

Feathered Glory
Literary Club Paper

William Pratt

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“Thursday—Ohio River--Oct. 12th 1820
I left Cincinnati this afternoon at half past 4 o'clock on board of Mr. Jacob Aumack's flat boat—bound for New Orleans... We only floated 14 miles by the break of the day 13th Oct.—the day was fine... We prepared our guns and went on shore in Kentucky... We shot thirty Partridges [Quail]—1 Wood Cock—27 grey squirrels—a Barn Owl—a young Turkey Buzzard [Turkey Vulture] and an autumnal warbler... [as Mr. Alexander Wilson calls] the young of the Yellow Rump Warbler—this was a young male in beautiful plumage for the season and I drew it...”

Thus begins the Mississippi River Journal of John James Audubon, who in 1820 was 35 years old, and was embarking on the epic journey that would eventually result in the publication of *The Birds of America*, one of the world's most original, beautiful, and valuable books. Audubon did more than any single individual to translate the American wilderness into art. His lifework began in Cincinnati in 1820, and found fulfillment in London in 1838, when the fourth and final volume of the Double Elephant Folio of color engravings was completed from Audubon's superb watercolors. The watercolors themselves could not be exactly duplicated, but the engravings alone are works of art. Each image was painstakingly traced on a translucent sheet of paper, incised with acid on a copper plate, then inked and printed in black and white, and finally hand colored to match the original. This laborious process took more than ten years to finish, but when complete, it truly captured the power of Audubon's transformative vision, which by his own reckoning took 35 years to achieve, beginning during his boyhood in France, continuing on his father's farm in Pennsylvania, and culminating in the six years from

1820 to 1826 when he journeyed by flatboat from Cincinnati, down the Ohio River to the Mississippi, and on down the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans.

It was from New Orleans, on May 18, 1826, carrying a portfolio of over 300 lifesize paintings of American birds which he hoped to publish, that Audubon boarded the schooner *Delos*, bound for England. The ship was loaded with bales of cotton on the way to textile factories in England, and Audubon, who was traveling steerage, slept on one of the bales as he sailed slowly across the Gulf of Mexico, then across the Atlantic, on an arduous nine-week journey, during which he suffered much from boredom and more from seasickness before he finally landed in Liverpool on July 21, 1826. There he showed his paintings to several expert British naturalists, one of them a nobleman, who were so impressed that they immediately put a selection of his paintings on exhibit at their Royal Institution, where he at last began to feel his long journey was justified.

Liverpool was the first to welcome him; from there he went to Manchester, which proved almost as welcoming, and then north to Edinburgh, “the handsomest city on Earth,” he thought, where he found his first real public audience. Scotland was famous for its scientific studies at that time, and Audubon was hopeful of finding the right engraver in the Scottish capital. He did so, with the help of a Scottish naturalist, who led him to the best engraver in the city, William Lizars, who at 38 was already an experienced engraver of birds. Lizars had published a book of lifesize etchings of Scottish birds, exactly what Audubon hoped to do with his American birds. As soon as Audubon opened his portfolio to the engraver, Lizars exclaimed, “My God, I never saw anything like this before.” Lizars was so taken with Audubon’s work that he quickly set out to reproduce the first of his bird paintings, a lifesize image of a wild turkey, which as

The Great American Cock would become the signature frontispiece of *The Birds of America*. Audubon was so impressed by Lizars' skill as an engraver, and so flattered by his enthusiastic reception in Scotland when his portfolio was shown publicly, that he wrote a letter to his wife Lucy in New Orleans, exulting that his paintings "will be brought up and finished in such superb style as to eclipse all of the kind in existence." His claim was eventually justified, but he had little money of his own to invest in such an expensive undertaking, and he began looking for subscribers to help him finance his grand project. He would only be satisfied with lifesize color engravings of American birds, and he started at the top, enlisting the support of the Royal Scottish Academy, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow. To persuade them, he offered the Scots an exhibit of American birds, displaying his portfolio of watercolors, augmented by color prints which Lizars began turning out, and adding some oil paintings he made on the spot. The exhibit featured a bold print Lizars made of Audubon himself in frontier costume, painted by a Scottish artist named John Syme, a portrait which was later hung in the White House. So great was Audubon's initial success in Scotland that he was elected to the Royal Scottish Academy, his first international honor, bolstering his confidence that he could eventually find enough subscribers to pay for the publication of all his bird paintings. To accomplish his purpose, he headed south from Edinburgh, going to London by way of Liverpool, and enlisting several more wealthy subscribers along the way. He had good reason to believe his enterprise would succeed, because Lizars had quickly turned out five color plates and had begun working on five more, but the laborious process of reproduction was interrupted suddenly by a strike of the skilled colorists Lizars employed. They wanted more money than Lizars was willing to pay, and

