

Seven Continents, 90 Nations and 8,131 Species:

Romney Bathurst's Stunning Accomplishment as a World Birder

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According to the International Ornithological Committee (version 10.1 in 2020), 10,770 species of birds populate our planet. This is a changing count as DNA research clarifies subordinate and superordinate relationships, new species are discovered and extinction takes its toll. No one has seen them all. Phoebe Snetsinger was the first person to see 8,000 species, having achieved that celebrated world record in 1995. Today, few people reach this milestone. Romney Bathurst, who has deep roots in the Highlands community and the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society, saw her 8,000th bird species in West Papua in 2019 and continues to add to that total. Evident in her careful travel notes and revealing accounts, this accomplishment requires gritty determination, expert field skills, uncommon patience and on-the-spot courage. It's a story that merits telling.

Romney, who retired from a career as a stock broker in Florida in 1982, came to birding relatively late in life. She grew up with a bird book on the kitchen table and a bird feeder outside the window, but she has been an active bird watcher for only 20 years. On a trip to the Shetland Islands with her husband Bill in 1999, she was offered a turn at a spotting scope to view nesting Puffins and "something clicked." That eye-opening trip was followed by an even more formative ocean cruise, accompanied by a world famous guide to seabirds, which prompted her to begin her careful data base of sighted birds, her life list. Initially, she was beguiled by exotic birds such as the Resplendent Quetzal found from Mexico to Panama and the Southern Screamer in South America.

Since that excited beginning, Romney has sought birds on every continent. The 90 countries she has birded in include Bhutan ("stunning"), Brazil (nine times), Botswana (and other east, west and central African countries), Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on the Silk Road, Ethiopia, Peru, Cuba and other remote and exotic locations as far afield as Alaska, Madagascar and Antarctica. She has been on trips dedicated to seeing the newest species described to science such as the Scarlet-banded Barbet which is found only on one isolated plateau in northern Peru. She is known and recognized world-wide by leading birders and tour groups.

All told, she has seen 8131 different bird species or 75% of the known avian species in the world.

Romney's travel stories, told in her travel notes sent over the years to family, friends and Audubon colleagues, are tales of exotic destinations, remote treks and close encounters with people, wildlife and the elements. In the last 5 years, these travel notes have come from Indonesia, Guatemala, New Zealand, West Africa, West Papua and Kenya, including surrounding locations. All her trips involve extraordinary encounters and personal discoveries that astound, amuse and inform. At times her search for the remote and uncommon has reached epic proportions.

An Earthquake, Overturned SUV and Sinking Ship

A trip to Indonesia in the fall of 2016, for instance, held a lifetime of high adventure that typifies her broader accomplishment. The 73-day trip involved 8 weeks of intensive birding ranging across three tours of some of the 17,000 islands that comprise this wide-ranging equatorial country in the Western Pacific. Included were the islands of the Lesser Sundas, Sulawesi, Halmahera, Sumba, Timor and Flores, culminating in 18 days of a high seas ship-based tour of remote islands in the Banda Sea.

The first stop after the gathering of guides and participants in Bali was Sumba, one of the "island gems set in aqua seas." The group travelled through many villages and sighted colorful endemics including Black-naped and Red-naped Fruit Doves. Her trip narrative then contains the following startling entry: "On our second night in Lewa, we were all violently shaken awake by an earthquake, which set every dog barking for a long, long time! We learned the next morning that it had been 5.-something, based in the Flores Sea. Everyone took it in stride, as such things are apparently not infrequent." Little sleep that night.

From Sumba it was a short flight to Timor followed by a two hour, bumpy road trip and brief ferry ride to the tiny island of Roti. Birding for owls on her first night on Roti, Romney suffered a deep gash under her kneecap and ended up the next day in an ER in Kupang. The bleeding stemmed without stitches, she was able to resume her busy schedule of birding and hiking on Roti, then traveled to Timor (the "Timor Sparrow, Timor Boobook, Orange-sided Thrush, Tri-colored Parrotfinches are but a few of my favorites") and Flores ("the Glittering

Kingfisher, Flores Hawk-eagle and Moluccan Scops Owl were just a few of the bird highlights here”).

