

Tacoma birder has the biggest of Big Years breaking state record

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Will Brooks is having a Big Year. That’s the term bird-watchers use to describe an attempt to identify as many species of birds as they can within one calendar year.

Sometimes, it’s just to set a personal best. Sometimes, they compete against other bird-watchers, or birders, as they call themselves.

In Brooks’ case, his Big Year broke the Washington state record of 370 and he’s not finished yet.

The University of Puget Sound, where the 23-year-old graduated from in 2020, called him the Bird Nerd. But that, say those who know Brooks, sells him short. He’s really a bird savant.

Brooks’ affinity for birds runs so deep it’s hard for him to explain. He calls them “intrinsically interesting” and “really cool.”

“It’s fun to discover new things,” he said. “Go out exploring and finding a species you’re not expecting. I think it satisfies the collection type thing as well.”

BIRDERS PARADISE

On a recent drizzly morning, Brooks walked along the paths of Dune Peninsula at Point Defiance Park, carrying binoculars and a camera with a long telephoto lens. While other visitors were focused on orcas, Brooks tracked cormorants on the water and small black-capped chickadees flitting among shrubs.

Like so much in life, being a birder is more than just the subject at hand.

“It’s really fostered an ability to observe the world,” Brooks said. “I really enjoy the ability to be in the natural world and see all the animals and plants around and sort of enjoy a new place in a new way.”

Like other skilled birders, the Tacoma resident can identify a bird without seeing it and distinguish one fast moving silhouette from another.

But Brooks can do it better than just about anyone. Those skills, and a dogged perseverance, allowed Brooks to break the state record last set in 2012.

There’s no trophy or cash prize — just the acknowledgment of fellow birders and 30,000 miles added to the odometer of his Prius.

Brooks grew up on the campus of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. His father teaches urology at the university’s medical school.

It was his father who got him interested in birding when Brooks was eight. But it wasn’t until he attended UPS that his birding took flight.

FLOCKING TOGETHER

When Brooks arrived at UPS for his freshman year, he announced himself as a birder to biology professor Peter Wimberger.

“There’s a lot of people who are interested in birds,” Wimberger, a birder himself, said.

Brooks would return from weekend birding trips with reports of rare birds. His professors took the sightings in stride.

“Birders sometime think they see things when they often don’t,” Wimberger said. “We were a little dubious of his claims.”

So, Brooks produced what Wimberger calls the “gold standard” of birding: photos and recordings of bird songs.

Wimberger and his fellow professors were stunned by what Brooks was finding.

“It became pretty clear



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Local bird watcher Will Brooks, 23, takes a photo of a bird while taking in the sights, sounds and ornithology at Dune Park in Ruston on Tuesday.

pretty quickly that Will was a remarkable birder,” Wimberger said. “Sharp ears, sharp eye and really knowledgeable.”

Soon, the student became the teacher.

“He made me a much better birder and aware of what was going on around me,” Wimberger said.

Brooks is in tune to subtle differences in appearance and vocalizations, allowing him to tell the difference between subspecies that most people, even seasoned birders, might just lump together as one, Wimberger said.

Skills like those are important in bird research, the professor said, because habitat ranges are on the move as a result of human interaction and changing climate patterns.

BIRD CALLS

The abundance and variety of the bird world never disappoints Brooks. A mountain lion researcher, by contrast, could go months or years without seeing the subject of their study in person.

“It’s great for research

because if you need a large enough sample size for behavioral or genetic work, it’s easy to find enough birds,” he said.

He likes to bird in Washington more than California for the simple fact that there are fewer people here. A rare bird sighting in California might attract a small crowd when word gets out.

Dune Peninsula, he said, is the best place for birding in Pierce County.

“That is the spot I go to the most,” he said. “You have both sea birds and migratory birds congregating in one place.”

Though several other Washington staters have had big years in 2021, it’s unlikely anyone will catch up with him this year, said fellow birder Matt Bartels.

