

Book Reviews

ZOOLOGY

Arrivals and Rivals: A Birding Oddity

By Adrian Riley. 2005. Brambleby Books, PO Box 410, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, AL5 5XQ UK. 165 pages. £7.99 paper.

Many of you will know I am not a lister (or twitcher as they are called in Britain.). I am nowhere near competitive enough. I really do not care if you have seen more than me, as long as I see what I want to see. This is a book about the author's efforts to meet the ultimate twitcher's challenge – to become the British Twitcher of the Year. So I was intrigued as to why he did it and against what social backdrop.

The author starts his year with his retirement and a consequent move to Norfolk. Now Norfolk is a very good location for a birdwatcher as it has an interesting list of annual birds and gets a great number of vagrants. The author starts his year as a very keen birder who keeps an annual list. His early partnership with an avid twitcher nets him a very respectable winter list by the end of February. His retirement allows him the time to chase many rarities, particularly those on his new back door step.

Then his tone starts to change as he become more greedy for ticks. He pushes himself harder and farther to add a new bird. He finds he has become a "combat birder, where the tick transcends everything else. Friendships pull apart and then become bitter and paranoid. He becomes over-emotional and over-tired. The competition becomes a war and many of the joys of birding fall to the wayside. The end of December comes as a relief. The fighting is over and he has won with a tally of 380 compared to the 573 on the official list of birds of Great Britain sanctioned by British Ornithologists' Union's Records Committee (BOURC).

His total is over two-thirds of the British list. Or is it? He includes one bird that had not made it to the official list by November 2005 (Elegant Tern, although this California to Chile bird is on the Irish list – and it appears "Britain" still includes Ireland for ticklisters. The BOURC however states "Species recorded from the Republic of Ireland (jurisdiction of the Irish Rare Birds Committee (IRBC)) and the Channel Islands are not covered in any reports or lists produced by the BOURC). There are two species (Baikal Teal and White-headed Duck) for which there is "reasonable doubt" and therefore "they form no part of the British list" (quotation marks are BOURC text). He has also added five species whose taxonomy as a full species is

still in debate. Again the BOURC has not seen fit to add them at this time. BOURC has split redpoll into three species, but most authorities, including the American Ornithologists Union and Birdlife International, recognize only two species saying the taxonomy of the Lesser Redpoll is no longer valid. His total is submitted for scrutiny, but I am not clear who does this or what reference they used to make his list "official."

I was amazed at how well-organized rarity chasing is in Britain. Although the author does not explain the system, I deduced there is a manned Rare Bird Alert (RBA) that accepts and vets calls, issues bulletins by pager and keeps the information up to date. This means a birder chasing a vagrant in the far north can receive an alert with instructions and drive to the south coast for another tick on the same day!

The cost of this epic is that he has seen the darkest side of himself and others. Withholding or obscuring RBA information is only part of the "game." He endured a great deal of discomfort, potential legal action, sloshing through that awful British weather and in driving many long, lonely hours. As well it cost him friendship and about \$16 000 Canadian.

To his credit, he maintained a sense of humour and never really lost the true meaning of birding (although you had to wonder on occasions!). He also never lowered himself to questionable sightings or inclusions. Questionable practices is a different question.

I was amazed at the number of vagrants that turned up in Britain in a single year. Over 30% of his ticks were single sightings and another 11% were two sightings only.

I was truly fascinated by this book. It is certainly a book for all birders – sane and insane – and definitely a must for all marathon twitchers. I enjoyed the writer's style and I hope he takes on a new project with a different, more valid objective that leads to another book (perhaps he could retrace the steps of Henry Seebohm; *Siberia in Asia: A Visit to the Valley of the Yesnay in East Siberia, with Description of the Natural History, Migration of Birds, etc. 1882?*). Then he would avoid adding his last sentence in the book – "In the end, it matters not a jot."

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