he sent word to Audubon on his arrival in London, expressing doubt that he could ever afford to finish engraving the rest of the paintings. He regretfully advised Audubon to look for another engraver.

It was a bitter blow, just when he thought he was about to realize his life's ambition, but Audubon made up his mind to find another skilled engraver in London. He had the good luck to discover Robert Havell, rated the best engraver in London, and though Havell was 58, and considered himself too old to complete the job by himself, he had trained his son, Robert Havell, Jr., in the delicate art of color engraving, and he agreed to undertake the daunting task of duplicating Audubon's birds in color, printing them in eighty sets of five Numbers, and binding them together to form the complete four-volume Double Elephant Folio of *The Birds of America*. The Havells used a process called aquatint—etching images in fine detail on copper plates--which was superior to Lizars' engraving method, and as soon as Audubon saw a proof sheet of one of his birds, he was so delighted he danced a jig on the spot. He quickly signed a contract, and this time, it wasn't broken. In the next ten years, Havell and Son turned out a masterful work of reproduction, with Audubon himself closely supervising it to insure that each engraving was a faithful copy of the original watercolor he had painted. Audubon found time to add to his portfolio during the ten years the Havells were busy engraving its contents, sailing back to America to paint birds he hadn't yet seen in places as far apart as Florida and Labrador. He had gained in the long run by having to move from his first skilled engraver in Edinburgh to a second, even more skilled engraver in London. "The Havells," according to Audubon's most recent biographer,¹ "were masters of aquatint:

¹ Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 300.

“*The Birds of America* is generally acknowledged to be the finest work of colored engraving involving aquatint ever produced.” Audubon had sought to paint every known species of North American bird, and though that goal proved to be more than he could accomplish in one lifetime, he would eventually complete a total of 435 lifesize paintings of birds, sometimes more than one species to a plate, making the actual total 497 different species. Each plate bore the inscription, “Painted from Nature by John J. Audubon,” and they were all in fact done mostly from specimens he personally gathered in the field, plus a few that he painted from skins sent to him from west of the Mississippi where he hadn’t yet traveled. Audubon, who had by then spent more than half his life pursuing and painting birds, had the satisfaction of seeing his work at last reproduced to perfection, when the last plates of *The Birds of America* were completed, by Robert Havell, Jr., in four enormous volumes, in 1838 in London. Only 119 of these four-volume editions remain intact, but the Cincinnati Public Library owns one full set, a complete edition of the original Double Elephant Folio, which it purchased in 1870, and which it displays proudly in a special glass case in the Cincinnati Room. Every Monday, a librarian turns one page at a time, taking more than eight years to show all 435 plates. Each plate is exquisite in color and detail, and carries at the bottom the authenticating words “Painted from Nature by J.J. Audubon” and “Engraved, Colored, and Printed by Robert Havell, Jr.”

The Birds of America was a major feat of skill and perseverance, but it was not all Audubon accomplished in his lifetime, for he wrote an *Ornithological Biography* to accompany it, and later published another book of *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of America*. Still, *The Birds of America* remains his masterpiece, a spectacularly successful

