



I'm hooked, and I'm not the only one.

At midnight on 31st December, just as Auld Lang Syne is echoing around the nation, the clock is re-set. It doesn't matter how many bird species you've seen in the year which has just ended, or the trouble you went to in order to see them, the slate has just been wiped clean. And now you are on a big fat zero.

So at first light on 1st January, hangover permitting, you peer through the window:Collared Dove... Blackbird... House Sparrow... Black-headed Gull. Good! You are now off the starting grid, back in action, and the listing of the year's birds has started all over again. If you get out birding on New Year's Day, maybe to a local wood or wetland, it's almost like birding for the first time, because everything is new! At least for the year it is. So why do some, maybe even most, of us birders do it? Are we gluttons for punishment, are we just 'sad'?

There are two main reasons that I maintain a year list:

Firstly, there is the competitive nature. This can either be competing with yourself; trying to improve on last year, or better still, trying to break your personal record for number of species in a year. Or it can mean competing with your peers, your fellow birders, which I do in a fairly light-hearted way (as long as I'm ahead!). Or, for the hardcore, the premier league, it can mean competing on a national level, trying to get into the top 10 or top 20 in the country. I'm glad to say that I don't take either year listing, or myself, quite that seriously!

Secondly, it's to help keep the hobby, the passion for birding alive. If it wasn't for year listing, why would I go down to Breckland to see Stone-Curlew, or Anglesey to see Chough, when I'd seen them before? Obviously there is a financial penalty to driving all over the place to see particular birds each year, which can be mitigated by car sharing, but it gets you out of the house, into the fresh air, and each birding trip has its own surprises which weren't part of the plan.

There are lines to be drawn, choices to be made in year listing, depending of course on cost, time and how keen and driven you are. An example would be the Blue Rock Thrush which has been living in Stow on the Wold for several months now. We went down to Gloucestershire last December to see this bird, which was a UK lifer for me at the time, and a very fine bird it was too. It is still there, but I wouldn't want to travel all that way, just to see the same bird again (which I saw very well the first time), just to get it on my 2017 list. To me, that is a step too far; for others, they will have been there on New Year's Day, even if they'd seen it only a couple of days before! But, if a **different** Blue Rock Thrush now appeared in Norfolk, I would be making plans to see it.

Year listing has rules of course. You can make your own rules, or follow guidelines from the 'establishment'.

The first rule of course is time-line. This means 1st January to 31st December. This is black and white. If you haven't seen a Tawny Owl all year (a reality for me in 2016), and are one bird away from breaking your year record, and then you see a Tawny Owl at 30 minutes after Auld Lang Syne time, when staggering home in the dark, well tough! It would start off your new year's list very nicely, but it is not going on the old year's list. You would only be deceiving yourself.

The second rule is listing area. The only year list I keep is for the UK. Some people keep a county year list, which makes sense if you don't want to travel as far, or even a local patch year list. It doesn't matter what the listing area is, as long as you don't change the rules part way through the year.

Of course if you go on a foreign birding jaunt during the year, which most birders with the means like to do, it doesn't matter whether you see Hoopoe and Woodchat Shrike in Spain, or 500 species of exotics in Costa Rica, they are not going on the old year list back home. A separate holiday list should of course be made, but a single list of species seen in the UK + Costa Rica in the year would just be silly. And to add insult, by going on the two week overseas holiday, you have opted to take time out from adding birds to the year list back home, and may end up 5 species down, which you never get back! Of course, that is a very small price to pay

for a great foreign holiday....unless you are on a Big Year. To take a Big Year seriously, you would be foolish to ever leave the listing area during the whole year!

The third rule, is what to accept as species on your list. The official benchmark in the UK, is the British List as prepared by the BOU, in particular their A and C category species. Most birds are on the A-list, those good,



A pair of Egyptian Geese which were present at Redcar Tarn from 27th August to 6th September 2011
A Red-crested Pochard

photo: Ian Hargreaves
photo: Mike Bloomfield

wholesome naturally-occurring species. The C-list, is rather more grimy, although acceptable to most, and consists of introduced and naturalised species, which I personally wish would all disappear overnight, such as the abominable Canada Goose, Pheasant and Red-legged Partridge. The B-list, for anyone wondering, is for species not seen for a very long time in Britain.

If you are a bit of a rebel, and could do with a few more species than the BOU list offers, you could use the UK 400 Club list as your guideline. That way, you would have three species of Brent Goose at your disposal, or nine species of wagtail to choose from, compared to only four which the BOU accepts. This all sounds very nice, but makes things difficult when you want to compare records with others. Were you to brag that 'my list is bigger than yours', only to find that you follow the UK 400, with it's 664 species, compared to the other guy following the British List with just over 600 species, you'd better keep quiet!

The forth rule, is whether to accept birds which you only hear (or smell if you are close enough), but do not see. Personally, I don't, I have to see them. But, if I hear and recognise a bird from the call, then see the source of the call flying away, but don't get a view which would have ID'd the bird on it's own, that would be OK.

My year listing expectations have changed over the years. When I was a kid, I thought I'd done very well to see 150 species in a year, 15 years ago I was happy with anything over 200, now I would think of anything below 250 as a poor show. Serious big listers may show disdain towards anyone who cannot get to 300 in a year.

Year listing can be frustrating, and sometimes you find yourself asking 'why?'. One such occasion was on the 22nd December last year. I found myself down at Attenborough Nature Reserve in Nottingham looking at Egyptian Geese. I had driven about 100 miles, alone, just to add a naff C-lister on to my year list. Thing is, I was close to breaking my record. But just over a week later, I finished the year on 264, with the Blue Rock Thrush. My year list record is 265. If only. If only I'd also seen the equally naff Red-crested Pochards at Attenborough; if only I'd gone for the Tawny Owl by Guiseley Station which Richard Lobley told me about, but didn't, because I don't like walking the streets at night with binoculars. I would have broken my year record by one, instead of being one short.

But, even if I had, the list would have been wiped clean a day later, and wouldn't have mattered to me any more. That's year listing.