



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

*Olivia Gentile*

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## **Life List: A Woman's Quest for the World's Most Amazing Birds Olivia Gentile**

**A frustrated housewife sets out to see more bird species than anyone in history—and ends up risking her life again and again in the wildest places on earth.**

Phoebe Snetsinger had planned to be a scientist, but, like most women who got married in the 1950s, she ended up keeping house, with four kids and a home in the suburbs by her mid-thirties. Numb and isolated, she turned to bird-watching, but she soon tired of the birds near home and yearned to travel the world. Then her life took a crushing turn: At forty-nine, she was diagnosed with cancer and told that she had less than a year to live. Devastated, she began crisscrossing the globe, finding rare and spectacular birds that brought her to the heights of spiritual ecstasy. But as it turned out, she beat the cancer. She eventually went to more than a hundred countries, had frequent brushes with danger, became a hero in the birding world, and set a record for the most species seen. *Life List* is a powerful portrait of a woman who found refuge from society's expectations in a dangerous and soul-stirring obsession.

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

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### Carrie Laben says

Incredibly frustrating and subtly dismissive book about a woman who did something literally no-one else on earth had ever done, only to be criticized sidelong by an author who does the equivalent of attributing John Glenn's attempts to leave the earth to trauma and complaining about how unfair Marie Curie was to her husband. It's hard to say whether this is down to a species of internalized sexism or a simple inability to grasp the grandeur in the single-minded pursuit of an epic goal at the expense of conventional behavior. When Snetsinger complains about a tour, Gentile assumes she was troubled and cranky and not, say, on a tour that was legitimately bad; when Snetsinger falls from a boat or sprains an ankle, Gentile is quick to point out that she was taking 'unnecessary' risks that were in fact highly necessary if she wanted to achieve her aims; when Snetsinger is praised by her birding companions as warm and giving, Gentile behaves as though this somehow doesn't count because her husband (a dull man in the classic Midwestern post-war style, who was happy for the couple to live largely separate lives when it suited his career but suddenly needed his hand held when he retired) found her cold. Most outrageous of all is the constant harping on the fact that Snetsinger was once raped on a bird tour and Gentile's insistence that she somehow failed to deal with it, as opposed to accepting her at her word that she dealt with it by continuing to seek out new birds and refusing to let it take away her drive to travel. It would be one thing if any evidence were presented that it caused her ongoing problems, but in fact Snetsinger comes across as quite frank and levelheaded about the whole ordeal while Gentile appears to reject her subject's lived experience in favor of a Psych 101 stereotype of how rape survivors should behave.

The fact that the husband and children Snetsinger left behind are Gentile's primary sources is probably the source of this bias. It would be interesting to read a book that balanced their views with more accounts from the guides and fellow birders who were capable of recognizing and celebrating Snetsinger's best qualities.

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### LibraryCin says

Phoebe Snetsinger grew up in the mid-20th-century, and wanted to be a scientist. She received a good education, but in the 1950s, women (whether or not they had an education) got married and stayed home with the kids. Which is what Phoebe did. But, she was bored, so when she discovered birds when the kids were a bit older, she became obsessed. She spent most of the rest of her life travelling (and when not travelling, she was researching), so she could add as many of the 9,000 (ish, the number changed over the years) species of bird to her "life list" of which birds she'd seen. In 1981, she was diagnosed with cancer and given 1 year. She lived for many more years and, after her diagnosis, upped the frequency of her birding trips. In addition to ending up in many dangerous situations in her travels, her birding obsession came with a cost to her relationships with her husband and children.

I really enjoyed this. I became interested in birds after purchasing a bird feeder many years ago as entertainment for my two inside cats. So, the bird information (and a few drawings) was very interesting to me, though much of the book also focused on Phoebe's obsession, travelling, and how this affected her relationships and the rest of her life. This was very good.

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## Julie says

I've been a birder for a while, but not much of a birder, in that I hadn't heard of Phoebe Snetsinger. It seems everyone else in the birding world has; when she died in 1999, Snetsinger had seen more bird species than anyone else in the world. And not just "seen" them, as in caught enough of a sight or sound to check the name of the species on a list: She had spent time studying birds, watching them, and recording her sightings. She'd been "in the game" long enough to have compiled her own field guides for countries where no such thing existed until she prepared to visit. She had excelled at what was, for decades, a gentleman's hobby. She was the world's best birder.

