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The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession

Mark Obmascik

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Every year on January 1, a quirky crowd of adventurers storms out across North America for a spectacularly competitive event called a Big Year -- a grand, grueling, expensive, and occasionally vicious, "extreme" 365-day marathon of birdwatching.
For three men in particular, 1998 would be a whirlwind, a winner-takes-nothing battle for a new North American birding record. In frenetic pilgrimages for once-in-a-lifetime rarities that can make or break their lead, the birders race each other from Del Rio, Texas, in search of the rufous-capped warbler, to Gibsons, British Columbia, on a quest for Xantus's hummingbird, to Cape May, New Jersey, seeking the offshore great skua. Bouncing from coast to coast on their potholed road to glory, they brave broiling deserts, roiling oceans, bug-infested swamps, a charge by a disgruntled mountain lion, and some of the lumpiest motel mattresses known to man.
The unprecedented year of beat-the-clock adventures ultimately leads one man to a new record -- one so gigantic that it is unlikely ever to be bested...finding and identifying an extraordinary 745 different species by official year-end count.
Prize-winning journalist Mark Obmascik creates a rollicking, dazzling narrative of the 275,000-mile odyssey of these three obsessives as they fight to the finish to claim the title in the greatest -- or maybe the worst -- birding contest of all time. With an engaging, unflappably wry humor, Obmascik memorializes their wild and crazy exploits and, along the way, interweaves an entertaining smattering of science about birds and their own strange behavior with a brief history of other bird-men and -women; turns out even Audubon pushed himself beyond the brink when he was chasing and painting the birds of America.
A captivating tour of human and avian nature, passion and paranoia, honor and deceit, fear and loathing, *The Big Year* shows the lengths to which people will go to pursue their dreams, to conquer and categorize -- no matter how low the stakes. This is a lark of a read for anyone with birds on the brain -- or not.

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