Bartels compiles the annual list of state birders and species. Most log their sightings in at a website, eBird, run by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Other sites, like Washington Birder, also have online reporting.

So, are more birds calling Washington home?

Not necessarily, said Bartels. It’s more likely that technology, such as websites which can instantly alert other birders of rare sightings, are now common. Add in an agile young man willing to drive, walk and climb where ever he needs to go and you get Will Brooks.

But Brooks isn’t following, he’s leading, Bartels said.

“He wasn’t just chasing other people’s finds,” Bartels said. “He really has been out there this year finding new birds.”

“I like finding my own birds,” Brooks confirmed. “That’s been my aim.”

Bartels has seen Brooks in action.

“His skill sets are above and beyond most other birders,” Bartels said. “It’s great to run into him because he’s going to be alert and able to find whatever happens to be out there.”

In order to count as a sighting, a birder has to lay eyes on or hear the bird. Washington has 330-340 bird species that spend at least part of their year in the state.

And no, chickens, escaped parrots and other non-natives don’t count. Turkeys do, however. Wild flocks exist all over the U.S., including in eastern Washington.

A flamingo blown off course? It would count.

BIG YEAR

Brooks said he had no plans to try to break any record when 2021 started. He had a summer research job lined up in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Brooks noticed a lot of rare birds were being spotted in Washington in early 2021. Then the job in Asia fell

through.

“I figured that would be a great way to start a big year,” he said.

On January 8, he found a winter wren in Orting. The bird is common in most of eastern North America but had never been seen in Washington before. He took it as a good sign.

Since then, he’s driven to see a little gull in Tri-Cities, a hooded oriole in Willapa Bay and a Wilson’s phalarope in Spokane.

The rarest bird he saw, the common crane, is usually only seen in Africa, Europe and Asia. It’s not found in Skagit Valley where Brooks saw it. Someone else had spotted the lost bird. When that happens, it’s not hard to track down, he said.

“Birds are surprisingly creatures of habit,” Brooks said. “When they’re lost, they will just hang out in the same tree for a winter.”

Brooks got another summer job to replace his lost overseas opportunity. That one, monitoring vesper sparrows and horned larks populations at Joint Base Lewis McChord, helped him add a few birds to his list.

Brooks often camps or sleeps in his car while on his trips around the state. He doesn’t trespass while birding but more than one rural resident has threatened to shoot him.

“I’ve been cussed out for just being on public roads,” he said. “Sometimes, you encounter people that went way out into places to get some privacy and I’m violating that in some way.”

Most interactions with the public are positive, he notes.

On Nov. 16, the day Brooks broke the state record, he got an early morning call from fellow birder Charlie Wright. Wright had just seen a thick-billed murre fly by at Dune Peninsula.

“I’ve never seen a thick-billed murre in my life,” Brooks recalled. The birds do not normally venture this far south from their Alaskan homes.

The murre was just one of several he added to his list that day which included a three-hour drive and an hour tromping through woods to find to find a Blackburnian warbler in Skamania County.

Late last week, Brooks ventured to Okanogan County to look for two rare species. He found one, the sharp-tailed grouse, and added number 375 to his list.

Brooks has applied for graduate school in the field of evolutionary biology. His study area: birds, of course. Until he relocates, he’ll keep birding in Washington.

On Wednesday, he added number 376 to his record, a dickcissel in Sequim, breaking his own record five times.

“You can use brute force to get so far,” Bartels said. “But, there’s a point where you’ll hit the ceiling. And that’s where someone like Will who has that skill set, can really turn into a big year like this one.”

Applications and websites to identify birds and other wildlife

— eBird, ebird.org/home, a website run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that records bird sightings and those who see them.

— Merlin, a free smartphone application from Cornell that identifies birds by their vocalizations or songs.

— iNaturalist, a website from the California Academy of Sciences that citizen scientists can use to log and identify numerous forms of life from mammals to fungus. inaturalist.org/

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