collaboration between a French-born American painter and an English engraving firm, headed by a father and son who were assisted by fifty expert colorists. By the time it came out in full in 1838, the Double Elephant Folio of American birds had made Audubon the painter and Havell & Son the engravers world-famous. It also made North American birds the best known avian species in the world, since Audubon's achievement was never matched by any other artist in any other country. It was a feat all the more remarkable because Audubon was entirely self-taught. He had no formal lessons, teaching himself all he needed to know by trial and error in the field, inventing his own technique of depicting birds as if alive, in customary poses and habitats. Audubon's singular talent gave the world precise portraits of a wide variety of American birds, including some that are now extinct. It is thanks to Audubon that we know exactly what the Ivory-billed Woodpecker looked like, for though there are lingering hopes that this largest of American woodpeckers might be seen again some day, years of searching for it in the deep woods and swamps of the southeastern United States have not produced convincing evidence that a single one still survives. They were a fairly common sight to Audubon, in his travels along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, where he was able not only to observe them, but to shoot them, mount them quickly on wires, and paint them directly from life. "I have always imagined," he wrote in his journal, "that in the plumage of the beautiful Ivory-billed Woodpecker, there is something very closely allied to the style of colouring of the great Vandyke." Audubon was both a great artist and a great naturalist. He knew the Old Masters as he knew his birds, and he demonstrated his dual gifts amply in the great book he produced, which has become one of the wonders of the civilized world.

Audubon finished the major part of his lifework in just two decades, from 1820 to 1840. Two centuries later, *The Birds of America* stands as a monument of human achievement. Created in the 19th Century, it has only three serious rivals among the rarest books in the world: the 8th century Book of Kells (the Latin Gospels hand-decorated with fantastic figures by Irish monks, a unique work which is also displayed one page at a time in Trinity College Library in Dublin), the 15th Century Gutenberg Bible (the text of the Latin Vulgate, printed with newly invented movable type in Strasbourg in 1456), and the 17th Century First Folio of Shakespeare, printed in London in 1623. Shakespeare died in 1616 without ever seeing his poems and plays in print, but Audubon was determined to see his paintings of birds published in their entirety in his lifetime. All three of its rivals among the world's rare books are literary; Audubon's book is singular, a work of visual art and natural history. Though the engravings in *The Birds of America* are unexcelled, they cannot replace Audubon's original watercolors, which are one of a kind, and exist only at the New York Historical Society. They were purchased from Audubon's widow, Lucy, in 1863, twelve years after Audubon died in 1851. She hoped to sell them for \$5000, but received only \$2000 for the entire collection. It was a small fortune at the time and one she badly needed, because her husband had left her almost penniless. The purchase turned out to be one of the greatest bargains in the history of art, for today a perfect single sheet from the Double Elephant Folio is worth over a hundred thousand dollars, and the last complete set of four volumes was sold at auction in 2010 for 11.5 million dollars, a record price for a printed book of any kind. One of the original watercolors could not be bought for any price. They are the exclusive property of the New York Historical Society, and can only be seen by visiting

its headquarters on upper Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. There they are displayed forty at a time, which means you can see only ten percent of Audubon's original paintings on a single visit. Yet it is worth the trip, since each painting is a revelation, a marvel of color and form surpassing even the masterful engravings made from them. There will, however, be one exception. You will have the chance of a lifetime to see the entire set of originals put on display in 2013, when the New York Historical Society promises to exhibit all 433 original Audubon watercolors for the first time. It will be a pilgrimage no true birdlover would want to miss.

Among the extinct birds Audubon painted from life, in addition to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the Carolina Parakeet, and the Eskimo Curlew, is a charming pair of Passenger Pigeons. He saw enormous flocks of these birds in the 1820s, the last one of which, affectionately named Martha, died in 1922 in the Cincinnati zoo. In his journal, Audubon described the wonder he felt, as passenger pigeons flew over him in Kentucky in vast columns a mile wide, in such numbers that it took three days for the entire flock to pass over: "The air was literally filled with pigeons, the light of noonday was obscured as by an eclipse, the dung fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow, and the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose." By later estimates, passenger pigeons once comprised a quarter of all the breeding birds in North America, some 2 to 3 *billion* birds. They were native to North America, and more striking in appearance than the common city pigeons we see, which are not a native American species anyway. The name "passenger pigeons" came from their habit of moving unpredictably from region to region in search of food, roosting together in huge numbers in the forest, causing immense destruction to trees and fouling the ground below with

their droppings. Early settlers considered them a nuisance, but a valuable source of food, and shot them down indiscriminately, until it became obvious that their numbers were dwindling, and laws were passed to limit the hunting season, but it was too late to save the species. They were on their way to extinction in Audubon's lifetime, but no one could see that far ahead, so attempts to conserve the species failed. What is left to us today is Audubon's endearing portrait of a pair of passenger pigeons, billing and cooing in full color and large as life.

