

To See Every Bird on Earth

By Dan Koepfel. 2005. Hudson Street Press, New York, New York, USA. 278 pages. \$24.95 U.S./\$35.

Dan Koepfel tells the story of his father, Dr. Richard Koepfel, 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 Koepfel'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 layperson'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 Koepfel, it seems, entered medicine to please his parents, and sadly failed to find a fulfilling niche in medicine. His marriage failed early. He became a morose, rather pathetic man who found 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 Koepfel'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 lacks formal postgraduate education in ornithology but has succeeded the late Ted Parker as a finder and describer of new species in South America.

One also meets Richard's competitors. Within our region, North and Central America, Dan Canterbury

has seen a record 1731 species. Peter Kaestner, who traveled widely in the diplomatic service, was the first person to have seen a representative of all 159 avian families. Others in competition with Richard Koepfel for the world list have been Harvey Gilston of Britain, 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 Danzenbacker, 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 Koepfel 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 Koepfel, 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 only 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

By Chris Czajkowski. 2006. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, British Columbia, Canada. 221 pages. \$19.95 Paper.

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