And yes, it cost her personally, because every story of a woman's achievement has to also be told as a story of what it costs, doesn't it? According to Olivia Gentile, what it cost Snetsinger was happy relationships with her husband and children and possibly, some awareness of her own experience as she gave up a happy family life in a drive to the top.

I like many aspects of the way Gentile handled Snetsinger's story. I adore her descriptions of bird species: She is the master of finding one telling, delightful detail and giving you a whole bird. "The African Jacana's back shines like newly polished copper." "The Gray Crowned-Crane stands tall and still, with a 'crown' that looks like freshly picked wheat." She's not trying to describe all the field marks, just give a sense of the bird and elicit a reaction. Who wouldn't enjoy looking at shiny copper or fresh wheat? I thought her bird descriptions were very effective.

What I didn't enjoy as much was her diagnosis of Snetsinger's psychology, especially after a particularly awful incident in 1986. Gentile keeps returning to the aftermath of the incident and reviewing how inadequate Snetsinger's emotional response was. In addition to becoming repetitive, these bits never revealed any fresh insight.

But I finished the book appreciating Snetsinger's achievement and feeling I had achieved some understanding of her as a person, so all in all, this is a book I would recommend to women who enjoy reading about women who aspire to excellence, and to birders of all kinds, who deserve to know about this woman's accomplishments.

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## Rod says

If the name Phoebe Snetsinger means anything to you, you're probably a birder or live with one. Snetsinger was the first person to see more than 8,000 species of birds. Among birders, she is a legend. If you're a birder, then you may have already read her autobiography, "BIRDING ON BORROWED TIME." And if you've read her autobiography, you know about Phoebe Snetsinger, the birder. But you were probably still left with a lot of questions about Phoebe Snetsinger, the person. What leads a person to miss birthdays, family milestones and her mother's funeral to pursue birds with such intensity?

Olivia Gentile does a worthy job at bringing the rest of Snetsinger's life into focus with her book, "Life List: A Woman's Quest for the World's Most Amazing Birds." Gentile interviewed many of Snetsinger's family and friends for her book, which provides much needed context for Snetsinger's life and accomplishments.

Gentile begins with a very brief history of birding to set the stage. This history, like most of the rest of the book, is informative and highly readable. The book flows almost like a novel rather than a stuffy academic biography, likely because Gentile's background is in journalism. If the bogs down at all, the fault may be

with the full-time birding and traveling that dominated her subject's life.

Like many birders, Snetsinger stumbled into birding and took to it as a form a therapy and intellectual stimulation. In Snetsinger's case, it was to offset the domestic duties of being a 1950's housewife, which she evidently found to be drudgery.

Of special interest for me was Gentile's mention of the friendship between Snetsinger and Burt Monroe, a professor of ornithology at the University of Louisville and Beckham Bird Club member. Snetsinger and Monroe not only had their love of birds in common; both lived with cancer.

It was the cancer diagnosis that spurred Snetsinger's quest to see as many birds as possible. However, something else Snetsinger noted about birding during the "Golden Age" that adds some urgency to my own birding. Gentile quotes Snetsinger: "We are living at the best possible time in history of mankind to see a representation of the birds of the world." This "narrow window" would close as more habitat was destroyed and more species were lost, "the pursuit may become more depressing than it is exhilarating...so don't let it pass without considering taking part in the greatest avian celebration ever witnessed."

However, it was an accident rather than cancer that ended Snetsinger's life. Though a tragic loss for her family, friends and the birding community at large, one cannot help but think it was the way she would have wanted it: having died in pursuit of birds "with her binoculars on."

Indeed, Snetsinger is a legend and a hero. She did and will continue to inspire. Gentile gives us the fuller appreciation of her life and that even heros are still human. Snetsinger's legend lives on in "Life List."

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### **Marlene says**

As a novice birder, I found the story of Phoebe Snetsinger remarkable. She was fortunate enough to travel the world over, and over again, to find the birds she had such a passion for. Good for her!

I am glad the author gave us a good glimpse into Phoebe's personal life, enough to see that a quest such as hers was not without its challenges on many levels. When one has life goals and when one has people in one's life, most often the two clash in purpose and importance. Taking steps to reach one's goals can so often step on the toes of loved ones. This has reminded me that it's important to give space to others in my own family to be who they are and to pursue their dreams.

I personally won't be garnering even a few hundred birds, but I am reminded through reading this book there are an amazing amount of fantastic winged creatures everywhere!

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### **Lisa says**

I enjoyed this book covering the life of Phoebe Snetsinger, even though I can't identify with the subject. Phoebe sacrificed family relationships and her health in her obsessive search for birds across the globe and in every environment. Disregarding political turmoil, she ventured into places which compromised her safety and were beyond her physical limits (in her later years).

