

ABOUT BOOKS

Run For Your Lifelist

Mark Lynch

Birding On Borrowed Time. Phoebe Snetsinger. 2003. American Birding Association. Colorado Springs, Colorado.

“Death is life’s way of telling us to slow down.” Dick Sharples.

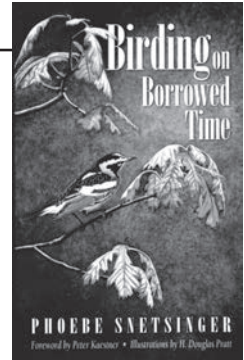
“I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work...I want to achieve it by not dying.” Woody Allen.

In the mid-1960s one of the more popular TV shows was *Run For Your Life*. Paul Bryan, played by Ben Gazzara, finds out he has “chronic myelocytic leukemia.” The producers of the show searched high and low for a noncontagious, incurable disease that would also still allow the lead actor to remain active. The kicker is that Paul has no more than two years to live. What should he do? He decides to cram as much extreme living as is possible into his remaining life and sets out to do all sorts of extraordinary and dangerous things and also help the folks whom he meets along the way, in typical TV melodrama fashion. *Birding On Borrowed Time* chronicles the hardcore lister’s version of this premise minus the helping of the folks met along the way.

Phoebe Snetsinger remains a legend in birding circles. Known as the first person to tick over 8000 of the world’s bird species, Phoebe was also well known as an indefatigable field birder and a meticulous record keeper. She bounded all over the globe with a passion and energy rarely seen in teenagers. This was all the more amazing because Phoebe was suffering from metastatic malignant melanoma, a form of cancer first detected in a mole on her back in 1981. Though she was operated on to remove the malignant growth, the prognosis remained extremely grim, giving her just a few months of seeming healthy life and then a slide into oblivion. Or so the doctors thought.

Despite this gloomy sentence, Phoebe’s brain, bone, and liver scans showed no signs that the cancer had metastasized in other parts of her body. Desperate to just get on with her life, Phoebe decided to throw all her mind and body into doing that one thing she had really enjoyed up until then: birding. Whenever she was out in the field looking at birds, she found that even just for a moment, cancer was not on her mind.

Always, in the heat of the chase and the fun of the find, thoughts of impending illness and death seemed less overwhelming. I was still managing to do some of those things I loved to do; bit by bit the magic grew, and the terror and hopelessness lessened their grip (p. 53).



And this she did with a ferocious single-mindedness rarely seen outside of Russian chess players or computer code writers. She suffered numerous injuries, a near drowning, and a frightening and horrific holdup and gang rape in Papua New Guinea in 1986. Always, her answer to every negative turn of events was to keep on birding, no matter what. Periodically, a lump would reappear under her arms, she would consult doctors and have an operation, but her bone, brain and liver scans always remained as blank as one's year's list on January first. Eventually, in 1999, Phoebe died, not of cancer, but in a freak bus accident in Madagascar, while birding, of course.

Birding On Borrowed Time is Phoebe Snetsinger's account of her frantic quest for the next new species. Peter Kaestner has written an appropriate foreword that fondly remembers Phoebe as his "soulmate." An epilogue by Thomas Snetsinger, one of Phoebe's sons, recaps Phoebe's fateful last trip to Madagascar and adds a needed perspective on her life. The black-and-white illustrations and color plates by H. Douglas Pratt are very good but not extraordinary. There are several photographs of Phoebe in the field, and at home tending her list over the years, which I found very touching.

As a book, *Birding on Borrowed Time* is an exhausting chronological account of Phoebe's birding forays. Phoebe Snetsinger took more trips in a year than most birders I know take in their life. By trying to include at least a mention of everywhere she went, many descriptions of trips that sound potentially fascinating are reduced to just a few paragraphs or less. For example:

Another gap in my world experience was Micronesia, so I had signed up for a late-February trip with Doug Pratt, a highly-respected tour leader and artist. We flew to Guam and went from the Marianas (Saipan, Rota, and Tinian) south to Palau and then east along the Caroline Island chain to Yap, Truk and Pohnpei. These islands hold a high number of endemics, and I was fortunate enough to observe every last one (p. 166).

That's it! On to Japan and the island of Torishima for Short-tailed Albatross. In all fairness, some trips are fleshed out with details, but so many perfunctory descriptions fly by that simply list places and species seen, the reader becomes numb. One is left with very little sense of the many exotic places that were visited.