Audubon's career was as singular as the book he created. He struggled against odds all his life to accomplish what he seemed destined to do. He was the illegitimate son of a French sea captain and a French chambermaid, born in 1785 on the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo, a former French colony today called Haiti. All his life Audubon tried to conceal the true facts of his origin, even claiming to have been born in Louisiana, though he was a French citizen at birth, christened Jean-Jacques Audubon. As he rose to become recognized as the foremost painter of wildlife in the world, he rechristened himself John James Audubon, a naturalized American citizen and a staunch patriot of his adopted country. When he finished writing his Scottish journal in 1826, he signed it "John J. Audubon, Citizen of the United States of North America." At age 6 in 1791, his father had taken him and his sister from Santo Domingo to Nantes, near the French coast, to be raised in post-revolutionary France, where he began to study birds. He only escaped conscription in the French army Napoleon was leading across Europe because his father prudently sent him across the Atlantic at age 18, to manage an estate he had bought in Pennsylvania. At Mill Grove, outside Philadelphia, he would begin studying and painting birds in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Though he lived

in many cities, he always felt more at home in the woods, and he later wrote a memoir for his sons, after he had gained international fame, recalling that “during my deepest troubles I frequently would wrench myself from the persons around me, and retire to some secluded part of our noble forests; and many a time, at the sound of the wood-thrush’s melodies have I fallen on my knees, and there prayed earnestly to our God.”

Audubon taught himself to paint birds directly from life, capturing them, bringing them home alive, and coaxing them to pose for him, but he soon invented a new technique that enabled him to paint dead birds as if they were alive. He had devised it as a young man living at Mill Grove. He would shoot a bird, quickly wire it to a wooden plaque, and paint it before it lost its natural colors, arranging the wings and body exactly as he had observed them in life. The device was portable, could be used over and over again to mount each new species, and served him well, for in his paintings every bird appears to be alive and active, no matter whether it was alive or dead when he painted it. Audubon had devised this ingenious way of preparing birds before he conceived his high ambition of painting every North American species, and it enabled him to portray each bird in characteristic behavior and habitat, and to give it visible expression, especially in the eyes. A plate of the Great White Heron, for example, shows the long-necked bird with a fish in its beak, the bird looking predatory, while the fish is looking scared. He believed birds to be naturally intelligent creatures, and he showed their intelligence in his paintings. He also strove to match the exact color of each species, so that, for instance, his Eastern Bluebirds have differing shades of blue in the male, the female, and the baby bird, while his Cerulean Warbler is a shade of blue distinct from any of the bluebirds.

It was in these early years, while he was tending the family plantation at Mill Grove, that he met and, on April 5, 1808, married, Lucy Bakewell, daughter of a neighboring English planter. She became his “dearest friend,” as he often addressed her, and his devoted, long-suffering wife. On their honeymoon, she traveled dutifully with him to Louisville, where he opened a general store. But Audubon was never cut out for business, and when his first commercial enterprise failed, he moved farther down the Ohio River to Henderson, where he enjoyed a temporary prosperity that lasted long enough to install his family of four, which now included two sons, Victor Gifford Audubon and John Woodhouse Audubon, in a log house which served him as a general store. For a few years he was content to settle down with his family and live in domestic comfort, but in the hope of prospering still further, he let his brother-in-law, Tom Bakewell, talk him into building a grist mill and sawmill and even contracting for a small steamboat to supply them with grain and lumber. Then his luck ran out, for Tom left Kentucky to go back to Pennsylvania, an unscrupulous boatman stole his steamboat, and the Panic of 1819 finally bankrupted him. “Misfortune after misfortune came down upon us like so many avalanches,” Audubon wrote in his journal. He was briefly put in jail for debt, and when he returned to Louisville, his fortunes had sunk so low that he was forced for a time to make a meager living by doing charcoal sketches of people. He could draw quick “likenesses,” as he called them, for \$5, and his natural talent for drawing served him well when he needed money. But Audubon was never content with merely earning a living. “Ever since boyhood,” he would later write, “I have had an astonishing desire to see much of the world, and particularly to acquire a true knowledge of the Birds of North America, consequently, I hunted whenever I had an opportunity, and drew every new

