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The Next Big Thing:
Laura Keene's Photographic Big Year

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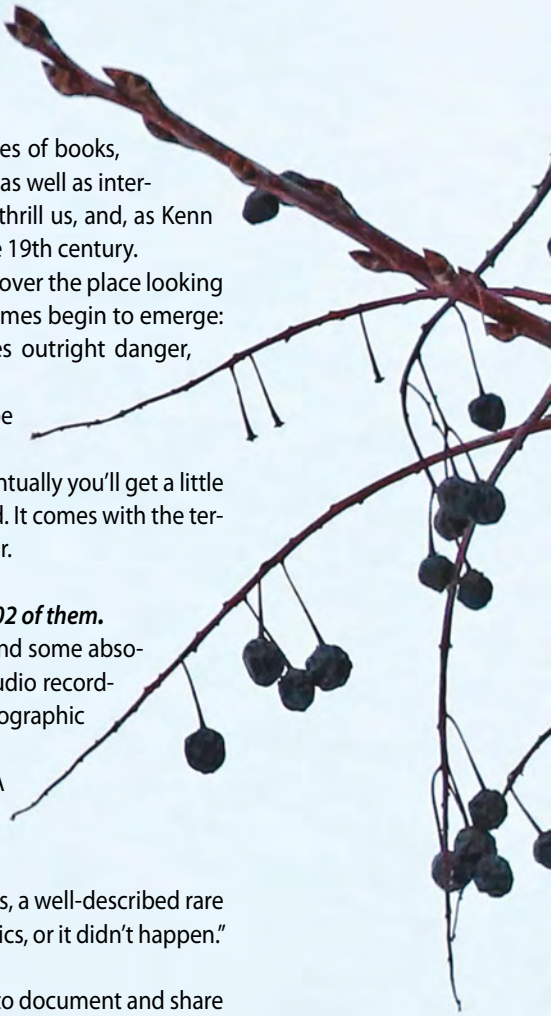
The Next **Big** Thing

Laura Keene's Photographic Big Year



Big-list birding is one of the ABA's oldest and most storied traditions. There are shelves of books, not to mention a major motion picture, chronicling the stories of ABA Area Big Years, as well as international efforts. Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher's 1954 Big Year continues to thrill us, and, as Kenn Kaufman has noted, Lynds Jones and pals were doing Big Days as long ago as the late 19th century.

At first blush, the Big Year seems easy. What's the Big Deal? You spend a year traveling all over the place looking at birds. But once you get to reading about Big Years, or attempting your own, certain themes begin to emerge: surprisingly complex strategies, frustration and loneliness, real hardship and sometimes outright danger, strained relationships…

The central challenge of a Big Year is seeing or hearing all the species well enough to be able to say for certain that they belong on your checklist. Talk to any of the guides who have worked with Big Year birders over the years—from Attu to Florida and now Hawaii—and eventually you'll get a little smile and an eye roll when discussing whether this or that birder actually saw this or that bird. It comes with the territory. Our lists are our own, and whether we've had a "good enough look" is up to each birder.

Which is where Laura Keene's unprecedented 2016 effort comes in.

During her 2016 ABA Area Big Year, Laura saw 815 species***—and physically documented 802 of them.***

She managed to take identifiable images of over 790 species—most of them very good and some absolutely stunning, as you're about to see. (The rest of the documentation was in the form of audio recordings and video.) To put this achievement in perspective, consider that Paul Budde's 2015 photographic ABA Area Big Year netted 605 species photographed.

This is not a new game. Back in 1996, David W. Nelson photographed 412 species in the ABA Area. That's nothing to sneeze at when we remember the cost (considerable) and ease of use (not) of 35-millimeter slide film.

Digital photography has changed the very nature of birding. When I started out in the 1970s, a well-described rare bird documentation form, perhaps with a sketch, was considered the standard. Now it's "pics, or it didn't happen." Well, maybe not officially, not yet—but we're getting there, I believe.

The digital revolution has made it relatively easy and inexpensive—and undeniably fun—to document and share the birds and other wildlife we find. We do it constantly. So much of birding in the present age plays out on Facebook, eBird, iNaturalist, Instagram, Twitter, and our own personal blogs.