On west Bali and east Java her new lifers included “the critically endangered Bali Myna, a stunning bird which faces extinction, even now, due to the demands of the cage-bird trade,” Javan Banded Pitta, Black-winged Starling, Green Peacock, Javan Flameback Woodpecker, “brilliant blue Javan Kingfisher,” Javan Owlet, Javan Bush-warbler, White-flanked Sunbird, Pink-headed Fruit Dove and more. Sulawesi and Halmahera yielded “many lifers, including the Geomalia. The Red-eared Fruit Dove was pretty, and the Satanic Nightjars were awesome! But my favorite, by far, was the Purple-bearded Bee-eater, with its rich colors and upright stance. Truly a great bird” (pictured below from BirdTour Asia, LTD).



On Sulawesi the group sought a score of endemics in the Lore Lindu National Park after a long, steep ascension on the Anazo Track: “I was proud of myself for completing the 2500’ climb, but already knew that I would not be going up a

second time as was planned for our third day in the park. I spent that day birding the lowlands, enjoying views of Grosbeak Starlings at their roost (they are communal cavity nesters and quite raucous), Yellow-billed Malkoha and Ashy Woodpecker, among many more.”

The island of Halmahera held several surprises: “It was now Sept. 10th, and we were experiencing the first really rainy weather of my whole trip. Arriving on Halmahera our SUVs headed for Tobelo after a stop for lunch in Ternate. It was pouring down rain and the three of us in the lead car, Craig in front, with Mark and me in back, were sound asleep. We were awakened suddenly when we felt the car going out of control! It had hydroplaned and started flying wildly, finally landing on the passenger side (mine), on the side of the road. Mark had the presence of mind to grab onto the driver’s seat in front of him and didn’t fall on me, thank goodness. Just as we 3 were finding ourselves almost unscathed and trying to figure out how to get out, an entire football (soccer) team, in uniform, in the drenching rain, appeared at the side of the car and pushed it upright! Later on we learned from the group in the 2 cars behind us that they had no idea where the team had come from!”

She continued then by outrigger canoe at night in a successful search for the endemic Moluccan Scrubfowl: “What an incredible end to a very surreal day!”

After 6 weeks of birding she and her fellow birders saw 284 species including many new lifers for her.

She then returned to Bali for a week of much-needed R & R followed by 18 days aboard a ship birding remote islands in the Banda Sea. Her ship was “a beauty” with a crew of 11, spacious accommodations including AC and a shaded viewing deck for the 12 passengers. “Our first week aboard was super!” Then: “As we were headed from Leti to Damar, on the morning of Oct. 12th, we were about to stop to snorkel on an untouched reef off a small, uninhabited island, Terbang Selatan (which means flying south). Suddenly, we felt a big bump, and then another – we soon discovered that we had hit the reef! In retrospect, the ensuing minutes seem to have flown by, but in fact it was some time before we realized how much trouble the ship was in. The captain had sent out both small boats with lines to try to dislodge the ship, to no avail. Suddenly we got the word that the engine room was filling with water and we needed to pack and get on deck as

quickly as possible. I went down to my cabin and stuffed my bags with everything I could lay my hands on, the crew brought the bags up and I was soon on the zodiac on my way to the island – which, of course, was uninhabited! We had hit the reef at high tide, so things weren't going to improve for the ship, but the crew was able to bring us food, water and cushions from the lounge chairs on the upper deck. They rigged a tarp for shade, and it was relatively comfortable. Of course, the uncomfortable part was not knowing when we might be rescued!" She was shipped-wrecked and stranded on an uninhabited island.



“Over the next 6 hours, we watched the ship continue to list and fill with water as the tide went down. A ‘May Day’ distress call had been sent by the captain, so any passing vessel was required to stop. Suddenly, over the horizon came the Indonesian Inter-island Ferry – which passes by this little dot of an island twice a month – amazing luck!!! We climbed in the tender and were walked out over the

now very shallow reef to transfer to the zodiac which was waiting just beyond the breaking waves, and then on to the ferry.”