species as I could or dared steal time from my business, and having a tolerably large number of drawings that have been generally admired, I concluded that I could not do better than to travel, and finish my collection or so nearly that it would be a valuable acquisition.” Repeated failures in business freed him to do what he really wanted to do, which was to find and paint every species of bird to be seen in his adopted country.

He did not wait long to pursue his true vocation. He first moved his family back from Henderson to Louisville in 1819, and made a bare living with his charcoal portraits, but he quickly found a more promising line of work up the Ohio River in Cincinnati. He was invited there by Dr. David Drake, a leading physician in the city, who was opening a natural history museum, and was in need of stuffed animals and painted backgrounds for his wildlife exhibits. Hearing of Audubon’s artistic gifts, Drake offered to hire him at \$125 a month, more than enough to bring his family with him to Cincinnati. The income was however slow in coming, and Audubon had to supply food for the family table by hunting and fishing, which he was able to do quite readily in Cincinnati, since, to quote his journal, “Partridges (quail) are frequently in the streets, and I can shoot Wild Turkeys within a mile or so; squirrels and Woodcocks are very abundant in the season, and fish always easily caught.” Audubon’s new job was arranging natural scenes that would attract customers to the Western Museum, and he was good at it, but Drake lacked the money to pay him, and so he had to provide for his family by moonlighting as a drawing teacher at the Cincinnati College where Drake was a trustee. Drake came to like Audubon’s drawings of birds so much that he opened a special exhibit of them, which won praise from visitors to the Western Museum. Thus it was in Cincinnati that Audubon first became known for his skill in painting birds, and it was there he began to

think seriously about making it his future career. To do so was not easy. It meant leaving his family and the comforts of home, and living in the wilds while he sought birds to paint, but he was determined to try it, and so, in October of 1820, accompanied by a young pupil named Joseph Mason who would paint the backdrops for his birds, he boarded a flatboat on the Cincinnati wharf and started the journey that would make him famous. At the age of 35 he had entered into his true calling, which would in time more than make up for all his previous failures.

Audubon set out from Cincinnati in the fall of 1820 with a definite purpose in mind, that of identifying and painting every North American bird he could find. More importantly, he had made up his mind to show them in the habitats and behaviors peculiar to each species as if they were feeding or mating naturally, unlike the practice of other bird painters. Alexander Wilson, his most famous predecessor, had already published a two-volume book of *American Ornithology*, modeled in stiff two-dimensional figures, as though they were stuffed specimens in a museum. Audubon's great originality, beyond his obvious talents for drawing and painting, was in placing birds as if actively alive in their native habitat, dramatizing each one individually, and portraying them in their exact shape and color. To do so meant to combine the talents of an artist with those of a scientist. Ornithology as a science has advanced considerably since Audubon's day, and identification techniques are much more precise than they were then, but Audubon's paintings of birds will never be out of date, because he set the standard for judging them. In his lifetime he was honored as a scientist, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in London; today it is Audubon the artist who is most honored, and whose work endures far beyond his age.

