

NEXT-LEVEL BIRDING

THEY'VE GOT THE TWITCH

Yukon birdwatchers heed the call

By Karen McColl

If you don't consider birdwatching an extreme activity, then you probably haven't gotten up at 3 a.m. to hear the dawn chorus or driven through the night to see a rare-feathered species. And you surely haven't seen *Listers*: A *Glimpse into Extreme Birdwatching*. In the 2025 documentary, neophyte birders Owen and Quentin Reiser spend a year driving across the U.S. to learn about birds and birdwatchers. Along the way, the brothers become obsessed with identifying more birds. They also smoke a lot of weed. "I'd run through a brick wall for that bird," Quentin says while filming the "crazy looking" Montezuma quail.

Not surprisingly, some Yukoners also go to considerable lengths to see birds. If Aaron Barker could run through a brick wall for a bird, he would have the scars to prove it. When a northern pygmy owl was reported by a lake in Whitehorse one winter, he didn't let a ruptured Achilles tendon stop him. He hobbled along a snowmobile trail in a half metre of snow. Hearing the "toot" of this tiny owl was worth every posthole of his crutches. "It was just the best thing ever," he exclaims.

Barker is a quick study. He started birdwatching during the COVID-19 pandemic, when a short walk with binoculars was as much activity as one could ask for. He's part of a cohort captured by a 2023 Statistics Canada study showing the number of people participating in wildlife viewing or birdwatching activities increased by almost one-third between 2019 and 2022.

If restlessness got Barker started down this path, the eBird app got him hooked. He uploads his sightings into the crowd-sourced database every day. He has more than 1,800

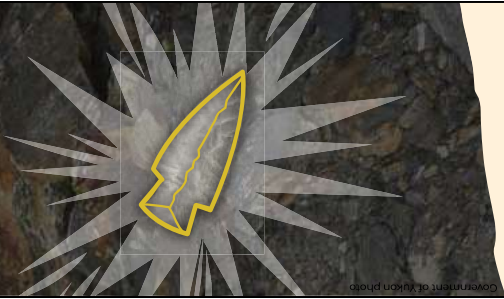


Northern pygmy owl.



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"YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE ACTUALLY CONTRIBUTING TO THE DATA, THE RESEARCH. I REALLY LOVE IT."

Yukon checklists—bird counts from specific locations. That's the equivalent of one a day for five years.

"It's an addiction, 100 percent," he says, laughing. He's particularly proud of his 2023 Yukon bird count (219 species) and all-time (249). Barker is a "lister."

Like eBird, the Merlin app plays a role in birding's increased popularity. Gone are the days of fumbling through a 500-page guidebook. Merlin's step-by-step bird-identification and call-recognition features are easy for beginners to use. Merlin helped give Barker his birding wings, but apps weren't his only tutors.

Cameron Eckert has brooded Barker and many other burgeoning birders. He and a crew started the Yukon Bird Club more than 30 years ago. "My primary interest and enjoyment have been sharing birds with other people," he says. That passion continues today, with volunteers hosting dozens of free field trips through spring and summer.

Eckert isn't interested in the competitive aspect of listing but can be just as dogged as Barker when it comes to bird spotting. On Boxing Day, he drove up Haeckel Hill in Whitehorse at sunrise. It was -35°C. Tracks led him to the white-tailed ptarmigan, an uncommon chicken-sized bird almost perfectly disguised by its snowy mountaintop home. Eckert's sharp eye has developed over a lifetime of birding. He believes birds offer a

window into, and connection with, the natural world. "And you don't have to go off down rivers, deep in the forest or the jungle, to see and enjoy them," he adds.

Both Eckert and Barker did, however, venture to the far side of the territory last fall after Susan Drury spotted a Eurasian bullfinch at her feeder in Watson Lake. (As its name implies, this little bird was way off course, and this was the first recorded sighting in Canada.) Barker made the five-hour drive on a dark November evening, landing the black-capped bird in the crosshairs of his camera at first light the next day. "It was beautiful," he recalls. It turns out he didn't have to hurry; the female bird overwintered in Watson Lake. Drury said more than 30 people came to see the bullfinch, mostly Yukoners but also some avid birders (nicknamed twitchers) from Calgary, Vancouver, and Ontario. "It's been an exciting winter," she says.