While parts of Phoebe's story were very interesting, I found myself comparing this woman's life to others "obsessed" with the pursuit of a single activity (Dean Karnazes -Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner and Christopher McCandles covered by Jon Krakauer in the book *Into the Wild*). You'd think I'd take inspiration from these folks, but mostly I just shake my head in disbelief and wonder, "What makes a person pursue a hobby or interest to the exclusion of other hobbies, their health, and their relationships?" Still, there is a story to be told, and you can get a more one-sided perspective by reading Phoebe's memoir, "Birding on Borrowed Time" or you can get a bigger picture by reading this story.

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### **Michelle says**

I suspect that at the end of the year, this extremely engaging and well-written biography of Phoebe Snetsinger will be on my short list of the best books I've read this year. I picked it up on a lark, since I will pick up nearly anything having to do with birds and since, of course, just the word "Snetsinger" is capable of putting me and many other birdcrazy people in profound and prolonged awe. I knew of course the "basic outline" of her story--diagnosed with malignant melanoma, but went on a furious binge of birding tours around the world and ended up being the first human being to sight 8,000 species of birds. I had no idea about her earlier life, about the complexity of her life--her amazing birding achievements still stand and I still admire them. But . . . to know that she virtually abandoned her husband and children for often half the year or more to go on birding tours, beginning while she still had children in high school; she missed her mother's funeral, one of her daughters' weddings! I feel that Gentile has done an excellent job with this book, examining Snetsinger's achievement and obsession thoughtfully while also discussing what her achievements cost those close to her. Amazing book about an extraordinary woman.

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### **Nancy says**

Life List is a biography of Phoebe Burnett Snetsinger. Phoebe's story is in many ways the story of bright women who came of age between 1945 and 1970 or so. During World War II many women worked and day care centers apparently were available, because most men were away at war. After the war, women were told to go home, have babies and be full time mothers. They were guilted horribly by the government, women's magazines and society in general, if they didn't follow this high-pressure advice.

Yet when they followed the advice, many were miserably isolated and or unfulfilled, desperate to be more than the children's mother or their husband's servant and sexual partner. As their children got older and they became more independent, many developed interests that began to give them a sense of self. Life List is the story of Phoebe's evolution from depressed mother to world-renowned birder.

The story particularly interested me because it traced the impact of society's goals on individual women during much of the 20th century and also because I am both an observer of birders and a photographer of birds. Phoebe was obviously a woman gifted with a strong body and an extraordinarily keen mind. The degree to which she eventually became compulsive about birding made me think it's just as well I'm not a birder.

I was bothered by the author's pushiness about her bias that Phoebe's increasing moodiness and compulsiveness about birding was due to her being sexually assaulted and not seeking counseling. Although that's certainly a possible explanation, it appeared that the stress and moodiness may have been more closely

correlated with her having set a goal for her Life List and fearing that some competitors might reach the goal before she did. This is particularly suggested by the fact that once she reached her goal, much of her moodiness subsided even though her interest in competitive birding did not.

The evolution of Phoebe's relationship with her husband and children was fascinating. I'm not sure that a person who had no interest in birds could enjoy this book. If they did, it might well be because of the history of 20th century women generally, the evolution of this one woman and the story of her relationships.

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### **Paula Cappa says**

Why this book is categorized under birdwatching or birding is a misdirection. It's really a biography about Phoebe Snetsinger's life, her trials and successes, and how driven, obsessed actually, she became about birds. I can admire how she seemed to find her calling but I was disappointed in that it really isn't about birds or bird watching at all. The storytelling is okay. If you are interested in reading memoir or biography, then try this one out.

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### **Lisa says**

I'm near the end. Only one more chapter and the epilogue to go. While this book has been the perfect primer for the wife of a birder, and it's phenomenally interesting to see how a person can become totally obsessed with something while facing her impending death (she has malignant melanoma), Phoebe Snetsinger (of whom the book is about) is a person I hope to never become. I became more and more angry with her selfishness to reach the goal of being the first person to see 8000 birds. This, at the expense of essentially emotionally abandoning her family (not to mention she was gone from her family 7-10 months out of the year), putting her life in danger (she was caught in the middle of a tribal war, nearly drowned, was gang raped, and taken hostage--all on separate birding trips). She beat her 1-year cancer death sentence and lived 12+ years beyond that, only to die in a bus accident. As she aged she turned into the typical self-absorbed person who tries to control things and events and becomes easily annoyed when people don't behave in the manner she would like. Again, I recommend the book for book clubs. But don't think you're going to read about a protagonist you can get behind. The one lesson to learn from this book is read about a person you DON'T want to become. I don't feel that what she was doing was particularly noble. Were she a middle aged woman from Draper, Utah who was obsessed with going to the gym and looking fantastic at the expense of spending time with her family we would all whisper to each other about how wretched she is. Don't think this woman is really any different. Book is well researched, though. I could have done without the constant mention of the rape, though, at every turn of the page.