Audubon began shooting and painting birds in earnest in 1820 in the Oxbow of the Ohio River west of Cincinnati, at the mouth of the Great Miami River. He noted in his journal that he had bagged an Osprey (Fish Hawk), a Wild Turkey, 7 Partridges (Quail), a Godwit, and a Hermit Thrush. He launched his career knowing that “Without any money my talents are to be my support and my enthusiasm my guide in my difficulties.” With only his gun and a small spyglass, he explored what was then largely wilderness, letting others man the boat while he looked for game wherever it might appear. He carried his sketch pad with him, and every day he made sketches of birds he would later paint. He shot small birds and large birds wherever he found them, warblers and vultures, swallows and herons, and a great variety of ducks. It was his habit, after carefully mounting them on wires to sketch them, to cook and eat them. He was not particular in his tastes: he ate water birds or land birds at will, making extensive notes on their behavior before consuming them. Sometimes he would include in his journals comments on their flavor, noting for instance that grebes, which were water birds, had a fishy taste, while a flock of starlings were more to his liking—“eat them at our supper, good and delicate,” he wrote. The godwit, another water bird, he described as “very fat but very fishy,” while on the other hand “I eat the purple Grackle, it tasted well.” Canvasback ducks were an especially “fine food” he noted, and he relished their flesh whenever he had the opportunity to shoot one. Roger Tory Peterson, whose field guides set the modern standard for identifying birds, wrote of Audubon's culinary tastes: “Not only does he speak with a gourmet's authority about the edibility of owls, loons, cormorants and crows, but also the gustatory delights of juncos, white-throated sparrows, and robins.” His object in shooting birds was not to eat them but to paint them, and his

skill in doing so led Peterson, a bird painter himself, to say that “As long as our civilization lasts, America will be in debt to this genius.”

Audubon’s pace was leisurely. It took him a month to float on a flatboat from Cincinnati down the Ohio to the Mississippi. When he reached the confluence of the two rivers, he observed that “the beautiful and transparent water of the Ohio when first entering the Mississippi looks more agreeable to the eye as it goes down surrounded by a muddy current.” The Ohio was his favorite river. He wrote when he returned to it many years later, “The very sight of the waters of that beautiful river filled me with joy.” At times he was awed by the natural spectacle around him, writing eloquently on November 3rd, 1820, as he floated along the Ohio: “the Indian Summer, this extraordinary phenomenon of North America, is now in all its splendor, the blood red rising sun, the constant smoky atmosphere... not easily to be accounted for.” Indian Summer was a natural phenomenon which some settlers attributed to the native American Indian practice of burning off the prairies as fall came, but to Audubon that explanation was far-fetched, since he had seen Indian Summers well east of the prairies, in wooded and mountain landscapes as often as on the plains. He noted that after the Ohio flowed into the Mississippi, not only did the color of the water change, but game was less plentiful and much shyer at the sight of humans. Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were abundant on the banks, and so were bears and wolves, but it was not easy to hunt them, because “the country [is] extremely difficult of access, the canes extending in many places several miles from the river.” These tangled canebrakes along the shore made landing impractical, and since the Mississippi River was muddier than the Ohio, fishing was more

difficult as he went along, so that for Audubon, living by gun and rod as he liked to do became a greater challenge the farther he went on his epic journey.

The birds Audubon saw and painted, as he made his way from Cincinnati to New Orleans by flat boat, included not only extinct birds such as Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, Passenger Pigeons, and Carolina Parakeets, but endangered or rare species like the Whooping Crane, or the more abundant Sandhill Crane, the Tundra Swan, the Bald Eagle and the rarer Golden Eagle, both Brown and White Pelicans. He noted in particular “the constant cry of Ivory Billed Woodpeckers about us—scarcely any other except a few Pileated and Golden Wings [Yellow-shafted Flickers]—have not seen a Red Headed Woodpecker for some time.” To Audubon, the now extinct Ivory-Billed was not only the largest but the commonest woodpecker along the lower Mississippi, and, as he neared New Orleans, he began to see alligators sunning on the bank.

Audubon was a perfectionist, whose watercolors surpass the techniques of even the most sophisticated later photographers, because he could paint each species, male and female, young and old, in exactly the poses and habitats that suited it best, dramatizing it expressively as no photographer could do. In his day, all species of native American birds were abundant, the country was relatively unspoiled by human habitation, and there were no endangered species. He was a crack shot with his rifle, and since to paint birds meant to shoot them, he did so freely, not having to worry about how many birds he killed. He considered a day wasted when he had not killed at least a hundred birds. Millions of the now extinct Passenger Pigeons and Carolina Parakeets filled the woods, and he noticed as he floated along the lower Mississippi River that “Ivory billed Woodpeckers are now plenty. “ He loved to watch pairs of them foraging, rapping loudly

with their beaks and calling “paint, paint” as they searched for insects in the bark of the giant trees that lined the banks of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

