



Kingbird Highway: The Biggest Year in the Life of an Extreme Birder

By Kenn Kaufman

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Now revered as one of North America's top birders, Kenn Kaufman hit the road at age sixteen and spent a year crisscrossing the country to see as many birds as he could, in a birding competition known as a "big year." In what has become a classic among birders, this memoir chronicles the subculture of birding in the 1970s and a teenager's search for his place in the world. In a new afterword, Kaufman looks at the evolution of bird-listing since his own big year.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

As ornithologist Kenn Kaufman recounts in his lively memoir *Kingbird Highway*, he's managed to do what other birders only dream of doing: take a year and chase winged creatures from one end of the country to another. The year in question was 1973, when Kaufman was 19 years old, and a few dollars and an outstretched thumb could go a long way. Armed with binoculars, notebook, and the blessing of birder patron saint Roger Tory Peterson, Kaufman set out to capture the record for most species spotted in a single year. He came close, closing with 666 species sighted from Alaska to Florida and back again. More important, he racked up a lifetime's worth of adventures on the road. These stories form the heart of his book, a narrative in which spotted redshanks, white-eared hummingbirds, marbled murrelets, and black-capped gnatcatchers are among the chief supporting players.

From [Booklist](#)

Kaufman set out on his first solo birding trip when he was 16 years old, on a Greyhound bus, starting in Wichita, Kansas, and ending up in a California jail, for it was illegal for minors to be in that state without adult supervision. So began his quest to set a record: spotting the most North American bird species in a one-year period. Kaufman did just that in 1973, sighting what was then a record 229 species on a grueling hitchhiking trip that took him from Puget Sound to the Florida Keys and the Dry Tortugas in the Gulf of Mexico. Other birding trips followed, from North Dakota to Alaska, from Alaska to Maine, from Maine to Mazatlan in Mexico, and from Arizona to New Jersey. On those arduous trips, too, the author hitchhiked, stopping to work at odd jobs to earn a few dollars. His book is a fascinating memoir of an obsession with birds. *George Cohen*

From Kirkus Reviews

You may not have found your loins quivering at the thought of a rose-throated becard, but Kaufman (*Lives of North American Birds*, not reviewed) has, and here he sings sweetly about the birder's ineffable fascination with all things feathered. By the age of 16, Kaufman knew what he wanted from life: to look at birds. So he dropped out of school--with the blessings of his admirably tolerant parents--and hit the road in search of birds. With very little money, he needed ingenuity to survive. He discovered, for instance, that a box of Little Friskies cat food could sustain him for a week. He gradually encountered a subculture of birding aficionados and joined their ranks. In 1973, when he turned 19, he decided to embark on a so-called Big Year: to count as many species as he could manage in a year's time. The book is largely taken up with that quest. There are, of course, plenty of birds here, from the everyday to the extremely rare, but Kaufman also provides--in a winning, plain-spoken prose style--a Baedeker that covers the fine art of hitchhiking, crackling landscapes, and sharp profiles of other birders (as with any subculture, the personalities ranged from the repulsive to the sublime). The listing begins to pale by the end of the year: "Views of birds are measured in milliseconds, in which bird songs are classified instantly, and then ignored, in which no precious moment of daylight could be wasted on aesthetics." Yet one can only marvel at how determined he was (he eventually counted 666 species) and at the purity of his enterprise, and join him in regretting that the compilation of lists has shifted "away from knowledge and planning and experience, toward contacts and hotlines and money." For Kaufman, the pleasure now lies not in lists but in simply watching attentively. He makes us understand the joys of both in this frank, passionate book. (maps and drawings, not seen) -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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