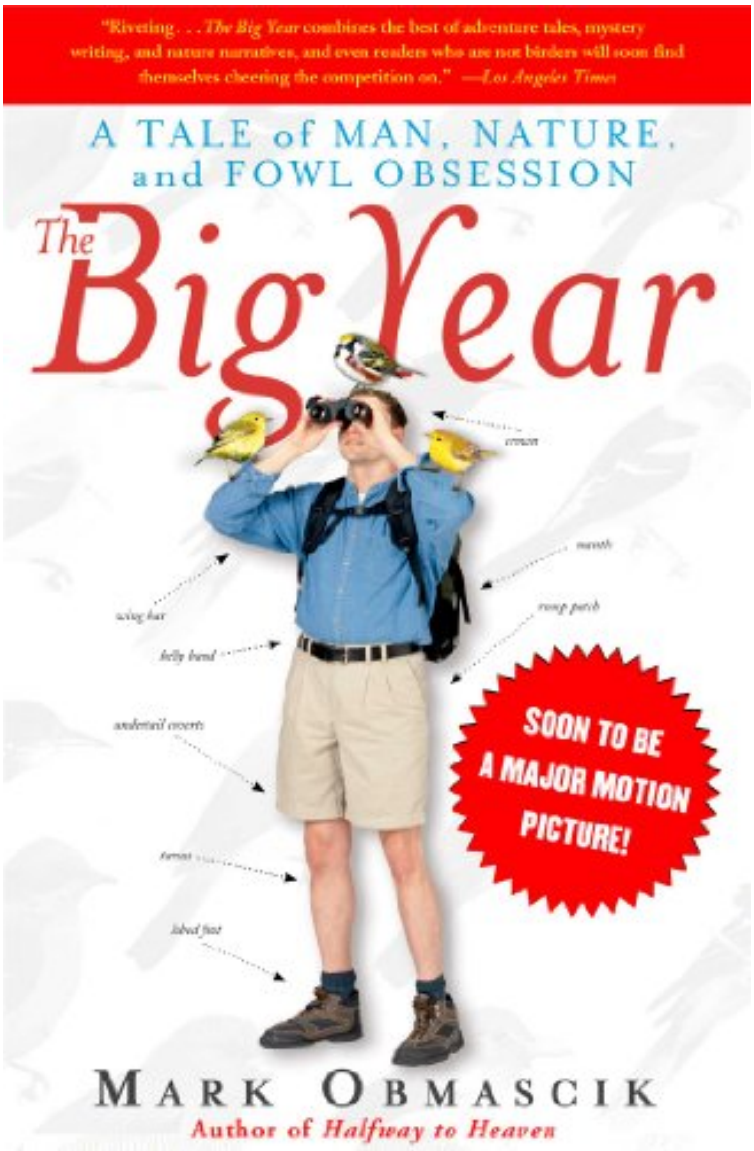
The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession (English Edition)



Par Mark Obmascik
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[DOWNLOAD] The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession (English Edition)

Par Mark Obmascik : The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession (English Edition):

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurEvery 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.ExtraitIntroductionThe first time I met a real birder, I couldn't tell a tit from a tattler.I was a cub newspaper reporter, stuck on the graveyard shift and scrambling for some way, any way, to get off. If I wasn't chasing some awful car accident, I was hustling to find the relatives of a homeless man slashed in a railyard knife fight. Nobody was happy.Then one night, an anonymous call came in to the Denver Post newsroom.There's a man right here in Colorado, the caller told me, who is one of the world's foremost experts on birds. He's a law professor and he's old, and you should write something about him before he dies. His name is Thompson Marsh.A chance to work among the living? I grabbed it. I called Professor Marsh the next day.Professor Marsh, however, never called back. This really bugged me. In my line of work, even grieving widows returned phone messages. Surely a man who was one of the best in his field would want to talk, even if his field was a bit goofy. I decided to chase the story.Slowly, from some of his friends, a picture emerged: Thompson Marsh was a birdwatcher possessed. To chase rare birds, he would rise before dawn on weekends. He would take expensive vacations on desolate Alaskan isles and pray for foul weather. He would wait for phone calls in the middle of the night, then rush to the airport for the next red-eye flight. Only five others in history had seen more species of birds in North America.He managed to do all this while becoming a lawyer so sharp, so demanding, that many of his former students still felt intimidated by him. When Thompson Marsh was hired by the University of Denver in 1927, he was the nation's youngest law professor. Now he was eighty-two and the nation's oldest, having worked the same job for fifty-eight years. Some days he still walked the four miles from his home to class. A few years back, he conquered all fifty-four of Colorado's 14,000-foot mountains.But the old coot wouldn't pick up a phone to call me.To hell with him, I decided -- until his wife unexpectedly called and arranged a meeting at their home.I rang the doorbell on time, and his wife sat me down on the couch and poured tea. Behind her, in a room facing the garden, I spotted a tall, thin man with a shock of silver hair -- the birdman himself.I stood and offered a handshake, but it wasn't accepted. The master legal orator looked down at the floor and said nothing.His wife apologetically explained there would be no interview."He is a bit embarrassed by it all," Susan Marsh told me. "For some reason, he thinks it's a little silly. Why, I don't know."Actually, she did know. The professor was a proud man who had been thinking about his newspaper obituary, and he didn't want to do anything now to change the story. Or, as his wife eventually confided, "He wants to be known as an attorney, not a birder."Thompson Marsh, browbeater of future judges, was struck mute by a bird.I returned to my newsroom and wrote a general story about the quirky world of competitive birdwatching and then moved on to covering murders and politicians and other typically depressing newspaper subjects. But my memory of that famed law professor, fidgeting horribly before a twenty-three-year-old reporter, still nagged me. What was it about birdwatching that gave a man such joy and discomfort?I couldn't let the question go. Over the years I learned more about birds and their lovers, and I wrote the strange stories with glee. There was a Baikal teal that caused an international stir by wandering from its native lake in Siberia to a creek behind a Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop outside Denver. There was a biologist who implanted microchips in geese so he could track the spring migration from New Mexico to the Arctic by computer from the comfort of his home. There even were twitters about a new species of grouse -- North America's first new bird species in a century! -- having sex in the sagebrush somewhere in the Utah high country.Slowly but certainly I realized I wasn't just pursuing stories about birdwatchers. I was pursuing the birds, too. Marsh's obsession was becoming mine. My relentless pursuit of a rare subspecies of law professor had tapped a trait repressed deep

in my character.I needed to see and conquer.This is not a unique craving. In the course of civilization, others have responded to that same fundamental urge by sailing uncharted oceans, climbing tall mountains, or walking on the moon.Me, I watch birds.Today I stroll in the park and I no longer see plain birds. I see gadwalls and buffleheads and, if I'm really on a hot streak, a single old squaw. A road trip finds me watching the sky as much as the pavement. It gets harder to pass a sewage treatment pond, that notorious bird magnet, without pulling out my binoculars. When somebody cries, "Duck!" I look up.No longer is it accurate to call me a birdwatcher, a term the pros use to dismiss the spinsters and retired British army colonels who wait passively for birds to come to them. I have become an enthusiast, a chaser -- a birder.If Thompson Marsh were still alive -- he died in 1992, at the age of eighty-nine, from injuries in a car accident on a birding trip -- he might even talk to me. He was, after all, my first truly tough bird.Today I can say without hesitation that there are seven kinds of tits (Siberian, bridled, bush, juniper, oak, tufted, and wren) and two tattlers (gray-tailed and wandering), but I can't say this knowledge impresses anyone, certainly not my wife.Why this happened to me, I can't easily explain. It's never been very manly to talk about feelings, especially when these feelings involve birds. But put me on a mountain stream with our two sons and give us a glimpse, a fleeting glimpse, of a bald eagle, and it's hard to tell who's more excited -- the four-, seven- or forty-year-old. I watch a hummingbird dive-bomb a feeder outside our kitchen window and marvel at its grace and energy; I pull out a birding field guide and learn that this finger-sized creature probably sipped tropical blossoms a few weeks ago in Guatemala, and I'm awed by the miracle of migration. On the prowl through the pines in the middle of the night, I hoot a few times through my cupped hands and wait. From the trees above, I detect wingbeats, then a returned hoot. It's an owl! Move over, Dr. Dolittle. I'm talking to the animals.Birding is one of the few activities you can do from the window of a Manhattan skyscraper or the tent flap of an Alaskan bush camp; its easy availability may explain why it can become so consuming. There are one-of-a-kind birds living on the streets of St. Louis, below a dam in Texas, and amid the suburban sprawl of Southern California. One of the earth's greatest avian populations -- with 3 million birds passing through each day during spring migration -- is in New Jersey, just off the Garden State Parkway.Birding is hunting without killing, preying without punishing, and collecting without clogging your home. Take a field guide into the woods and you're more than a hiker. You're a detective on a backcountry beat, tracking the latest suspect from Mexico, Antarctica, or even the Bronx. Spend enough time sloshing through swamps or scaling summits or shuffling through beach sand and you inevitably face a tough question: Am I a grown-up birder or just another kid on a treasure hunt?During certain periods of our lives, the world believes it's perfectly acceptable to collect rocks or seashells or baseball cards. The truth is that everyone has obsessions.Most people manage them.Birders, however, indulge them.By the time you find yourself compiling lists and downloading software to manage, massage, and count birds, you -- well, I -- have become a hopeless addict.As I spend another winter night by the fire, fingering David Sibley's 545-page birding guide and trying to memorize the field marks of thirty-five separate North American sparrow species, I'm jarred from self-absorption to self-doubt: Am I weird? Am I crazy? Am I becoming Thompson Marsh?There is, I decide, only one way to fully understand my condition. If birding is an obsession that takes root in a wild crag of the soul, I need to learn how strong it can grow. I need to study the most obsessed of the obsessed.I need to meet the birders of the Big Year.Copyright 2004 by Mark Obmascik|Chapter One: January 1, 1998Sandy KomitoSandy Komito was ready. It was an hour before sunrise, New Year's Day, and he sat alone at an all-night Denny's in Nogales, Arizona. He ordered ham and eggs. He stared into the black outside the window.At this stage in his life, he knew men who lusted for a new wife or a Porsche or even a yacht. Komito had no interest.What he wanted was birds.For the coming year he would dedicate himself to a singular goal -- spotting more species of birds in North America than any human in history. He knew it wouldn't be easy. He expected to be away from home 270 of the next 365 days chasing winged creatures around the continent. There were ptarmigans to trail on the frozen spine of the Continental Divide in Colorado and hummingbirds to hunt in the heat of the Arizona desert. He would prowl the moonlight for owls in the North Woods of Minnesota and wade the beaches of South Florida at dawn for boobies. He planned to race after birds by boat in Nova Scotia, by bicycle in the Aleutian Islands, and by helicopter in Nevada. Sleep was not a priority, but when it came, he would be tossing in the army bunks of Alaska and turning on the rolling waves of the Dry Tortugas.This was, after all, a competition, and Komito wanted to win.He ordered his second thermos of coffee and spread paperwork across his place mat. One sheet was an Internet printout of a North American rare-bird alert from Houston. The other was a regional alert from Tucson. Komito smiled. There were more rare birds spotted last week in southeastern Arizona than

anywhere else on the continent.His gut told him that this chain restaurant was the right place to start. He'd eaten in so many Denny's over the years that he didn't have to waste time with a menu. Besides, other birders reported that the trees around this Denny's were roosts for the great-tailed grackle and black vulture. Either of these fine local birds, Komito decided, would be a wonderful launch for his year.From his window Komito watched the horizon lighten with the gray promise of dawn. Little moved.Across from the restaurant, though, a freight train suddenly rammed through the quiet. All the ruckus made something take wing outside and land just beyond his window.Komito's heart raced: it was his first bird of the competition!He lurched forward for the identification.Plump...gray...head bobbing."It's a damn pigeon," he muttered.Every year on January 1, hundreds of people abandon their day-to-day lives to join one of the world's quirkiest contests. Their goal: spotting the most species of birds in a single year. Most contestants limit themselves to the birds of their home county. Others chase birds only within the borders of their home state. But the grandest birding competition of them all, the most grueling, the most expensive, and occasionally the most vicious, sprawls over an entire