From Natchez, where he lived briefly to recoup his fortunes, Audubon chose to leave his flatboat for passage on a larger keelboat towed by a steamboat, and thus he completed his journey down the Mississippi, arriving in New Orleans on Jan. 7, 1821, about three months after leaving Cincinnati. There in the Mississippi Delta he saw many Fish Crows, and lots of Gulls: “our men cooked the gulls,” he noted, “and found them excellent food.” For some months Audubon lived in New Orleans, earning the money he needed by giving drawing lessons to those who could afford it, but he accepted an invitation to extend his lessons by going to live at Oakley Plantation on Bayou Sarah near St. Francisville, in order to teach the fifteen-year-old daughter of the family, Eliza Pirrie, the finer points of drawing and painting. He welcomed the prospect of a steady income of \$60 a month, and was particularly pleased by the birdlife around him, painting many species of warblers, cuckoos, swallows, and other birds to add to his portfolio. He produced some of his finest paintings during the summer of 1821, because at Oakley Plantation he found himself in a natural paradise, where “surrounded once more by thousands of warblers and thrushes I enjoy Nature.” Mockingbirds were numerous, and Audubon observed that they sang as sweetly as nightingales, having no song of their own but mimicking the songs of every other kind of bird. Among the new birds he found in the woods, “I had the pleasure of meeting with several Red Cockaded Woodpeckers yesterday during a walk to the pine woods and procured two beautiful males, both alive, being slightly wounded each in his wing.” He put them under his hat and took them back to the house to paint them, portraying one of them with a spider in its mouth. Seeing

“several pairs of Ivory Bill Wood Peckers [I] killed a handsome male” he wrote, and marveled that Louisiana had more different kinds of woodpeckers than he had seen anywhere else. He was delighted by the abundance of colorful warblers, including rare species like the Louisiana Waterthrush and the Prothonotary Warbler. One of his most beautiful paintings is of a swallow-tailed kite, dramatized in flight with a small snake in its mouth

Audubon taught Eliza Pirrie drawing and other subjects like music and dancing and arithmetic. She was a willing student, but he observed candidly that she thrived on flattery, and “she had no particular admirers of her beauties but several very anxious for her fortunes.” In addition to painting and teaching at Oakley Plantation, Audubon did a great deal of writing, working on what he would eventually publish as an *Ornithological Biography*, a companion to his bird pictures. He was a master painter, but he was no slouch as a writer, ably enhancing his paintings with detailed anecdotes about the behavior and appearance of the birds he encountered.

After four months at Oakley plantation, Audubon returned to New Orleans, but Lucy, back in Cincinnati, was missing him, so she boarded a steamboat with her two sons and rejoined him in New Orleans. She was delighted by the work he had done, but wanted him to get on with it, urging him to finish his bird paintings and take them abroad where he might find an engraver equal to the task of reproducing them. Lucy was his mainstay, eager to see his bird paintings published, but impatient to see it done as soon as possible. He agreed to work faster to please Lucy, but his conscience was against it, since he was determined that his bird paintings would be the definitive collection, better than anything yet produced. He refused to be hurried into perfection.

In fact, Audubon had reason for working slowly, because he was consciously developing new techniques for representing birds, aiming at greater and greater precision. To his formidable drawing and watercolor skills he added the use of pastels and gouache, giving his final color images of birds hitherto unattained subtleties of line and color. He was teaching himself how to be a master artist as he went along. The secret of Audubon's genius was being true to nature: he was never content with a single species until he was sure he had rendered it exactly as he had seen it in the wild. He insisted that all his birds be lifesize, sometimes presenting small birds in multiple images on the same page, the male and female of the species in different poses, or showing related species of woodpeckers from varied perspectives on the same tree. With larger birds such as cranes and herons, he would arrange their posture to fit into his frame, being careful to show them as he had seen them in nature, without any distortion. The result was that every species of American bird had its proper image in the appropriate natural setting.