Until quite recently, I think it's fair to say that big-list birding was generally in the realm of the proverbial old school. That has changed. Young birders often grab camera before bins. If I'm reading the tea leaves right, Laura's photographic Big Year, far from being a one-off, heralds the next Big Thing. The challenge of racking up big numbers is still there—but with an added challenge and more fun than ever.

The images that comprise this gallery all come out of Laura's 2016 ABA Area Big Year. We have chosen them to reflect the diversity of experiences that go into a Big Year: all the scenery, all the travel, all the birds. As you browse the gallery, what are your thoughts about the role of photography in your own birding endeavors? Do you keep a photo list? Has birding by camera improved the experience of birding for you? Are you contemplating photographic big-list birding of your own? Please join the conversation online at The ABA Blog, still ongoing: aba.org/magazine.

—Greg Neise
Editor, *ABA Big Day & List Report*

■ These **Bohemian Waxwings** were a late addition to Laura Keene's checklist as they foraged in a Turnagain subdivision in Anchorage, Alaska, Dec. 2–species #757.

An asterisk (*) following the species number denotes that Laura Keene had photographed it previously during her 2016 photographic Big Year.

RIGHT: ■ These **Great Egrets** were fancy in their breeding plumage at the Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Florida, Mar. 16–species #59*.

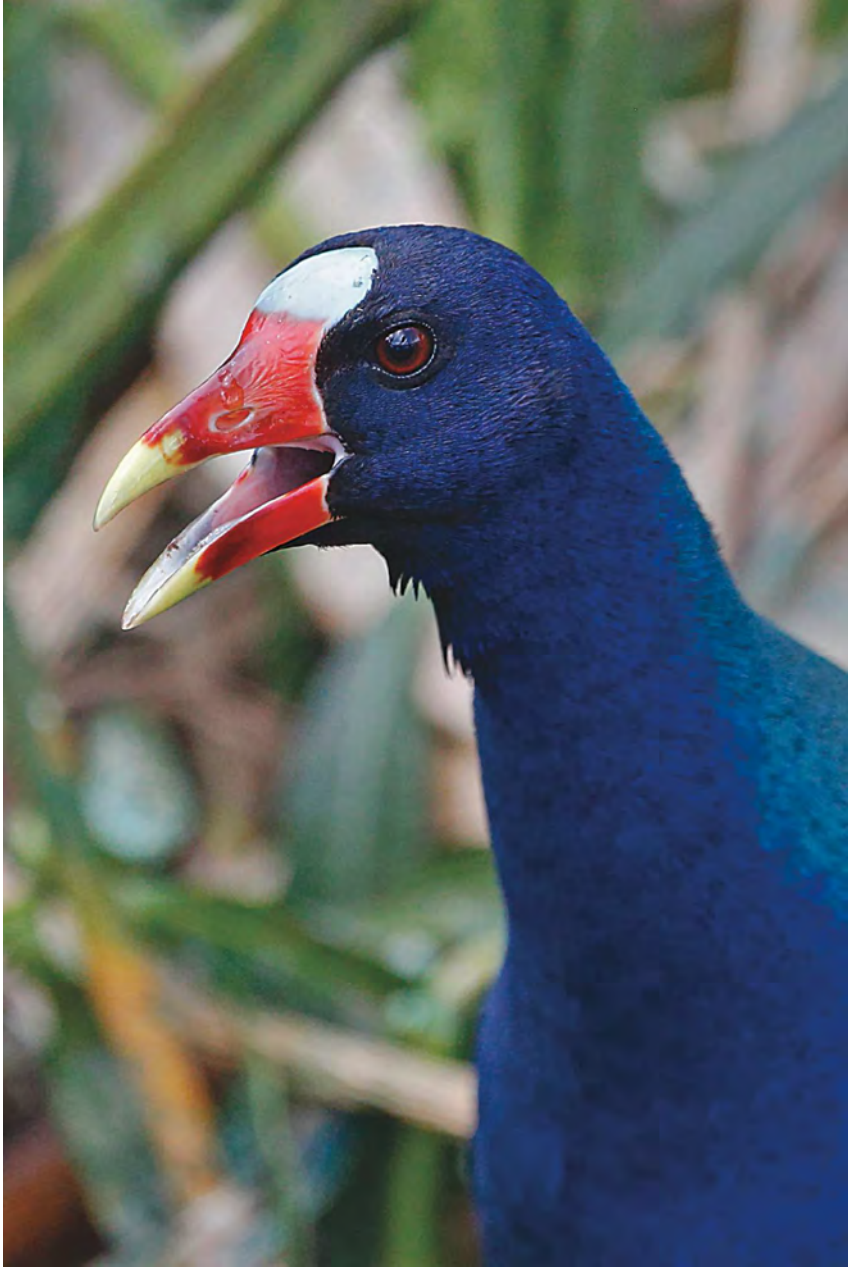
BELOW: ■ A magical moment was espying this **Northern Saw-whet Owl** with prey at the Tyron Creek State Natural Area, Oregon, Apr. 8–species #424.

