

# A passion for



*Sean Dooley's obsession with birdwatching has led to a book which will have you aching with laughter, if not itching to go twitching.*

No trumpets sounded, nor red carpets unrolled when, in 2002, Sean Dooley ticked off his 634th bird to break the Australian record for the number of species seen in a calendar year. Neither was there a certificate, plaque nor official listing to mark his eventual total of 700 – 703, to be exact. The birding community is not known for its grandiloquence. “Though I did visit a birder who actually makes up plaques for himself,” says Sean.

Sean was not, however, without support. “One guy suggested that I be nominated for Australian of the Year!” he says. “That was pretty funny.”

Birding glory is as tough to pin down as the birds themselves, because it's a matter of conscience – one could pretend, even lie to oneself, about the numbers seen and no one would ever know. But though many diehard birdwatchers watched Sean's every move as keenly as he was watching the birds, none questioned the integrity of his record.

Sean's motivation for tackling the record was not acknowledgement or admiration. After both his parents died, he decided to use his inheritance to fund a 12-month, round-Australia trip in pursuit of his goal; the achievement went some way to honouring their memory, in that he spent the money on something which truly expressed who he is. “In the end I didn't care what people thought,” he says. “It was something I wanted to do for my own reasons.”

His book, *The Big Twitch* (a twitch is the chase for a rare bird) documents the trip – and in Sean's hands, what most people consider a tame pursuit becomes an adventure of personal significance, full of danger, hopes thwarted and unexpected delights. It's also travel writing with a twist, describing our country from a unique perspective – where the birds hang out.

Taking on physical and mental challenges, Sean makes choices about how far he is prepared to go in the pursuit of the goal, striking a balance between determination, perseverance and going with the flow. “Yes, it was about notching up each tick,” he says. “But at times it was very Zen; you couldn't become too attached to any one particular bird.”

He may not consider himself the most obsessive birdwatcher on the planet, but flying in a light plane over the Abrolhos Islands in Western Australia to see the Lesser Noddy, or transcending wretched seasickness for the Great-winged Petrel surely puts him up there in the birdwatching lunacy

