



An interview with Rob Meyer, director of "A Birder's Guide to Everything"

**Fledging Birders Institute:** How would you describe A Birder's Guide to Everything?

**Rob Meyer:** It's a coming-of-age story about a group of teenage birders who set off on a road trip to find what they believe may be a Labrador Duck. It strives to convey the excitement and wonder of birding and the important role nature plays in our lives. It also tackles the difficult reality of facing loss and the awkward excitement of a teenage romance.



**FBI:** What was your inspiration for writing a movie about birding?

**RM:** Well, Birder's actually based on a short film I made (Aquarium) which was about aquarium fish enthusiasts. That was me, as a teenager: I loved fish. I was a member of the Boston Aquarium Society and had about 20 tanks. I wanted to change the story to fit the structure of a road trip so I needed the kids to be chasing something -- at first, the simple reason for birds was that a bird made a lot more sense than a fish for something that the kids could chase. That said, while I started researching birding and experiencing it firsthand, it became a gift that kept on giving. Birding has so many great cinematic qualities and wonderful potentials for metaphors-- it really took our script to another level (I wrote the script with my good friend and writing partner, Luke Matheny).



**FBI:** Birders often reflect on how birds and birders are depicted in movies and television shows. As director, could you describe any steps you've taken to create an authentic portrayal of birding in ABGTE?

**RM:** I worked really hard on this and I had a lot of time to get it right because the film took so long to get made!

First off, I did a lot of birding - with experienced birders in Central Park as well as a few trips with the Young Birder's Society of New York State. I also read as much as I could. Kenn Kaufman's Kingbird Highway was probably my biggest influence. I always paid particular attention to *\*why\** people are so passionate about birding.

One highlight was that I got to meet with Jonathan Franzen and ask him every birding-related questions I could think of. We then had several experts, including Kenn Kaufman and Morgan Tingley, who read the script for accuracy and made changes to it. Morgan and Kenn also came to set when we were filming any birding to make sure the kids looked convincing. Finally, we had the Cornell Macaulay Library help us ensure that we got all the bird calls exactly right! This was something that was very important to me. Of course, there are things that stretch reality. It is, after all, a film about kids looking for an extinct duck! Yet, wherever possible, I wanted to get it right.



Director Rob Meyer with Kenn Kaufman (photo courtesy of Kenn Kaufman)

**FBI:** Do you need to be a birder to "get" A Birder's Guide to Everything?

**RM:** Absolutely not. It strives to be a universal story. For me, the central theme is about coping with loss and communication. Things that everyone has to deal with.

**FBI:** Can you comment on how the theme of birding in the film either made it easier or harder to get others on board with ABGTE? actors, production companies, distributors, etc?

**RM:** Honestly, it probably didn't make a huge difference either way.

I tried to convince people that we have a built-in audience and therefore could feel confident that we'd get a good response when the film was released. According to the National Fish and Wildlife "of the 46.7 million people who observed wild birds, 88% did so around their homes and 38% on trips a mile or more from home." These are real numbers. But no one was actually convinced that millions would show up to the theater to watch the film. I hope we prove them wrong! It certainly didn't hurt the film getting made because it never felt like a forced theme. It just made the film more specific and fresh, in many ways.



**FBI:** I've read interviews in which you said that you started developing an interest in birding as a result of writing and producing ABGTE. Could you share any particularly memorable/exciting birding experiences you've had so far?

**RM:** Oh yeah. Well, on my first trip to Central Park, we saw a Saw Whet Owl in the middle of the day! That was incredible and got me hooked. Then, at the Biggest Week in American Birding, I had the privilege to bird with Kenn Kaufman and Victor Emmanuel during the peak of the Spring Migration. I saw so many warblers up close that it was overwhelming! I couldn't pick a favorite, they were all so beautiful and interesting to watch.

**FBI:** What would your short list of birds to see in the near future include?

**RM:** I'm actually going on a trip with my friend to New Zealand. We are going on a trek where it's possible to see a Yellowhead (or Mohua). I just found out there's less than 5000 of them!



**FBI:** Was anyone in the cast either a "birder" before the production or perhaps find themselves becoming a birder in the process?

**RM:** Other than me, I don't think so. The reality was that the shoot was so tight (schedule-wise) that the actors only got to do a little bit of birding when we were filming. Even then, they had to pretend to see things that we cut in later. I did take them all out before we started filming in Central Park but it was a terrible day and we hardly saw anything. But I'm going to try to get them out again this Spring when the film comes out!

**FBI:** In recent years, there has been increasing discussion about the lack of diversity in American birding. I was glad to notice that Michael Chen is playing one of the young birders in the movie.

Was it a conscious decision to include a non-white character in your birding ensemble? Or was it simply a case of choosing the best actor for the part?

**RM:** From what I've seen, there seems to be improvement in the diversity of American birding. I find that most birders that I've met are excited to share their passion with anyone who shows interest, so I'm not surprised that the demographic is becoming more diverse in every way.

In terms of Michael Chan being cast, I did keep diversity in mind when casting the whole film. I think it's important that films reflect the real world. In the end, Michael was the best actor for that role so I got to have it both ways.



A Birder's Guide to Everything cast: Katie Chang, Alex Smith, Kodi Smit-McPhee, and Michael Chen

**FBI:** Why should people involved with the Bird Education Network go see ABGTE?

**RM:** Well, in short, I think they'll really enjoy it! It's also a film they can take their non-birding friends to go see as well. Finally, it's an opportunity for birders to show the world that there are a lot of us out there!

**FBI:** If ABA (American Birding Association) members were on the fence about whether or not to go see ABGTE, what would you say to convince them the movie is worth their time?

**RM:** Hmm, good question.

Well I'd say, first of all, that I feel confident that we filmed the best and most inspiring sequence of young people birding that has ever been put on film. It's actually one of my favorite sequences. It's also an interesting film in that it strives to take a lot of the underlying themes of birding and apply them to family, relationships, etc.

And finally, there is a fun cameo by a famous birder in it!

**FBI:** With Kenn Kaufman around, did the cast and crew get to the opportunity to share in any bird sightings with him?

**RM:** It was more the reverse. Kenn has a knack for seeing beauty and wonderful things everywhere he goes. Even if it's not anything rare, Kenn has a way of making you realize how special it is.

**FBI:** Is there anything else you think the birding community should know about A Birder's Guide to Everything?

**RM:** I think we covered it!

Oh, I guess I'll re-iterate that Ben Kingsley is in it! He was very excited to play the role of a legendary birder, and it might be the first time a birder is played by an Oscar-winning actor.

I worked really hard to make this a film birders would love. It was important to me because I knew there weren't a lot of films about the subject so I felt that responsibility. I hope I succeeded!