continent.It is called the Big Year.In a Big Year, there are few rules and no referees. Birders just fly, drive, or boat anytime, anywhere in the continental United States and Canada, to chase a rumor of a rare species. Sometimes birders manage to photograph their prey, but usually they just jot down sightings in notebooks and hope other competitors believe them. At the end of the year, contestants forward their self-reported species totals to the American Birding Association, which publishes the results in a magazine-sized document that generates more gossip than an eighth-grade locker room.In a good year the contest offers passion and deceit, fear and courage, a fundamental craving to see and conquer mixed with an unstoppable yearning for victory.In a bad year the contest costs a lot of money and leaves people raw.This is the story of the greatest -- or maybe the worst -- birding competition of all time, the 1998 North American Big Year.Nutting's flycatcher is a small, plain, grayish brown bird, native to Central Mexico. Its cry is distinct. It says, "Wheek." The last time this rarity was confirmed in the wilds north of the border, Harry Truman was president and Jackie Robinson was slugging his first home run in an All-Star game. But in mid-December 1997, a birder hiking along an irrigation reservoir near Nogales, Arizona, saw the flycatcher and reported it to the local Maricopa Audubon chapter in Phoenix.Maricopa Audubon flagged the news on the Internet; the Tucson Rare Bird Alert posted a message on its twenty-four-hour phone number; the North American Rare Bird Alert in Houston started phoning people on its High Alert subscriber list.From 2,400 miles away, at his home in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, Sandy Komito answered the call. It was the sighting of the Nutting's flycatcher, above all other birds, that had convinced him to begin his Big Year in Nogales.He left Denny's and drove through the hills of prickly pear and mesquite until reaching the gates of Patagonia Lake State Park.A ranger greeted him."Five dollars, please," she told Komito.Komito had already spent hundreds of dollars on airline tickets, car rental, and motel room just to be here. But he had worked years as a New Jersey industrial contractor and he knew how to get things done. So he put a little sweetening in a deep voice that, back home, could startle work crews on the far end of a factory rooftop."Oh, I'm just a birder," Komito told the ranger. "I'm here to look for one bird. I'll only be here ten minutes. Do I really have to pay five dollars?" he asked, trying to take advantage of the park's unofficial policy of free entry for people who drive through and stay less than fifteen minutes. The ranger stared him down. His bargaining routine hardly ever worked, but he still made a game of it.From the Web, Komito had downloaded precise instructions on how to find the bird: "Turn right at the bottom of the hill and go through the campground. Where the loop turns around, there is a trailhead and about four parking spaces. Park here and walk in about one-third of a mile. On the left is the lake and willows; the bird is usually on the right in mesquite."Komito found the parking area and felt suddenly, uncharacteristically nervous. His car, for one thing, was all wrong. For years, he had rented a Lincoln Town Car on all out-of-state expeditions. This helped pigeonhole his reputation among birders as the loud wisecracker from New Jersey who barreled around in a giant land barge. For this Big Year, though, Komito had converted to midsize rentals. His thinking was simple: to stretch his travel budget, he would spend money on miles, not comfort, and a less prestigious car was cheaper than a Lincoln. Still, birding was all about classifying creatures -- long-eared owls always had long ears, and short-eared owls always had short ears -- and now he was abruptly changing his own personal field mark. Was the birding world ready for Sandy Komito, Ford Taurus man?There was another complication. All four parking spaces were filled; more cars perched along the narrow shoulder of the park road. The other vehicles had telltale stickers: Sacramento Audubon, Tucson Audubon. Komito wondered: Am I late? I hope I'm not too late.The trail wasn't exactly a trail. It looked more like a hard-packed cattle run -- and smelled like it, too. Meadowlarks darted through the brush, but

Komito ignored them. He had only one bird on his mind.Three hundred yards up the path, two men were crisscrossing the mesquite. They looked as if they were searching for something -- a lost hat, maybe, or even a flower or a butterfly. Komito guessed otherwise."Have you seen the bird?" he called to them."No," one replied.Komito loved it. In the brambles of the Arizona desert, he had found complete strangers who understood, and spoke, his intentionally vague language.Though Big Years were intensely competitive, Komito preferred to join a gaggle chasing rare species. Sure, working in a crowd meant that many people would identify and list the same bird. But to Komito, all these other people were more than just birders. They were witnesses. Top birders have closely watched each other for years, and many suspected some of fraud. In fact, the nastiest, most personal fights in the history of North American birding had come over disputed sightings.Komito had no time during a Big Year to slog through one of those quagmires, but he did expect at some point to come face-to-face with questionable characters. In a contest built on trust, credibility was like virginity -- it could be lost only once. Komito wanted more than a Big Year record. He wanted a Big Year record that was bulletproof.Up the trail, other birders worked the scrub. Komito recognized two.Dr. Michael Austin was a general practitioner who had moved a few years ago from his