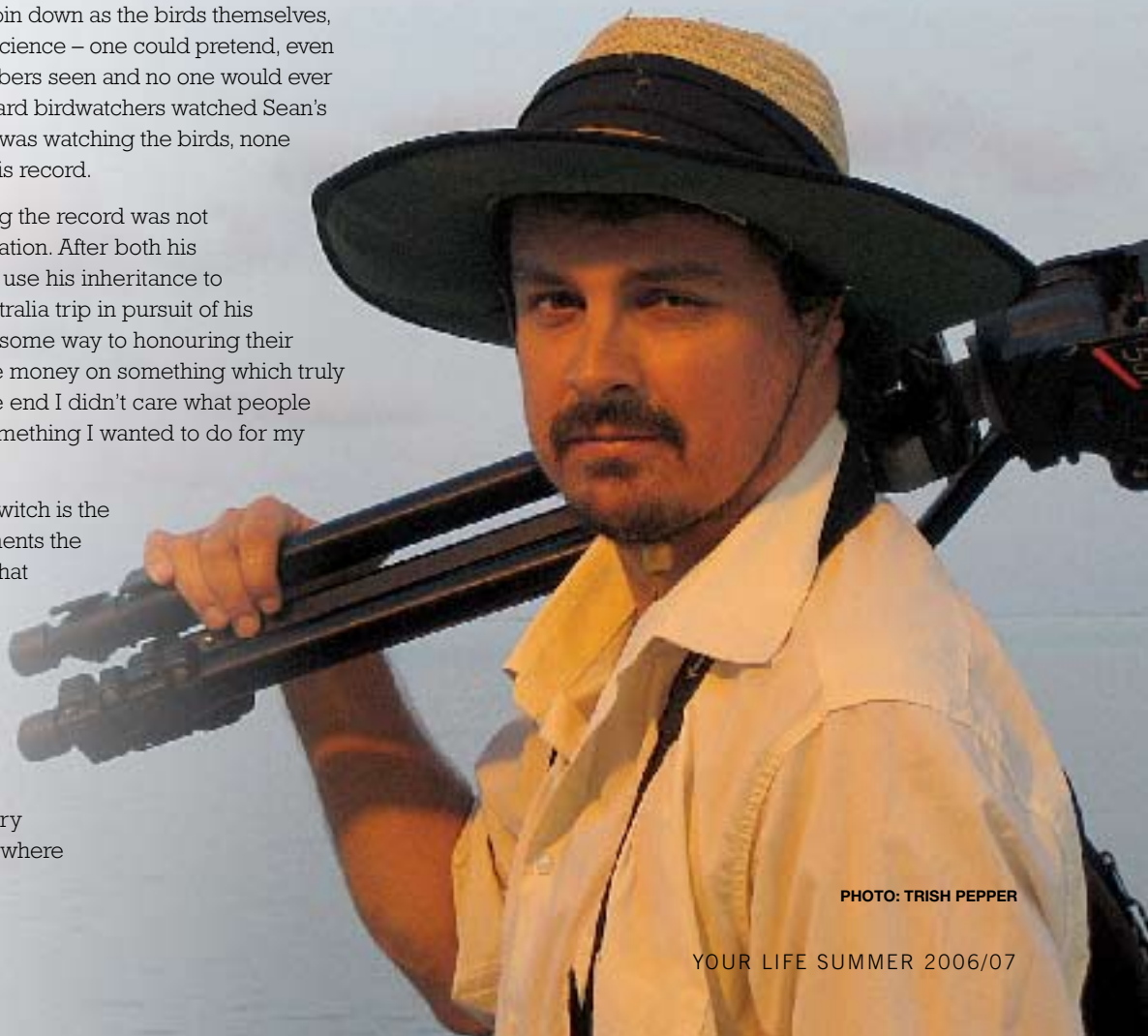


PHOTO: TRISH PEPPER



# twitching

stakes. "I think there are people more obsessed than I am," he says. "I was just able to distil my obsession into one year." So driving in the wrong direction for 500 kilometres to see the Chiming Wedgebill isn't obsessed? "I was so angry at the bird for making me do it," laughs Sean. "But I thought, I'm not going to let this one go."

Sean proves he's not the craziest by telling the story of his friend John Young. "He recently discovered a new species of parrot. It's incredibly controversial. People have accused him of making it up. If these new parrots are indeed a new species, they've eluded people for 220 years, because they live only at the top of rainforest mountains, in the very tops of the trees, and they're almost completely silent. John only managed to find them because he'd sleep in stag ferns 100 feet off the ground. He's bloody mad."

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Maybe all birdwatchers have the eccentric gene, or maybe they just know what they like. Breaking the record has helped Sean get it out of his system – a bit. "There's not the desire to go out *all* the time," he says. "Though me and my mates Groober and Puke recently did a 'twitchathon' – 24 hours of non-stop birdwatching. We had a ball. We beat our personal record, but not the Victorian record."

No one has yet broken Sean's Australian record. "I'm secretly hoping someone will and then I can have another crack at it," he says. "I've thought about whether I could do it in England or America. There was a shot in an English paper showing birdwatchers packed six deep on a narrow walkway along a sea wall. There's vicious competition over there."

Sean's enthusiasm is genuinely infectious. "I'm the Typhoid Mary of birdwatching," he says. "I'm spreading the virus." But for birders and non-birders alike, the message of his book is that the more you risk acting on who you really are, the more you have the confidence to be who you are, all of which is its own reward. Although, like the search for the Grey Falcon, a bird that purportedly exists but which Sean has never seen, the challenges are ongoing and full of frustration, mystery and wonder. "I almost don't want to see the Grey Falcon," he says. "In a way, I just like having that one thing I haven't seen." **YL**

### Sean's top three birds...

Grey-crowned Babbler – they're hilarious and rare.

Red Goshawk – when I sighted it, I thought, I can actually do this!

Buff-headed Coucal – they're amazing, they look like a Jim Henson puppet with a big fluffy head. And they've got a pretty stupid name.

### ... and top three twitching spots

Iron Range on Cape York – different from other rainforests, with an amazing number of birds.

The Lamington National Park, South East Queensland – a magic landscape, beautiful birds.

The Christmas Island tip – it stinks, it's foetid, but there are so many birds.

→ MORE

*The Big Twitch* by Sean Dooley, Allen & Unwin  
2005, RRP \$26.95.

Visit [www.thebigtwitch.com](http://www.thebigtwitch.com) to catch the latest news on Sean's birdwatching antics.

