

Collins. In fact, the amount of scientific rubbish that Lamarck put on paper certainly exceeds the quantity of good science in his scientific oeuvre. In this respect, he is no different from Aristotle, Isaac Newton, Darwin, Albert Einstein, Fred Hoyle or Francis Crick. But by writing about evolution directly rather than *en passant* (as did dozens of philosophers from Empedocles to Count Buffon), and by tackling the subject of evolution in scientific

rather than poetical terms (as did Erasmus Darwin), Lamarck is without doubt the father of evolutionary theory.

In this year bracketed by two celebrations of Darwin — the 200th anniversary of his birth on 12 February and the sesquicentennial of the publication of his masterpiece on 24 November — let us pause on 14 August to ponder the man whose biological insight preceded *On the Origin of Species* by 50 years. ■

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A passion for birds

Life List: A Woman's Quest for the World's Most Amazing Birds

by Olivia Gentile

Bloomsbury USA: 2009. 352 pp. \$26, £25

If you had less than one year left to live, how would you spend your days? After being diagnosed with terminal cancer, Phoebe Snetsinger, the subject of Olivia Gentile's first book, invested her time trying to see every bird species in the world. In the process, this American grandmother became the first person ever to see 8,000 species of birds. *Life List* is her story.

Birdwatching is typically dismissed as a quiet hobby pursued by eccentrics, but it can be more like an extreme sport. Most birders keep a record of all the species they've spotted — their 'Life List' — and its size is a source of prestige. Intense competition results. It is a pastime often dominated by middle-aged men who seek out globe-trotting, cliff-dangling adventures, punctuated by bouts of dysentery and malaria, to fulfil their quest to see the rarest birds in the world.

Birders share attributes with many scientists who may not know where the line between passion and obsession lies. But obsession requires extreme sacrifices.

Phoebe didn't start out noticing birds. In her youth, she was a tomboy who distinguished herself as a gifted student with a natural affinity for writing, languages and the sciences. But in the 1950s, young women's futures were limited, so Phoebe followed the expected path: marriage and children. But dedication to her family did not relieve the boredom, frustration and intellectual starvation that accompanied suburban life. Depression set in.

One sunny day, a neighbour took Phoebe into the back yard, put a pair of binoculars into her hands and pointed to a small bird

perched in a treetop. From the moment she set eyes upon the blazing orange throat of that Blackburnian Warbler (*Dendroica fusca*), she was hooked. She purchased binoculars, studied field guides and went out birding with her neighbour several times a week. Her remarkable memory and enthusiasm overcame her innate shyness, so she quickly befriended other birders. Birdwatching became Phoebe's freedom from the cage of domesticity.

As her skills improved, Phoebe began travelling farther to see birds. But everything changed in 1981, just a few months short of her fiftieth birthday, when she was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma. She was

given less than one year to live. At roughly the same time, she received an inheritance from the estate of her father, multimillionaire Leo Burnett, who had died ten years previously. With the blessings of her husband and children, Phoebe used her inheritance to pursue her passion. She set out to see more birds than anyone else had ever done before.

Despite her diagnosis, Phoebe did not die from cancer. She spent the next 18 years pursuing birds into exotic places, through war-torn lands, despite several injuries and the death of a birding companion. She persisted even after being assaulted in New Guinea. But her decision to pursue birds meant sacrifices elsewhere. It often took her away from family events: Phoebe missed weddings, funerals and christenings. Eventually her marriage was at stake.

All this ended abruptly in Madagascar in 1999: Phoebe was killed when the van she was travelling in overturned. She had just seen a rare species of vanga, a stunning bird that had only recently been described.

Life List is riveting and, like its subject, demonstrates a passion bordering on obsession. The index is extensive and there are detailed chapter notes, citing interviews with Phoebe's family and friends, referencing scientific papers, magazine articles and books, including Phoebe's personal memoir, *Birding on Borrowed Time* (American Birding Association, 2003).

Yet the story of a suburban housewife and mother-of-four who became a legend in the testosterone-driven world of competitive birding is more than a biography. It raises themes that echo through all our lives, from the restriction of people's roles by society, to questions of how best to spend one's days on Earth. Is pursuing a rare bird a trivial pursuit, or a chase worthy of respect? Ultimately, *Life List* asks what it means to live, and die, well. ■

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Phoebe Snetsinger logged more than 8,000 bird species.