native Ontario to South Texas to get easier shots at hard birds. His strategy had worked: now he had seen more species than all but fifteen birders on the continent. While Komito was watching the sun rise over breakfast at Denny's, Austin was already out in the field, searching for the flycatcher.The other birding acquaintance coursing the brush was Dr. Craig Roberts, an emergency-room physician from Tillamook, Oregon. Roberts was an intense man who, in the birding version of machismo, told others how he had spent hours memorizing tapes of birdsongs and chip notes. When Komito told jokes, Roberts rolled his eyes.Behind a bush Komito saw one member of the search party pointing a Plexiglas dish; the contraption was supposed to amplify faraway birdcalls. So far, no luck. Komito tilted back his head to scan the high mesquite branches. His neck was so accustomed to this exercise that it had bulged in size from fourteen and a half inches to seventeen inches. Among birders, this peculiar condition was known as warbler neck -- spending too much time looking up at treetops for darting songbirds.Suddenly somebody hollered, "I've got the bird!"Komito ran. His binoculars slapped his chest. What if the bird flew off? His cross-continent hunt closed to its last hundred yards. His stomach knotted. He ran harder.Bird still there?Slow down!Now he was close. The last thing he wanted was to scare it off. Gasping, sweating, heart pounding, he edged ahead on tiptoes.Twenty feet in front of Komito was Craig Roberts. Twenty feet in front of Roberts was a drab bird perching and darting among the thicket. Komito quickly positioned himself with the sun at his back and raised his binoculars. He knew Roberts, a gifted scout of obscure species, was unlikely to misidentify the bird. Still, the Nutting's flycatcher did look strikingly similar to the ash-throated flycatcher, a far more common bird. Like a cop homing in on a stakeout suspect, Komito hurriedly searched for the distinguishing characteristics -- a browner face, rounder head, shorter bill, yellower belly.Then the bird sang."Wheek."That call clinched it. Komito grabbed the Nikon from his backpack and rattled off a dozen shots on slide film.The bird was his, with witnesses and photographic proof. He pulled out a palm-size notebook and wrote: Nutting's. 1/1/98. Patagonia, Arizona.He wanted to whoop with joy, but that might scare the bird.His intensity melted. He stepped back and marveled at the scene around him.A throbbing, twitching pulse of thirty people had emerged from the mesquite with a collection of the world's finest optics -- Leica, Zeiss, Swarovski, and Kowa -- and encircled the flycatcher. Cameras cascaded with clicks and flashes and whirs. This bird had paparazzi.The irony was hard to resist. In Nogales, the INS had assigned one thousand Border Patrol agents to keep Mexicans out of the United States. But put wings on a lone migrant no larger than a Lonsdale cigar and dozens of people across America formed a pilgrimage to greet it.Many birders remained with the flycatcher, savoring their glimpses of such a rarity and swapping stories with old friends. Though these postdiscovery klatches were one of the main reasons why Komito loved birding, he glanced at his watch.Even on the first morning of the first day of his Big Year, Sandy Komito knew time was slipping away. He hustled back to his Ford Taurus.Al LevantinAl Levantin had waited forty years for this day. When he toiled in the lab, mixing the chemicals that won two patents for the company, he waited. When he flew one hundred thousand miles a year to sell products for the company, he waited. When he moved his family overseas for seven years to run the European division for the company, he waited. He waited during the weeks when he worked sixty hours, and he waited during the weeks he worked eighty. He waited for his two baby boys to grow into men, and he waited for his wife to become a grandmother.Now the waiting was over.He had set his alarm for 6 A.M., but he already lay awake. He looked out the bedroom window. Though the moon was barely a sliver, it was bright enough to reveal the outline, just beyond his aspen stand, of Snowmass ski mountain. He didn't want to wake his wife, so he

didn't turn on the bedroom light. It was dark, but he knew where he was going.Today he would set out on his quest to break the North American birdwatching record.From his closet he grabbed a sweater and headed for the kitchen. Levantin lived in a spectacular home. Built on seven timbered acres along a ridge of the Elk Mountains near Aspen, the house was one of those architectural marvels that appeared to ramble across several county lines while still feeling all warm and intimate on the inside. The hallway and dining-room floors were made of brown flagstone, with hot-water pipes beneath to keep naked toes cozy even in the depths of a Colorado winter. You couldn't move anywhere in this house -- the stairway, a hallway, an office area -- without passing some vast window with some breathtaking view. Ceilings were high and vaulted, with husky wood beams, and a fireplace gaped large enough to swallow unsplit logs. Levantin walked into his kitchen -- floor of cherry planks, Sub-Zero that could ice a Volkswagen -- and fired up the coffeemaker. It had taken eighteen months to build this place, six more than planned, but the results were worth it. Sometimes there were perks for waiting.He picked up his Leica binoculars and Kowa scope and followed the covered outdoor passageway to the garage. No fresh snow last night. From an elevation of nine thousand feet, stars seemed to spill everywhere.The gate at the end of the road opened automatically when his Audi approached. He goosed the gas. He wanted to be in a certain spot before the sun edged over the Continental Divide.Levantin had Highway 82 all to