Epic Season: A New Birding Challenge

"The Big Year"—that phrase has seeped into public awareness, thanks to last year's movie and the earlier book by the same name. A Big Year is an attempt to see as many different species of birds as you can during one calendar year.

Big Years can be loads of fun. At first you dash around checking off birds right and left. Everything is new. All the focus is on finding the first one of everything: as soon as you've seen one great blue heron, one eastern bluebird, one bald eagle, then you ignore them for the rest of the year. As it gets later in the year the law of diminishing returns sets in, and it becomes harder to find new birds and harder to stay motivated.

 "Big" birding is an exciting game. But this spring, why not try an Epic Season? Anyone can do this. To be a Big Year champ you need big bucks or unlimited time, or both. But to carry out an Epic Season, you just need deep curiosity, a high level of awareness, and a willingness to take notes on the birds that you see and hear.

All you have to do, really, is to choose an area, choose a season, and decide that you want to understand what the birds are doing. You could be looking at winter or a migration season in a local park, or the nesting season in your neighborhood. If your time is limited, you might want to focus on your own yard. If you have lots of free time, you might get ambitious and take on an entire county. But the challenges of an Epic Season are multiplied as you try to cover a larger area.

Here are some tips to make your Epic Season more epic:

**1. Write it down.**

Details can fade surprisingly quickly. It's good to get in the habit of writing down your bird observations.

**2. Don't just watch, count.**

You may get the impression that a certain species is more common at a particular season, but it's easier to establish that if you've written down the numbers that you see.

**3. Look at maps.**

Not just of your own zone, but surrounding areas as well. Are there lakes or rivers nearby?  Are there unique habitats nearby, such as forests or large meadows? That might explain odd birds that wander into your zone.

**4. Look at weather.**

Changes in weather have a major impact on migration, but they affect birds at other seasons as well. Birds may be much more sensitive than we are to barometric pressure and other conditions. If we're alert to weather predictions, we can watch to see how birds react.

**5. Read what is already known.**

Most states and provinces have books on bird status and distribution, and such publications often exist for smaller areas, even single counties. If you can find such a book for your area, compare your sightings with the status described in the book. For example, when your first towhee shows up, check the book: Are they migrating at this season? Do they have a history of wandering? This can fit sightings into a larger historical pattern.

**6. If you have Internet access, look at eBird.**

This is a fabulous tool for understanding where birds are going. Visit **ebird.org** and follow links for "view and explore data," and you can instantly create maps showing where a species is being seen, or graphs showing the timing of

their occurrence. And if you enter your own observations, you add to the quality of the database and you gain a convenient way of keeping some field notes.

**7. Finally, let your curiosity spark your imagination.**

Every day offers mysteries to explore. Which birds start singing earliest in the morning? Is that pair of robins starting to build a second nest while they're still feeding the fledglings from the first? Do the blackbirds fly to their roosts earlier on a cloudy evening? A new world opens up as soon as we shift our attitude from "What is that bird?" to "What is that bird doing?"

That's why an Epic Season could be the most deeply satisfying kind of birding. We may run out of new birds for our lists, but if we pay attention to what the birds are doing, we will never run out of new questions and new reasons to be fascinated.

---

*By Kenn Kaufman Courtesy of Bird Watcher's Digest*