RIGHT: **A Rivoli's Hummingbird** posed magnificently at Beatty's Guest Ranch, Miller Canyon, Arizona, June 29–species #397*.

BELOW: **Short-tailed Albatrosses** were hunted almost to extinction, so it was a powerful moment to record this bird in pelagic waters from Adak to Attu, May 17–species #568.

RIGHT: ■ This confiding **Purple Gallinule** posed at Green Cay Wetlands, Florida, Mar. 16–species #289*.

BELOW: ■ The **Gilded Flicker** was elusive and required a return trip to Tucson Mountain Park, Arizona, Dec. 19, for improved photos–species #669*.



LEFT: ■ It was such fun to watch and photograph **Wilson's Storm-Petrels** as they skipped across the water during a Hatteras, North Carolina, pelagic, June 1–species #600.

■ Pillar Rock, northwest of Kiska, Alaska, is home to a colony of thousands of **Thick-billed Murres**, photographed May 27–species #571*.

■ These **White Ibises** were cooperatively nest building within their colony in Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Florida, Mar. 16–species #150*.

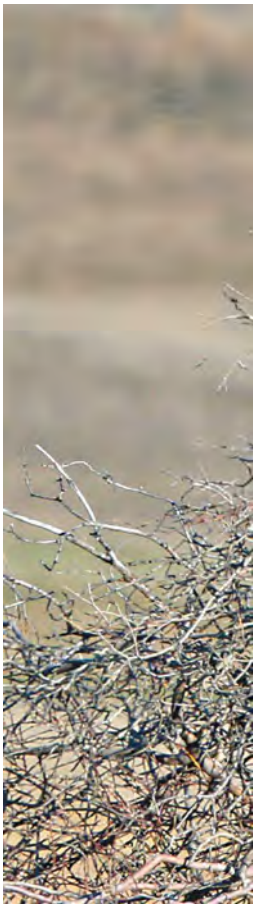
ABOVE: ■ **Yellow Rails** were a challenge to photograph during a bumpy combine ride in Thornwell, Louisiana, Nov. 14–species #752.

RIGHT: ■ It was fascinating to witness **Northern Gannets** as they torpedoed into the seas during a Hyannis, Massachusetts, pelagic, Feb. 7–species #314.

RIGHT: **Prairie Warblers** were plentiful and cooperative at Markham Park, Broward County, Florida, Jan. 25–species #272*.

BELOW: It was a rare opportunity to capture this male **Steller's Eider** rearing in the water during his mating display in Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow), Alaska, June 15–species #632.

Fulfilling a life dream, Laura Keene birded the legendary and challenging Attu Island, Alaska, photographed here May 19.



TOP: ■ The **Black Skimmer** was not a listing need late in the year, but nevertheless seized the photographer's attention at Bolivar Flats, Texas, Nov. 13–species #475*.

BOTTOM: ■ This handsome **Brown Pelican** gracefully glided along Gulfside Beach, Lee County, Florida, Jan. 26–species #146*.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

■ It was a special thrill to look into the eyes of this curious **Northern Pygmy-Owl** in Manning, Oregon, Apr. 8–species #420.

■ This **Summer Tanager** was a bright addition to the landscape at Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center, Port Aransas, Texas, Apr. 23–species #175*.

■ This group of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** forced a roadside stop in Okanogan Highlands, Washington, Apr. 10–species #343*.