himself. Most people in the Roaring Fork Valley did not rise before dawn. Some didn't sleep before dawn. They came here for Aspen, eight miles up the road, where Marla told Ivana that Donald was hers and Kennedys tossed footballs on the slopes and Goldie and Kurt and Don and Melanie and Barbi and Arnold and Jack all pranced for the cameras. Last night, Levantin had been at a small dinner party, with Ethel, his wife of thirty-eight years. At 10 P.M., mountain standard time, they turned on the TV to watch the New Year arrive at Times Square in New York. They were home in bed by 11 P.M.Where the highway curved, his headlights strayed beyond the road onto the river below. Steam rose. There were other places in North America -- the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, the mountains of southeast Arizona, Cape May of New Jersey -- where birders were so thick that a flycatcher could barely lift a wing without having its every movement broadcast around the world on the Internet. But Aspen was uncharted territory for a birder. Levantin liked it that way. A self-made man in business, he was determined to be a self-made man in birding. That meant a Big Year on his own terms. Others started a Big Year in some big birding hot spot; Levantin insisted on being with his wife for New Year's. Others hired guides to ease the discovery of rare birds; Levantin wanted to find everything himself. Others depended on the advice of veterans; Levantin relied on his own wits. What was the point of going for a personal record if everyone else was going along, too?Finally the black of night washed into gray. For the first time he could see beyond his headlights, the red of the river walls, the snow on the box elder branches. Then he saw: not all that white on the tree was snow. He slowed his Audi and raised his Leicas.A bald eagle! Levantin beamed. It wasn't exactly a rarity, and there definitely were other birders, the grizzled types, who would shrug off this bird as a commoner, but Levantin was not so world-weary. A bald eagle on a tree above the Roaring Fork River in the snow on New Year's Day -- that was magnificent.Gray gloom in the valley gave way to yellow warmth, and birds moved into the light. It was the magic hour: an American dipper in a river eddy, an evening grosbeak atop a willow, a red-tailed hawk spiraling a thermal -- nature was rising. Black-billed magpie. Black-capped chickadee. Dark-eyed junco. Levantin was making his list -- birds spotted today wouldn't have to be spotted again for the rest of the year -- but he could hardly keep up. American coot, American goldfinch, American kestrel. He looked down to scrawl the names in his notebook. He looked up and saw a merlin, diving, and he wrote that, too. Out flitted a northern flicker. The birds came faster than his fingers could move.He stopped.He heard no phones. He wore no tie. He took no meeting.From the soul of a company man, forty years of repressed obsession was simmering into the dawn mist of the Roaring Fork River.Al Levantin was free.In the area around Aspen, there were two kinds of life -- up-valley and down-valley. Up-valley was home of the resorts, Snowmass, Ajax, Highlands, and Buttermilk, where the skiing was rivaled only by the shopping, and the air-kisses by day became tabloid headlines at night. They used to say that tourism was king here, but locals knew better. Real estate ruled. In Aspen, the average home cost $3 million, and nearly one of ten city residents had a license to sell it. Real estate offices were so abundant that boutique owners complained they were killing downtown's street ambience; the city council debated whether to slap a quota on the number of brokerages permitted on Main Street. City lots were so expensive that people paid $4 million to buy a house, tear it down, and build a new one in its place.Of course, few Aspenites had calloused hands from any actual tearing down or building. Those people, the worker bees, were down-valley. In El Jebel, Mexican families lived in shifts in $1,200-a-month trailers; one year of demolition work in Aspen

earned them enough to buy their own house south of the border. The store managers and chefs lived in Blue Lake, where three-bedroom, two-bathroom tract homes cost $400,000. The $260,000 town houses at the Ranch at Roaring Fork were filled with framers, electricians, and tilers. Auto mechanics, however, remained a problem. Once a week a garage had to fly in mechanics 160 miles from Denver just to work on Range Rovers.Up-valley and down-valley were linked by four lanes of Highway 82. This worried Levantin. In a few minutes, the maids, busboys, and dishwashers from down-valley would start funneling onto Highway 82 for the bumper-to-bumper grind to their up-valley jobs. The Roaring Fork rush hour could be so nasty that the Colorado State Patrol installed roadside signs with a simple message -- Road Rage: CSP -- that was punched in repeatedly by frustrated commuters. Levantin didn't want to be caught in that mess. So he quickly scoped Blue Lake for ducks and cruised the Missouri Heights for hawks and jays in the pi?on and juniper. He tallied thirty-two species before turning back up-valley.Just outside the El Jebowl bowling lanes -- "The Most Fun You Can Have With Your Shoes On," where a vacationing Diana once picked up spares with Harry and William -- traffic congealed. This meant Levantin had to pay more attention to cars than birds. By the time he finally reached Woody Creek, Levantin felt his watch ticking against him. His twenty-five-mile return up-valley seemed to take forever. He knew the best part of his day was supposed to come next, but he hadn't counted on racing the clock to enjoy it.It was 10:30 A.M. Levantin hustled home and buckled a stiff plastic ski boot onto his left foot while keeping a shoe on his right. This was an old trick. He used