There is also precious little information given out about a species' habits, history, and behavior, so that many birds become just names on a very long list. For instance, the Short-tailed Albatross, one of the most endangered seabirds in the northern hemisphere, has a long and fascinating history of a severe reduction in population from causes both human and natural, and has an even more interesting history of conservation efforts. Yet in the two separate paragraphs in *Birding On Borrowed Time* devoted to Phoebe's quest to see this species on two different occasions, this is what we learn of the Short-tailed Albatross as a bird:

The Short-tailed Albatrosses were magnificent, and we had wonderful views of all plumages right around the boat as we were anchored off Torishima (p.168).

Most of the two paragraphs are devoted to details about making arrangements for the trip and dealing with Japanese culture. I would refer the reader to Carl Safina's *Eye of the Albatross /Visions of Hope and Survival* (2002. New York: Henry Holt and Company) for details of the history of this amazing tubenose. To be sure, no writer could convey salient details about the thousands of species seen by Phoebe in so short a space, but by trying to include everything, the birds become mere ciphers in her never-ending quest. At times I felt like I was randomly riffling through the pages of a volume of *Birds Of the World*.

The more I read *Birding On Borrowed Time*, the more I began to wonder what it all meant. Is "birding" just stamp collecting with feathers? Is this an extreme example of conspicuous consumption? How much money did she ultimately spend on accruing this huge list anyway? How would that compare to the GNP of one of the many small "developing" nations she often visited? Why do I bird? When does a passion become an obsession?

At one point Phoebe Snetsinger's husband asks for a divorce, and Phoebe reacts as if came out of the blue:

I deeply resented David's unwillingness to accept my point of view: that our lives were out of synchrony in much the same way they had been back when he was pursuing his career and I needed more adult compassion and companionship. Now he was retired, and I was pursuing *my* career, and he was feeling exactly the same lacks I had. We'd both been guilty of a lack of consideration for the other at different times in our many years together — but was it really too late to recognize this failing and to learn from it? There was no third party involved here. I was totally and utterly opposed to the split at this time in our lives. There was *so much* to lose, for both us, and so little to gain. I simply couldn't and wouldn't accept it. I was angry, threatened, confused, and miserably unhappy. And once again I fled — this time to the Ivory Coast (p.175).

This passage is startling within the context of the book because, for once, Phoebe lets the reader in on her passions for something other than for birds. I have to admit I was behind her 100 percent till I got to that last sentence. Your marriage is falling apart, and you're righteously upset, so you take a birding trip? This was where I began to draw the line between "passion" and "obsession." Later, she misses her oldest daughter's wedding because its date was not announced enough in advance, and she has a scheduled birding holiday to Colombia, a "truly excellent trip" (p. 182). I confess I began to wonder about Phoebe's priorities and my own as well.

Even more disturbing is the utter lack of a strong environmental message in this book. Problems like human overpopulation, global warming, forest fragmentation, habitat destruction, and pollution, and their obvious effects on the very birds Phoebe is breathlessly covering the globe to tick, are given barely any mention at all. I kept waiting for Phoebe to make some impassioned statement, some summation of the future of birding and the environment to be given, but none was forthcoming. Interestingly, the single substantive mention of environmental concern is found in one

paragraph in Peter Kaestner's foreword. Perhaps Phoebe had intended to write something more, addressing these issues before she died, or maybe she has written about these topics elsewhere. But as it stands, for a book by THE leading world traveling birder of the last two decades that sums up her life in birding, to not have such a message seems like a singular and important missed opportunity and a bit bizarre. I was left wondering if, in fact, this was the finished manuscript. Was this the book that she wanted to ultimately leave as her ode to the joys of birding? We can never know.

Something I have learned over the decades of interviewing authors for my radio show is that extraordinary people who lead extraordinary lives do not often make extraordinary writers. Why should we expect them to be? Most extraordinary people are far too busy to be able to take the considerable time it takes to turn out a decent book. *Birding On Borrowed Time* is a flawed book that gives only a bare outline of a very rich and complex life. Most of the details are here, but they lack a much-needed depth and perspective. The final appropriate testament to Phoebe Snetsinger is yet to be written. 🐦

Mark Lynch is an environmental monitor, teacher, and trip leader for Broad Meadow Brook sanctuary. He is also a teacher and docent at the Worcester Art Museum and hosts "Inquiry," an interview show of arts and sciences on WICN radio. Mark, of course, attended his son's wedding, which was held outside atop Castle Hill, Ipswich. However, he did wear bins over his tux and managed to tick Northern Gannet as part of his "wedding list."



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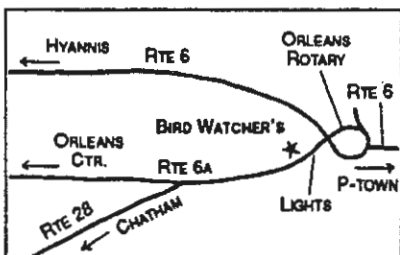
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