Like jumping off a mountain in a squirrel suit, seeing rare and interesting feathered creatures can be thrilling. Eckert is driven by a sense of exploration and discovery, both of places and birds. Getting a new "lifer" (a first-time sighting of a bird species) is particularly intoxicating. "You can feel the adrenaline rush," he says. One year he received a call right before the May long weekend. A farmer spotted a great egret in their field near Dawson City. Did he want to come see it?



Aaron Barker says birding is a total addiction. This lister counted 219 bird species in 2023.

"Of course, this is thousands of kilometres out of range," Eckert explains. Hours later, he and his family were boating down the Stewart River, south of Dawson, rewarded with incredible views of the elegant bird. That's one of Eckert's favourite chases, and not just because it was the first recorded great egret sighting in the Yukon. "It was a wonderful coming together of families and that sense of community."

Being outdoors and in nature drew Kim Selbee to birdwatching. Before eBird, the Mayo resident was an analogue lister, writing notes for herself and showing bird photos to her kids. The app took her interest to the next level. "You feel like you're actually contributing to the data, the research. I really love it," she says. Unlike Barker, who has driven almost every road in the Yukon in his bird pursuits, Selbee prefers keeping tabs on the regulars in her backyard and along local trails to see who comes back each year. (No slouch, she has almost as many Yukon checklists on eBird as Barker.)

Recently, Selbee found herself caught up in a twitching experience. She was visiting family on the Lower Mainland of B.C. when she heard about a sighting of a taiga flycatcher. Instead of wintering in southern Asia as it should have been, this small songbird was in a nearby park. She thought, *Why not?* On arrival, she spotted a small group of people, many

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GET STARTED:

Get the Merlin Bird ID app and download the Canada West bird pack.

GET THE GEAR:

Forget khaki pants, Tilley hats, and multi-pocketed vests. Yukon birder Aaron Barker says binoculars and a phone are the only essentials. (And, if you're like him, "five pounds of camera gear.")

LEARN THE LINGO:

Twitcher: A person who goes to great lengths to see a bird, after someone else has reported seeing it.

Lister: A person who obsessively make lists of the birds they see.

Lifer: Spotting a new species for the first time.

Little brown bird: A small, non-descript bird of unknown identity.

Pish, pish, pish: A sound that birders make to draw songbirds into the open. (According to *Audubon Magazine*, this imitates a "scold" call that tempts curious birds out of hiding.)

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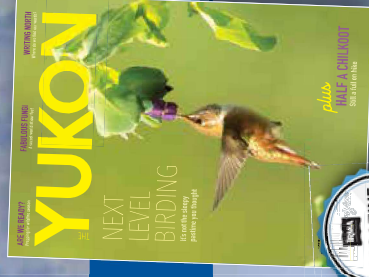
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with huge camera lenses trained on the little brown bird. "I got really caught up myself and just getting a glimpse of it was pretty cool," she admits. She snapped a few photos on her "tiny" camera and promptly left.

As with any extreme activity, birding can have a dark side. There's the carbon impact of criss-crossing the territory (or world) in pursuit of lifers or rare birds. There are also controversial practices the Reiser brothers learn about in their documentary, like playing bird calls on a phone, called "playback," to draw a bird closer. It can be effective but also stress birds if used irresponsibly. As for some of the negative behaviour documented in *Listers*, like people faking their bird sightings or rivalries turning toxic, Eckert, Selbee, and Barker agree that's not the vibe in the Yukon. "We have a community of birdwatchers ... who are collaborative, enthusiastic, and really love to get out to see these birds," says Eckert. "There's a lot of sharing of information, a lot of carpooling."

Would Eckert run through a brick wall for a bird? "Oh, for sure," he says with-out hesitation. To see the grey-headed chickadee in the Yukon, which used to be a rare sighting and is now "practically mythic," Eckert says. If he does come across it, there's no doubt he'll get on the blower. Because, as extremely motivated as Yukoners are to spot their bird, they are also extremely excited to share their sightings with others. **Y**