his shoe to brake and accelerate his car up the twists and turns of Snowmelt Drive -- the whole road was heated with underground coils to ward off icy spots -- and parked at the base of the ski mountain. Now he had to squeeze into only one ski boot; doing half the job in the comfort of his house had saved him five minutes of awkward foot-stomping in the parking lot.f0 At the base of the Fanny Hill lift, the wild life of Snowmass, two-legged variety, strutted in full display. There were Spyder suits on lady-killers and goose down over chicken hearts, with even a few mink and ermine on the side. Though loud colors were the fashion statement this season, Levantin wore plain black pants and a dull blue coat. He sported one unique accessory around his neck -- binoculars.Al Levantin usually bubbled with a Boy Scout's enthusiasm, but skis made him more excited. He did not like to ride ski lifts alone. He loved stories, both telling them and hearing them, and a ride up the mountain with a stranger was a great way to indulge one of his favorite treats. He enjoyed meeting new people so much that, after making vice president of an $8-billion company, he still volunteered to work as a greeter at the base of the ski mountain. He teased. He started conversations with young women by saying, "I'm an old man. I can't flirt." He was sixty-six years old, but often accused of lying about his age. With an outdoorsy pink in his cheeks, slate-blue eyes, and shoulders that still packed some muscle, he looked fifty. He acted thirty. He had charisma.Skiing and birding were the two things Levantin loved most about Colorado. That's why, when he'd mapped out this day months ago, he'd decided to become the first birder in history to launch a Big Year from skis. To hell with how everyone else said a Big Year should be done. He was having fun.Halfway up the mountain, as skiers glided off the Fanny Hill lift, ski area greeters passed out free cookies. Levantin took one and waited. He had a plan. Sure enough, something moved in the aspens. A Clark's nutcracker, gray body with distinctive black wings, swooped down into the snow to scoop up cookie crumbs. Levantin smiled. Unless you knew the right places, a Clark's could be a tricky species to find in winter.Bird bagged, Levantin hopped on the adjoining Coney Glade lift. Just below was the Spider Sabich Ski Racing Arena, named after the Olympic ski racer shot to death by his live-in lover, Claudine Longet. The O.J. of the seventies, Longet had paid for her crime with only thirty days in a specially redecorated Aspen jail cell, then ran off with her married defense lawyer and became the butt of endless Saturday Night Live skits.The two-lift shuttle up Snowmass mountain took ten minutes. Levantin was itching to get off his duff. He cut a quick left from the lift and pointed his skis downhill. Hands up, elbows out, and a grin on his face, Levantin blasted down the Max Park run. He was a ferocious skier, diving straight for the fall line and throwing up a rooster tail of conquered snow with each carved turn. There was no subtlety in his style -- he looked like a fullback on ice. He had the strength to streak downhill at forty-five miles per hour but the grace to hold his knees close enough to keep any sunlight from peeking through. Anyone who saw Al Levantin on skis wondered how he ever qualified for an AARP card.With perfect timing, he hockey-stopped at the Ullrhof mountain cafeteria just as skiers started carrying their trays outside for lunch. The arrival of the day's first french fries on the restaurant deck was exactly what Levantin had come to see. A diner raised a fry up high and a gray jay darted from the trees to sweep it out of his hand. Levantin could have wasted a half day in some wild forest in a long and arduous search for this species, but why bother? Ten thousand feet up the Colorado Rockies, the gray jays of Snowmass behaved as if they were

seagulls on a Coney Island boardwalk.Levantin skied past the decks at Gwyn's High Alpine and Caf Suzanne, but saw only Steller's jays and mountain chickadees. Though Levantin needed those common birds, they weren't what he had in mind. Snowmass was home to something better.He tucked down the Adams Avenue catwalk to his car, which he drove this time with two shoes. Now it was payoff time. For the past two years, whenever he'd met anyone in Snowmass who'd expressed the slightest interest in birds, Levantin had returned with a housewarming present -- a bird feeder. This was partly because Levantin hoped others would share his love of birds. But he had an ulterior motive. He wanted rosy-finches. Good birders coveted rosy-finches. Fickle and frustrating, the gray-crowned, brown-capped, and black rosy-finch lived most of the year in extremely hard-to-reach places, the tundra of Alaska or the steepest scree fields of the Rockies. During some winters, though, hundreds and hundreds of rosy-finches converged on the much more accessible and comfortable slopes of Snowmass. Why this happened, Levantin couldn't say. He also couldn't explain why, in other winters, the rosy-finches just didn't show up. But if Levantin could keep salting his neighborhood with bird feeders, then maybe, just maybe, he could have his own secret stash of one of North America's flittiest birds.Rosy-finch hunting required a certain flair. Whenever Levantin glassed the streets on rosy-finch runs, he tried to go with another local birder, Linda Vidal. A man in the backyard with binoculars was always suspect, but a man with a woman in the backyard was much less likely to be phoned in to police as a pervert. Unfortunately, Vidal was busy today. Levantin was on his own and didn't have much time.Not far away, Levantin saw something moving. He knew just where to go.Amid all the manses of Snowmass, 249 Faraway Road stood out for one reason: it was