the muted glow of the downtown skyline as they snaked their way south over the city. The swans were guided not by the shimmering opalescence of the full moon, however romantic that notion may have seemed. Rather, they were beckoned by the certain promise of good eating and safe haven in the muck-filled marshes of Tinicum, ten minutes from here, or perhaps the Chesapeake Bay, still two hours hence.

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December thirty-first, Philadelphia International Airport. Nearly three weeks had passed since Keith Russell called to tell me that Ed Fingerhood had died in his sleep. Just a few days before his death, Ed went birding at East Park Reservoir and found a real doozie: a rare Red-throated Loon. Had I been with Ed, the loon would have been #208. And had I been with him, Ed would not have suppressed his gleeful satisfaction, even beneath that crotchety veneer of patrician erudition, at my achievement. "I knew you could do it," he would have

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snorted, with a heartfelt delight that belied his outer gruffness. “And don’t you dare rest on your laurels,” he would have gone on to exhort me.

The day after Ed’s memorial service, Keith and I visited East Park Reservoir, where I saw #208. Not the Red-throated Loon, that haughty, silvery waif from the coast; no, it (too) had departed. Rather, a hen Greater Scaup, mundane and molasses-colored, loafing in a large raft of Canvasbacks and Common Mergansers at this most improbable of city hot spots—haunted by hookers and heroin addicts, littered with condoms and crack vials. Yet possessed of withered

beauty, and brimming with bird life. Through Ed’s eyes I had learned to see farther, more clearly, more caringly.

Late in the day on New Year’s Eve, I traveled by myself to the Philadelphia Airport, in a last-ditch effort to find #209. Horned Lark was my best bet, and Snow Bunting was a possibility. And it would have been imprudent to rule out a rarity: an Iceland Gull on the river, or a Snowy Owl sitting on the runway. I watched, and waited, and remembered. Twilight fell, and after that the dark.

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