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### **Mark says**

Good grief what a self -obsessed cow. Phoebe Snetsinger, (why do american surnames so often look as if they are made up), was a bird watcher of quite epic proportions. Indeed she was the first person to ever record sights of 8,000 different birds. By that I mean different types not 4,000 sparrows and a magpie or two. She did this over the course of some thirty years and achieved this amazing result by trawling back and forth across the globe in what she recognizes was the 'Golden Age' of birding when there was :

"a rather small window in history. transportation to remote areas feasible, political and social conditions reasonable and before the entire world has become people, pavement, eucalyptus and agriculture"

She was a woman of incredible wealth, amazing resilience, possessed of a single-mindedness which enabled her to miss two of her daughters' weddings, her mother's funeral and countless family Christmases and Thanksgiving celebrations and partnered, to her good fortune, with an incredibly patient and understanding (up to a point) husband. During the course of her explorations she was caught up in Revolutions, wars and numerous accidents and, on one horrendous occasion, the poor woman was gang raped by a bunch of bandits. In 1981 she was diagnosed with cancer and given only months to live. It was this, as it turns out totally incorrect time diagnosis, which spurred her on to greater searching.

She was intelligent and articulate and enthusiastic and zealous; she was opinionated and moody and selfish and thoughtless. She made promises to her husband and then broke them without a thought, she found ways of justifying her disingenuity which was breathtaking but over and above all of this she forged an extraordinary trail of insight and exploration and fascination through the fast disappearing undergrowth of the world and became not just the person who has seen the most birds but a woman of incredibly valuable and valued knowledge and experience.

She showed herself incredibly patient with less experienced watchers and was easily given to gushing over the expertise of her guides. Her many admirers spoke of her fondly after her death and indeed to her during her life but I feel that I found her singularly unattractive purely because of her singular focus. She was a totally self centred woman who, having found her interest, used her huge resources, inherited from her father's estate, to follow her passion. The enormous irony here, is that she criticized her father for his obsessive advertising career in which he built up a business from nothing but proved himself a largely absent father. Snetsinger, using his money, did exactly the self-same thing though in fairness she did not launch out into her wild exploring until her children were at least semi-independant.

Gentile has written an easy to read account through interview and research. Using Snetsinger's letters and memoir and accounts from many interviewees. The thing I found interesting, and I don't know whether this was purposeful or not, was Gentile's style was rather pedestrian and amateur at the beginning of the book just when Snetsinger's own expertise was poor and limited. As Snetsinger became the powerhouse of knowledge and expertise that she no doubt did, so Gentile's own style improved. Maybe it was just by chance but I found it fascinating.

If you are a bird-watcher, as I am, this will inspire and frustrate in equal measure unless you too happen to be ridiculously wealthy and full on up your own bottom as was Mrs Snetsinger. If you are not a birder but like tales of courage and 'derring-do' this would tick the box. If you secretly like to read books in which you can gasp at the commitment of the main protagonist whilst raising your eyebrows high over the careless disregard of anything but their own desires, this book should fly to the top of your pile.

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### **Chuck says**

This book documents an adventure in birdwatching. It is not the birdwatching of sitting at your kitchen table and enjoying the Cardinals and Chickadees eating your sunflower seed and splashing in your birdbath. It is the birdwatching of intense travel to nearly every remote location in the world in order to see as many species as possible. The subject of this story is well known to the birding fraternity [sorority?] as Phoebe Snetsinger. Over a period of years and with an unlimited budget she was able to see and identify

approximately 8,600 of the world's 10,000+ birds. The adventure additionally included cancer, accidents, deaths of fellow travelers, exotic diseases, questionable food and accommodations, many confrontations with natives or other local self appointed chieftains, being raped by a group of natives in Borneo and ultimately her own accidental death in Madagascar. There are no locations in the world that this book does not take you except maybe Las Vegas, Atlantic City or Pebble Beach. Since I include myself in the fraternity this book was a fascinating reflection and adventure of many of my own personal memories. I make no pretense, however, to have accomplished anywhere near the levels of Ms. Snetsinger. I have been to most of the locations addressed in this book which brought me joy as a pleasant memory, and I also enjoyed the recollection of all the guides and active birders that dotted its pages. In summary, if you are not an intense birdwatcher or have an intense curiosity about the natural world, this book may not be for you. Phoebe Snetsinger authored a memoir named, "Birding of Borrowed Time" which tells this story in less detail, but more personally.