ugly. Battleship gray, built across from the neighborhood's bear-proof garbage Dumpster, the house was a rental that turned over tenants. At some point some years ago, one of those tenants had put up a bird feeder. Whoever lived there now kept it filled.Today 249 Faraway Road had sunflower seeds, tall, leafless aspens -- and a pulsating flock of three hundred rosy-finches. Levantin was awed. In the snow their feathers shimmered with a stunning iridescence, like a summer hummingbird on steroids, dipped in raspberry and cinnamon and dark chocolate. Some birders struggled a lifetime to find the three species of rosy-finches. Levantin nailed them all in his hometown on his first day. Could there be any better way to start a Big Year?Months ago, Levantin had already pondered and answered that question. He raced home, grabbed his suitcase, and kissed his wife good-bye.At 4 P.M. his United Airlines flight lifted him from the winter of Aspen to the shirtsleeves weather of the South Texas coast. In his carry-on was the list of forty-five species he had seen that day. He felt good about his list. He felt good about his year.Greg MillerGreg Miller sat alone in his apartment. It was New Year's Eve, and his television clattered with laughter and the pop, pop, pop of champagne corks. Miller was too sad to celebrate. Earlier that day, on December 31, 1997, his divorce had turned final.Even though Miller knew many marriages ended in court, he still felt shrouded in shame. He had met his wife in a Bible fellowship class after studying to be a preacher at Oral Roberts University, and he had vowed in front of his God, church, and family to stick with her no matter what. When their cuddling gave way to sniping and snarling, Miller was working two jobs. Thinking that was the problem, he quit his weekend duties as pastor for the Voice of Victory World Outreach, where he preached to four evangelical churches around the Washington, D.C., beltway, and tried limiting his weekday hours as a workaholic software jock for the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Co. He and his wife tried being a couple again and went through three marriage counselors in four years. Finally Miller believed that he had found a source of their problems: he was too fat. He had loaded 220 pounds onto his five-foot-seven-inch frame, and his wife, a personal fitness trainer and aerobics instructor, complained about it -- a lot. So Miller decided to save his marriage by running, of all things, the famed Marine Corps Marathon. When he started training, he couldn't finish one of his wife's aerobics classes; a one-mile run was completely out of the question. But he started slow and walked when he got tired and gradually worked himself up to the point where he could do a twenty-mile jog without stopping. His wife had never even tried that. He still weighed a rotund 195 -- no matter how much he exercised, he couldn't break his McDonald's habit -- but he felt ready for the marathon. On race day, it rained. He got soaked. Then the temperature plunged. He got chilled. By mile fourteen, both feet had blistered out, and Miller could barely walk, much less run. He wanted to quit, but told himself that he wasn't a quitter. He had given up a whole summer of weekends training for this run, and he was going to finish the Marine Corps Marathon because it was going to save his marriage. Runners passed him. He suffered. He finished in six hours, three minutes, twice as slow as the winner. Hardly anyone was even left at the finish line besides his wife. He promised never to do a marathon again. He was still fat, and his marriage was still busting up.His wife didn't even show up for the last court hearing. Miller moved one hundred miles away to Lusby,

Maryland, and took another software job with the Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant. He worked ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day, partly to forget the pending legal action and partly to avoid being home. His apartment was a former two-car garage, with a sliding-glass door where cars once entered. The floor was covered with burnt-orange shag carpeting that wasn't thick enough to keep a dropped plate from shattering. Not that he used plates very often. Because the stove and oven didn't work, Miller lived on microwaved food. His dormitory-sized refrigerator had a freezer section that fit either one personal pan pizza or two Hot Pockets. His weight ballooned again. He had lost all the furniture in the divorce, but one wall of his new bedroom was covered, floor to ceiling, with unpacked boxes. The living room had only a nineteen-inch color television and a beanbag chair. He spent a lot of time in the beanbag chair.Now it was New Year's Eve, and the paperwork said his ten-year marriage had officially ended that very day. Forty years old and alone and no children -- he hadn't pictured life this way. He couldn't stop thinking about it. He wondered whether he should call someone, but his wife was gone, his friends were out, and his parents...well, his father was a devout Christian in the Amish town in Ohio where Miller had grown up. Miller wanted to feel better. He wasn't sure that calling his father would make anybody feel better.The television kept showing partyers in Times Square. Miller had no champagne in the fridge. He turned off Dick Clark and those happy, loving couples and fell asleep by 11 P.M.At work in the nuclear power plant, Miller was known as the Jolt Guy.On the rim of his office cubicle he had lined a row of empty twenty-ounce bottles of his favorite drink, Jolt Cola. Every bottle boasted that it was loaded with "all the sugar and twice the caffeine" of Coke or Pepsi. Miller downed at least one Jolt a day -- three on really bad days -- and his workspace had become a castle ringed with sixty red-and-gold turrets. As a new