Audubon was an outdoorsman by instinct. He loved vigorous sports, was an energetic walker and a tireless rider, boasting he could outwalk a horse if given sufficient distance, and capable of swimming across the Ohio River and back just for the exercise. With his gun he excelled in the popular sport of "barking" squirrels, dislodging them from a branch by shooting the bark out from under them. Early in his career, he stored his drawings and paintings in the attic of his log house in Henderson, until an infestation of Norway rats devoured almost all of them, and he had to begin making a new portfolio. He did so willingly, regarding it as an opportunity to improve his technique. Sometimes his birding adventures were hazardous. He once pursued a Great Horned Owl and shot it as it sat on a sandbar, then suddenly realized he was sinking in quicksand. He was saved

from being sucked under by the chance arrival of some boatmen, who heard his cries for help and formed a bridge with their oars to pull him out.

Today Audubon's name is most closely associated with natural conservation, and rightly, because though he was a skilled hunter he was also a conservationist, who often noticed, as he moved along the rivers, the massive destruction of birds by other hunters:

I took a walk with my gun this afternoon to see the passage of millions of Golden Plovers coming from the northeast—the destruction of these innocent fugitives from a winter storm was really astonishing—the sportsmen are here more numerous and at the same time more expert at shooting on the wing than anywhere in the United States. On the first sight of these birds early this morning they assembled in parties of 20 to 100 at different places where they knew by experience the birds pass--- every man called in a masterly astonishing manner, the birds immediately lowered and wheeled, every gun goes off in rotation and so well aimed that I saw several times a flock of 100 or more plovers destroyed... A man near where I was seated killed 63 dozen... that day 144,000 must have been destroyed...

On a later journey down the river in 1829, he noted with regret that birds and wild animals were being replaced by people, who destroyed the natural habitat, and he lamented the inevitable progress of civilization. He wrote feelingly, as the steamboat carried him back down the Ohio toward New Orleans, where Lucy was waiting patiently for him after a long absence in England:

When I see that no longer any aborigines are to be found there, and that the vast herds of elks, deer, and buffaloes which once pastured on these hills and in these valleys, making for themselves great roads to the several salt springs, have ceased to exist; when I reflect that all this grand portion of our Union, instead of being in a state of nature, is now more or less covered with villages, farms, and towns, where the din of hammers and machinery is constantly heard; that the woods are fast disappearing under the axe by day, and the fire by night; that hundreds of steamboats are gliding to and fro over the whole length of the majestic river, forcing commerce to take root and to prosper at every spot; when I see the surplus population of Europe coming to assist in the destruction of the forest and transplanting civilization into its darkest recesses--when I remember that these extraordinary changes have all taken place in the short period of

twenty years, I pause, wonder, and although I know all to be fact, can scarcely believe its reality.

There are now millions of heirs to Audubon's legacy in the study of birds, and the National Audubon Society which bears his name is dedicated to conserving the natural landscape that he loved. There are estimated to be more than 50 million serious American birdwatchers, who actively pursue birds all over the country as he once did, equipped with binoculars, cameras and telescopes far superior to his primitive rifle and spyglass. But Audubon has no peer among painters of birds, though he managed to paint only 497 of the 914 American species currently recognized by the American Birding Association. Birdwatchers today can boast lifelists far in excess of Audubon's, but none can ever see all that he saw, because some species are extinct now that were abundant in his day. I myself have been trying most of my lifetime to see all the extant birds Audubon painted, and I haven't yet succeeded. Nor, I may add, have I given up trying. In 1900, the National Audubon Society launched a major conservation effort, the Christmas Bird Count, to provide an alternative to shooting birds, and every winter millions of people go out to identify birds just by spotting them. Some species threatened with extinction have been preserved by human effort. The Whooping Crane, our tallest bird, which had dwindled to 14 individuals in 1940, now numbers over 300. The Bald Eagle, our national symbol, once endangered, is now at least as abundant as it was in Audubon's day. Modern ornithologists know much more about birds than Audubon did; however, none of them can paint them as he did. His paintings were first admired for their accuracy, beyond any previous representation, but though modern scientists, aided by sophisticated equipment, can study and photograph birds much more precisely than he

did, Audubon's *Birds of America* remain the highest standard of visual art, and proof that great art can capture what even nature cannot always preserve.