The rescue landed everyone in a small village on another remote island with no accommodations. She and her fellow passengers slept for two days on the floor of the local jail and were fed graciously by the villagers (“lots of rice, sometimes soup & veggies, sometimes squid or chicken, with Coke, Sprite and water to drink”). The island birding continued apace, of course, with a sighting of the rare Damar Flycatcher. She then endured a “looong” 12-hour crossing on rough seas in a bareboat (no life jackets, no deck rigging, no head, and no seats below deck) to Babar where she saw the Babar Whistler and Wallace’s Fruit Dove.

A final 6-hour crossing then to Tanimbar offered remarkable new birds including the Australian Masked Owl; Tanimbar Flycatcher; Tanimbar Corella; Orange sided, Fawn-breasted and Slaty-backed Thrush; and the Tanimbar Scrubfowl.

This highly successful if challenging trip ended in Singapore: “We flew from Tanimbar to Ambon to Jakarta, where most would fly back home the following day. But I had 4 more days in Singapore. At last it was time to head home. I must admit I was ready! It had been an exciting, exhausting, sometimes scary, often laughter-filled 6 weeks of visits to 18 islands. I had met many new people. Amongst the groups and their leaders I had made new friends. The encounters with Indonesians were by and large delightful, and of course, the birds were too.”

Onward to 8000

The following year, 2017, saw four far-flung trips. The first, in February, to Guatemala added the Pink-headed Warbler, Wine-throated Hummingbirds and other endemics to her life list. On a trip to New Zealand, her third trip to this endemic-laden island, she “finally birded the refuge island of Tiritiri Matangi.” The islands of New Caledonia, the Solomans, Louisiade Archipelago, Normandy and D’Entrecasteaux added the Kagu and “tons of new seabirds.” West Africa—Sao Tome and Principe and the Gabon mainland—held the Lyre-tailed Honeyeater, Plumed Guinea fowl and Vermiculated Fishing Owl. She ended the busy year with her second birding tour in the West Papuan islands.

A return trip to West Papua in 2019 contributed such exotic endemics as the Biak Paradise Kingfisher, Emperor Fairy Wren, Victoria Crowned Pigeon, Grand

Manikin and Spangled Kookaburra. Then on October 16 she sighted the Mountain Owlet Nightjar (pictured below from eBird): “The Feline Owlet-nightjar is 10-11” in length, while the Mountain Owlet Nightjar is only about 7-8”; both are endemic to the mountains of the Island of New Guinea. And the Mountain Owlet Nightjar turned out to be my 8,000th species!!! What a delightful one to see for that benchmark. I must admit that many years ago, when I read a biography of Phoebe Snetsinger, I had marked several passages which spoke to me. The book was entitled ‘Birding on Borrowed Time’ and, at this point in my life, I feel that’s what I’m doing too. Every bird I see beyond that somewhat magic number is just icing on the cake!”



She had reached an important milestone, a personal goal, a truly notable accomplishment. This is far from the end of the story or the end of stories, however, about this world-class birder. In the winter of 2020 Romney continued her quest for the remote and rarely seen on a trip to Kenya beginning in Nairobi.

Describing the season there as a “time of plenty” in East Africa, this tour covered 2800 miles and was a “constant feast for the eyes as well as the soul.” Among the many birds sighted were: Sokoke Scops-owl, Malimbe Pipit, Vulturine Guinea fowl, Golden-winged Sunbird Moustached Tinker bird, Grant’s Wood-hoopoe and Jameson’s Wattle-eye. At the end of this trip her life list stood at 8131 species.

2020 Reflections

The call of rare avian beauty still beckons to this accomplished naturalist. A trip planned and scheduled for the spring of 2020 included Pitcairn and Easter Islands, ending in Tahiti. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, this trip was cancelled at the last minute. “Though it was a huge disappointment, it was definitely the correct call by Apex and Silver Seas. Though housebound, as most others are, I have spent my time refining my life list, which is now on IGoTerra, a very sophisticated Swedish data-base. I still have my old Avisys data-base too, however, as so many species have been split since those early days, and I have gained a few ‘armchair ticks’ by checking on sightings long ago. I am also spending some time working on future travels, since at my age, 76, I won’t have much longer to go the places I need to go to see new birds. It’s the law of diminishing returns, of course - it gets mighty difficult to get to where you need to go, and expend the physical effort required to see birds in obscure places.”