employee in an office with a Dilbert-like maze of identical gray cubicles, Miller enjoyed working inside an instant conversation starter. It was hard to ignore the irony of a Jolt tower in a nuke plant. Occasionally, though, someone reminded him that each Jolt packed the caffeine of three cups of coffee and probably wasn't very good for his health. Miller didn't like to be reminded about his health.The truth was, Miller was prone to binges. He ate feasts, he ran marathons. And now he was spelunking into the darkest depths of a work binge.Miller's job was to make sure that millions of lines of software code were ready for Y2K. Years ago, when programmers wanted some procedure or test to be run forever, they entered a simple 00 in computer code. Today, however, 00, or the year 2000, was less than two years away. Miller was in a race to hunt down the 00s and all other Y2K bugs before the new millennium. So he tested a few thousand lines of code, he swilled a few Jolts. It was tedious work with no room for error: there was a good reason why nuclear power plants had become the poster child for the news media's Y2K scare stories. Though Miller often joked that he had no life, he saw less and less humor in his wisecrack.What kept him sane through all this was birds, or at least the thought of them. Ever since he had identified his first bird at the age of three -- female American goldeneye; his father, a birder, had taught him well -- Miller had loved to chase birds. Birding time was free time, playtime, the time when he and his father could prowl the woods and talk and come home tired but exhilarated. These days Miller was mostly just tired. But he always kept his binoculars and spotting scope in the back of his Ford Explorer, just in case he drove by a bird that was worth looking at. Of course, when he arrived at his windowless office before sunrise and left after sunset, he never quite knew when, or how, he might actually see a bird. Maybe an owl would swoop by.Miller stared at his computer screen. More code, more scans, more tests. He had already worked fourteen days straight, seventy-nine hours this week alone, and now it was Sunday. Numbers blurred into each other. He needed at least six more hours of code-crunching today, but he could hardly think.Actually, he could think.He stood up, rolled back his chair, and whipped on his coat. He didn't have enough time to walk, but if he drove fast enough he might make it. His urge felt so powerful that he nearly forgot his Cleveland Indians hat.He raced a half mile from his office to an overlook of the nuclear plant's outflow into Chesapeake Bay. The cooling-tower water was ten degrees warmer than the bay, and baitfish basked here. Above the baitfish, seabirds circled. They were hungry.The cooling pond of a nuclear power plant wasn't exactly on the National Audubon Society list of birding hot spots, but Miller would take what he could get. Gulls shrieked. He squinted into his spotting scope. It wasn't easy pressing his face close enough for a clear view, but far enough to prevent body heat from fogging the optics.Through the scope was a circus of bird activity. There were herring gulls and laughing gulls and great black-backed gulls and -- whoa! -- what was that bird? It was a gull, definitely, with gray wings and dark tips, but wasn't that a dark ear spot? Laughing gull -- a nonbreeder, maybe? No, this one was too small, and with a patch on the head, not streaking. Little gull? No, too big. Black-headed gull? Nah, those legs were pink, not orange.No question: it was a Bonaparte's gull, named after the nephew of the great conqueror himself. Nice bird, dependable visitor to the

mid-Atlantic, but a good identification challenge nonetheless.Miller stopped himself. He was breathing, really breathing. His face flushed. He opened his winter coat.He remembered this feeling: he was back in the hunt.On Christmas, his brother had given him a birding book, but Miller had stuffed it in a box without cracking the spine. He feared that book. He was already on a work binge. He didn't have time for any other kind.He returned to his desk and called up some more code, but his mind wandered. Tonight, he told himself, I'm going to find that book and I'm going to read it.Copyright 2004 by Mark ObmascikFrom Publishers WeeklyIn one of the wackiest competitions around, every year hundreds of obsessed bird watchers participate in a contest known as the North American Big Year. Hoping to be the one to spot the most species during the course of the year, each birder spends 365 days racing around the continental U.S. and Canada compiling lists of birds, all for the glory of being recognized by the American Birding Association as the Big Year birding champion of North America. In this entertaining book, Obmascik, a journalist with the Denver Post, tells the stories of the three top contenders in the 1998 American Big Year: a wisecracking industrial roofing contractor from New Jersey who aims to break his previous record and win for a second time; a suave corporate chief executive from Colorado; and a 225-pound nuclear power plant software engineer from Maryland. Obmascik bases his story on post-competition interviews but writes so well that it sounds as if he had been there every step of the way. In a freewheeling style that moves around as fast as his subjects, the author follows each of the three birding fanatics as they travel thousands of miles in search of such hard-to-find species as the crested myna, the pink-footed goose and the fork-tailed flycatcher, spending thousands of dollars and braving rain, sleet, snowstorms, swamps, deserts, mosquitoes and garbage dumps in their attempts to outdo each other. By not revealing the outcome until the end of the book, Obmascik keeps the reader guessing in this fun account of a whirlwind pursuit of birding fame.