

To See Every Bird on Earth

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

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 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 Koeppel, 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 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 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 Koeppel 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 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 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

which make the mountains a home. The well-being of the environment becomes close to the heart of any dweller of the wilderness and the threat of nature taking a turn for the worst can send dwellers of the backwoods to worry over their personal charge, the nature and landscape around them. Sustained inclement weather, freak storms, too much snow in a season, frost at the wrong time, drought in the wrong season or prolonged drought in any season, are all causes for worry but a natural disaster like a wildfire is feared above all. Though the title tells us only of one dramatic event in the history of her lake, cabins and near environment, the reader is drawn into her whole lifestyle of protecting, nurturing and living within the environment which she has come to call home.

As the story unfolds, Czajkowski leads us into her world, travelling long distances, keeping up with modern technology, camping and hiking with her tourist helpers. She is home in her particular isolated part of the world a long way from her nearest neighbours but connected with them by regular radio conversations, listening to radio broadcasts and occasionally eavesdropping on her neighbours' conversations, and finally email as that technology became available. At the same time, she is host to the world by operating a small guest house for people willing to travel the distance to spend a few days with her, or international wanderers who pay by passing a few weeks working and helping her with projects.

Finally the reader is led to the hot dry summer of 2004 and the devastating fire, the Lonesome Lake Fire which was well reported to the Canadian public as one of many fires in a hot dry summer, but to people of

that remote region, a disaster which shaped their environment for years to come. The reader is invited to travel with Czajkowski through the fear and uncertainty of watching gathering smoke and distressing news from various watchers in neighbouring valleys. We are inspired to evacuate with her to safer areas, but without any assurance that home or lifestyle could be preserved. Czajkowski leads us along her tale with interesting anecdotes and humorous stories about her dogs, friends, and people who come to visit her. She is an engaging story-teller and keeps the reader's attention for hours or just a few minutes at a time as the book is filled with short stories, portions of her diary and longer accounts of specific incidents.

The story builds in an entertaining way through her history of building the cabins, receiving visitors, including facts about making one's life in the wilderness at the same time maintaining connections firmly planted in the outside world. The fire is the high point of the book and gets the reader to the excitement of living her experience of the fear, doubt, loneliness and response of care for her own animals and the natural dwellers of her wilderness world. The reader enters into the story with her and can live the excitement she feels. In our sheltered world, our decisions are not always the same as the author's but she puts her concern and care for her environment in front of the reader and shows us a different world to enjoy for a little while then look forward, like her globe-trotting visitors, to the next visit we might have with her.

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YOUNG NATURALISTS

Tale of a Great White Fish

By Maggie de Vries. Greystone Books, Douglas & McIntyre Publishing Group, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. 34 pages. \$12.95.

The book *Tale of a Great White Fish* follows the 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 over-fishing. 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