

Zero-impact Birding: The Human-powered Year List

Tony Federer

When Steve Mirick left me a message about a Purple Gallinule in Exeter, NH, he told me to get on my bicycle and get down there. But Exeter is thirteen miles away on busy roads partly lined with strip malls. There is a way by back roads, but it is two miles longer. So I decided not to go. It was raining and I didn't have time, but the distance was the major factor.

Why didn't I just get in my car, as do many other birders, anxious to see every rare bird that shows up? Because I am trying to decrease my adverse impact on the earth. And one way I do this is by human-powered birding. In order to spur my own interest in this, and maybe to influence others, I came up with the concept of a human-powered year list (HPYL) late in 1998. This is the story of that inspiration.

I've always been concerned about gasoline consumption. The birth of my first grandchild two-and-a-half years ago has really made me think about what our society will be like when she is old and there is no more gasoline. All my life I've used a bicycle (as well as my feet and my skis) to get to work and have rather rarely jumped in a car to race after rare birds. My career involved research on effects of acid rain and climate change on forests. Since my retirement I've learned a lot about voluntary simplicity, sustainability, deep ecology, and bioregionalism. You can check my web site, TF's Ecocentric Pages, at <<http://www.nh.ultranet.com/~compassb>> for more on what motivates me in these areas.

In May of 1998 I was out for a run near my home and heard a song familiar to me from my hike on the Appalachian Trail in the south, but certainly not from New Hampshire. This Hooded Warbler attracted many birders to Durham over the next several weeks. But what really triggered the HPYL concept was a report that a birder from Washington State had flown to and driven to Newmarket, NH, and back *all in one day* to see a Little Egret for his life list. I thought birders were supposed to be somewhat environmentally concerned. In retrospect, I realized that the concept of driving hundreds of miles in twenty-four hours for a Big Day was also a questionable practice. What would be the outcome, I wondered, of birding without burning any gasoline?

Why not try keeping a list of all the species I could see in a year without getting in a car? The human-powered year list would have a simple rule: count species found using only human power to travel from one's primary residence. For me human power includes walking, running, bicycling, and skiing, but others might add skateboarding and canoeing. Maybe even sailing would be okay: it's not human power but it's sustainable. The trip must not use any kind of a motor for any part of it. Nor can it involve birding from a second home to which one drives.

On January 10, 1999, I wrote in my notebook: "I should get at least 110 species. Will have to work very hard for much more than that." What a pessimist! Without working very hard I finished the year with 148 species. In 2000, I've worked a little harder. I finished off the last 10 days of 2000 with a Rough-legged Hawk which I saw

while running, a Lark Sparrow found by Christmas Counters, and an Iceland Gull, which I biked to see, bringing the year's total to 166 species. Next year I think I'll do an overnight bike trip, staying at some motel on the New Hampshire coast. Not against the rules! A real bicyclist could cover all New England, or even cross the country!

I introduced the HPYL concept to the NH birders listserve, and it attracted the interest of several other birders. Pam Hunt already was doing a walking census from her home in Enfield, and she reached 155 species. This year she changed her primary residence in the middle of the year; maybe the rules should at least limit the number of primary residences per year to two!

What about rarities? In the two years I've been doing this I've recorded Greater White-fronted Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, Nelson's and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed sparrows, Upland Sandpiper, Lapland Longspur, and White-eyed Vireo. Pam Hunt reported such species as Baird's Sandpiper, Worm-eating Warbler, and Black Tern. Even the uncommon birds like Common Raven, Red-bellied Woodpecker, American Coot, Mourning Warbler, and Snow Goose seem rarer when found under human power.

On May 26, 2000, I tried a human-powered Big Day, starting with an eight mile loop I occasionally walk around Durham, then biking on my rusty old Schwinn first to Pease Airport then to Adams Point on Great Bay. I made it to 98 species. Wouldn't it be nice if Big Day competitions were done using only human power?

Besides avoiding the burning of fossil fuel, human-powered birding provides physical benefits to my body. In 1999 I first recorded 18 species at home: 64 by biking, 41 walking, 15 running, and 10 skiing. At age 61, I may be slowing down, but I try to keep my body fit; I expect it to function for several more decades. This year I've increased my bicycle range (although not yet as far as Exeter), and I'm enjoying the leisure of it. With human-powered birding I get to combine my exercise with my hobby.

In addition, human-powered birding is a sustainable recreation and fosters a deeper sense of place and connection to community. I am learning about good locations for birds that I have not discovered in all the thirty-five years I've lived here. And I am in closer touch with the trees, the wind, and the soil than I am in a car. I'm fortunate to live near a bit of tidewater in a good birding town, but the excitement that comes from rareness is a relative thing. No matter where you are, birding by walking or biking is an extra challenge that adds interest to whatever species you find.

I am gratified at the positive reaction to my concept of human-powered birding. As gasoline becomes scarcer and sustainability becomes more important, human-powered birding is the right way to go. 

Tony Federer has been birding for fifty years, since his junior high days at Belmont Hill School and Belmont Christmas Counts. Now retired from his career as a scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, he hopes to spend more time birding, but other interests like competitive orienteering and earth-centered social action keep interfering. His birding reached its zenith in December 1981 with the first New Hampshire record for Townsend's Warbler at his home in Durham. That same month he also found both Townsend's Solitaire and Yellow-throated Warbler on the NH Coast Christmas Count.