

Soaring to the top: Oregon 'bird man' sets world record



Noah Strycker visited 41 countries in one year to spot more than 6,000 species of birds for his Big Year.

By Caitlyn May
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Noah Strycker had one thought when his publisher greenlighted a year-round trip around the world. "Oh crap."

In 2014, Strycker published "A Thing with Feathers," a deep dive into why birds do what they do, which landed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list and earned the praise of literary critics from the *Boston Globe* and *Newsweek*. But 2015 was Strycker's Big Year.

The birding community describes a Big Year

as a personal challenge to spot as many species of birds as possible so, armed with a 40-liter backpack and a computer with scanned pages from a pile of field guides taller than his just-over-five-foot frame, Strycker began traveling the world with a goal: 5,000 types of birds spotted in 365 days.

"On Jan. 1, 2015 I was on a Russian ship in Antarctica because if you're going to see the world you might as well start at the end of it," Strycker told the Cottage Grove Rotary Club during a talk on Jan. 11. The Creswell native hosts a series of speaking engagements throughout the state as well as across the globe, telling his bird tales.

That first day, Strycker saw a Chinstrap Penguin as his fourth bird and with 4,996 species to go, he made a few rules for his quest: he had to see the bird with at least one other person and that person had to be a resident of the country he was birding in. The result? Strycker met hundreds of people in his quest to see thousands of birds.

One group met him at dawn in the tropics while another drove five and a half hours to bird with him all night in Iceland where the sun doesn't set in June, only to turn around and drive home in time for work. They saw 54 species of birds between midnight and 6 a.m.

"That's the type of help you will get when you share a passion for a project," Strycker said.

Traveling west to east, Strycker came home to Oregon only once—to get a haircut. He spent Valentine's Day in Peru at 16,000 feet above sea level,

Christmas in Australia where he saw just one Christmas tree. It was in made out of car tires and placed outside a gas station. He slept on the floor of a Norwegian forest and traveled so frequently that he would spend a few hours in India and 24 hours later, find himself in the Himalayas.

One day in Peru, Strycker had the flu. He woke at dawn with his guide, Gooner, and set out for a mountaintop to spot a bird with a yellow neck and a crown of blue. A dead car battery later, the pair made it into the trail, to the top of the hill and spotted the bird.

"I turn around and we're stuck on this mountaintop," he said. "I go around to push and Gooner gets in to drive and says, 'We have another dead battery here.' I look down and we have two flat tires. So, we get our luggage out, me with my backpack and Gooner with two airport-sized suitcases and we start walking."

The pair walked for miles before stumbling upon potato farmers.

"Gooner opens one of his big suitcases and it is just packed with oranges. I said, 'Gooner, that's got to be 30 pounds, you were just going to carry that the whole way?' But Gooner starts handing out oranges. We share these oranges with these farmers on this cliff side and then they ask if we need a ride," he said.

There were agriculture worker strikes, bus wrecks and landslides but the worst delay Strycker encountered? A 27-hour delay in New York City. None of which, distracted Strycker from his goal: 5,000 birds in a year.

"In December, in Australia, I saw the Mulga Parrot as my 5,959th bird," he said. "But I

thought, it'd be a shame to get that close to 6,000 and not get there."

So, after navigating the complex red tape of passports and plane tickets on Christmas Day, Strycker returned to India and on Dec. 29 found the Yellow Rumped Honeyguide, marking his 6,000th bird.

"I visited 41 countries on all seven continents, traveled more than 100,000 miles and saw 6,042 species of birds," he said. In the end, Strycker spent \$160,000 on the trip, working out to "\$10 per bird." "It depends what you think is expensive," he said. "It shows you can travel on any budget and see and do things."



Above, a Painted Bunting, a bird Strycker says he doesn't get to see very often. The bird was spotted on a trip off the Georgia coast in early October.

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