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### **Bob Stocker says**

*Life List: A Woman's Quest for the World's Most Amazing Birds* by Olivia Gentile is a biography of Phoebe Snetsinger, a birder who at the time of her death had seen 8,398 of the 9,700 recognized bird species in the world -- more bird species of than anyone had ever seen before. If you're looking for a book about birds or birding, you may find something more to your liking elsewhere. This the amazing story about how a diagnosis of terminal cancer and a new found hobby awakened and liberated a depressed stay-at-home-mom. Snetsinger's cancer went into remission. Birding, the hobby, became an obsession that led Snetsinger to withdraw from family life, travel the world from the Himalayas to tropical jungles, and, at times, place herself in grave physical danger.

Snetsinger left behind a wealth of material for a biographer: a nearly finished memoir, articles that she wrote for a local nature study society, field notes and index cards recording the birds she saw, poetry written before she was liberated by her new hobby, voluminous correspondence, and people who could be interviewed. Gentile does a masterful job of sifting through this material and including what was needed to tell about Snetsinger the person without getting overly involved in reports about seeing this bird here and that bird there.

One problem that Gentile must have faced is that Snetsinger went on so many birding trips and got to know so many people that a casual reader could not possibly keep all the people straight. Gentile almost always dealt with the problem by carefully referring back to earlier events when people reappeared in the narrative. Only once was I left wondering what an episode that didn't directly involve Snetsinger was doing in the book. In that case, I didn't recognize the name of the person involved and the back reference to "the legendary researcher and tour guide" wasn't enough to tie me to someone. A check of the index set me straight.

Gentile's writing was excellent, but not amazing. I'm giving the book five stars because it's an amazing story about an amazing person.

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### **Bea says**

A good view of a beautiful bird in the wild is the closest to bliss that I have experienced. The thrill and awe

are unequaled - the rest of the world simply disappears. So, in many ways, I "get" Phoebe Snetsinger, though I will never have anything close to her life list - 85% of the known bird species on the planet. At the time of her death, she had seen more species of birds than any other person.

After a couple of decades of being a unfulfilled housewife and mother, Phoebe was diagnosed with melanoma and told she had six months to a year to live. She immediately took off on her birding adventure and traveled to some of the most exotic and dangerous places in the world in the quest of more and more birds for her list. Her adventure took the next 18 years. In doing so she missed her mother's funeral, her daughter's wedding, and came within a heartbeat of divorce.

Another thing I have in common with Phoebe is having spent considerable time in Papua New Guinea. I worked there for three years. We took a car to go three blocks in broad daylight in downtown Port Moresby. It was on the outskirts of Port Moresby at dusk where Phoebe was gang raped while her guide was held at knife point. The author of this book can't seem to forgive Phoebe for not becoming an emotional wreck, "facing up" to this trauma, and abandoning her quest. Or maybe she should have given up when her boat capsized in Irian Jaya? Or when she broke her wrist in the Philippines?

I, myself, would not have had the courage to even get close to these remote locations, living rough and hiking for hours for the chance at another lifer. I can't judge Phoebe for doing it, though, and it kind of irked me that the author chose to harp on the rape and psychoanalyze Phoebe relentlessly.

All in all, if you are a birder, you won't want to miss this book. I'd like to read Snetsinger's memoirs some time soon.

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### **Holly Mascaro says**

This book is a great read for anyone who loves birds, birding, and world travel. It's about Phoebe Snetsinger, the first person (and notably, a woman in a male-dominated field) to see over 8,000 of the world's bird species - 84% of the species recognized in her lifetime. The book includes a lot of insights into the lives of young women and housewives in the 50s/60s, what was expected of them and how unsatisfied many of them became with their lives. This is what led Phoebe to embark on this epic journey. It also unearths the darker side of her obsession and the negative affects it had on her family, and some of the horrifying scenarios she and other birders have experienced over the years. After a certain point the book does become a bit of "And then she went here and saw this bird! And then she went here and saw this bird!" But overall an enjoyable, interesting read!

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