When asked about the rules of listing life birds, Romney laughs: “It’s up to each lister to make their own rules, actually. I started out feeling that I wanted to see and not just hear every bird. And that is how I feel today, though I have been tempted at times, definitely! The Swedes, for instance, tend to include birds they have only heard, and while calls are definitely an important part of identifying birds, there is nothing that matches the sight of the wanted bird, no matter how brief. I’ve run into couples who only count birds that both have seen, and others who jokingly count birds seen by the person next to them! That’s called a ‘stand-by list.’” Hers are all sighted birds.

What are her thoughts about recent evidence of the loss of many birds worldwide? “The alarming data on the loss of millions of birds in recent years is all the more reason for birders to go in search of increasingly endangered species. Without knowing where the birds are and what their life-cycle may be, there is little way to protect those that are most vulnerable. The introduction of eBird,

now coordinated by Cornell Labs, is a definite step forward in that regard. Though it came too late for me to transfer more than 26,000 sightings (and that was just from AviSys, which I stopped using 5 years ago), it is the preferred means of listing for those who are new to birding, and some of us troglodytes have made the switch too. Though sometimes the enumeration of numbers of a species seen can be tedious, and also often involves 'guess-timates', there is a team of reviewers that can question and ask for further proof of off-the-mark sightings. It seems to me that this is the way forward for those who want to build a life list and citizen-scientists too. Their contributions will add continuously to our knowledge of and therefore what must be done to reverse the downward trends."

Her other thoughts going forward? "There are new techniques for investigation being brought on board every year. Satellite views of bird migration, and satellite photos of unexplored terrain are adding to our knowledge immensely. My ninth trip to Brazil, for example, explored a previously un-birded stretch of the river Marie, a tributary of the Rio Negro in North Western Brazil. Our leader, Bret Whitney of Field Guides, used a drone to check out the areas around our remote, boat-based trip, and we proceeded to explore several side streams along the way. It was an exciting trip all around and even provided a few new lifers, such as Tawny-tufted Toucanet, a bird which is as colorful as an explosion in a paint factory!"

"Of course, birding is enjoyed in many different ways all over the world. At least so far, there is no place I've been where one can't enjoy seeing and hearing birds. It can be a life-long hobby, and though not many are able or choose to pursue it as I have done, the experiences nonetheless can be uplifting, satisfying something deep within most of us who long to connect with the world around us. Just last Saturday [near her new home in Virginia], I saw two male Baltimore Orioles in a blooming wild Dogwood with clear, blue sky in the background – just about as pretty as anything I've seen!

"In the end," she muses, "it is life's experiences that count, not one's possessions. I always encourage my family, especially the children, to open their eyes to nature. Even on a walk to the bus-stop, with my nephew Luke, or at a Horse Show with my older niece and nephew, we look at birds and try to identify them. It is

the up-coming generations, after all, who will find new pathways to conservation.”

How does she feel about what she has done in the last 20 years? “I feel quite privileged and gratified with the many memories I have of the whole process. All told, it’s been a super ride!!! I am so thankful for the help I’ve had along the way, my dear Bill for his support and encouragement, the many local guides, fellow birders, and professional guides and their companies – all have contributed far more than I can say. It’s a crazy sort of passion I guess, but so rewarding.”

What does Romney hope is her legacy? “The money spent in local communities will help keep the people, birds and their habitat, animals and plants, safe for many years to come. If there is any sort of ‘legacy’ to what I’ve achieved, it’s that!”

“The number of birds I have seen is not as important,” she says, “as that moment you see a bird—it knowing you are there and tolerating your being there—and then entering its world.” One of her most memorable birding experiences was seeing a Wandering Albatross fledge from the nest, “knowing that it would not touch foot on land again for five years.” Like that fledging albatross Romney Bathurst took flight with the birds 20 years ago and has preferred the wing to the nest ever since.



Photo caption: Romney Bathurst birding on Dauphin Island, Alabama, with the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society. Photograph by William McReynolds