

Birdwatch # 20, October 2006: The Rough Life of John James Audubon
by Phil Krajewski

I became familiar with John James Audubon at a young age after finding him in the encyclopedia, while researching the name of my hometown: Audubon, New Jersey. Shortly thereafter, I proceeded to prop up a box on a stick attached to a string, spread food beneath it, and trap a Chipping Sparrow, so that I could hold it in my hand and observe it very closely. If I had binoculars I probably would not have gone through this exercise, but would have satisfied my curiosity with a 7x magnification.

My abiding interest in birds may have nothing to do with the Audubon name, or it may be that I have been inspired to watch and protect birds through the life-long struggle of John James Audubon that culminated with his seminal achievement: The Birds of America. However, I have no compunction in casting my lot with millions of others as one of 'his seeds' when it comes to bird watching.

We may tend to think of Audubon as sitting in a well-lit room before a canvas, pallet in one hand, paint brush in the other, spending his days as a man of leisure, enjoying his favorite pastime of painting birds between tea breaks. Life for John James Audubon was so far from this image that even the mere suggestion may make me the focus of a pair of Great Horned Owl talons the next time I venture out into our field at night. His motivation to be a successful hunter, husband, father, provider, artist, musician, explorer, and businessman, has its roots in a pioneering spirit that was obsessive yet kind, rough yet cultured. He thought nothing of floating a flatboat on the Ohio River in winter 700 miles in 10 days, riding a horse 800 miles in 20 days, or walking 45 miles through a flood plain (one or two feet underwater) in 12 hours.



On expeditions he was usually the designated leader of the hunting contingency and made it a point to eat many of the birds he shot for drawing purposes. A number of the portraits done of Audubon by other artists have him sitting with a rifle on his lap. I know of none that depict him with a pencil or a paint brush. While living in the Ohio River Valley, he hunted and was as comfortable with, and had a great respect for, the Shawnee and Osage Indians.

His life is a testament to surviving in a grueling, dangerous, and enormously demanding early 19th Century pioneering frontier, in which his main foci were his wife and children, making ends meet, and pursuing his dream of documenting the birds of America. Before he became famous, the most accurate image of Audubon the artist that I can convey is the consummate outdoorsman shooting and collecting bird specimens, drawing and refining his artistic abilities, redrawing and re-refining, and again redrawing and refining ad infinitum, while moving around much of the Midwest and Eastern US with family and belongings, and luckily having his drawings survive intact. The fact that Audubon's drawings arrived in England and Scotland complete and undisturbed for engraving is nothing short of a miracle.

The eventual compilation of his drawings into the 4 volume, 435 plate, 497 species The Birds of America is the lifetime achievement of John James Audubon and the reason we remember him foremost as an artist.

The basic image of "putting in life" that Audubon wanted to create in his bird drawings was a major deviation from the strict scientific norm of ornithological accuracy. He wanted his art to be expressive and realistic. In order to further this style, he created his own mounting procedure consisting of a board standing on end with wires sticking out on which he impaled his freshly killed bird in a life-like pose.

He implemented the concept of *foreshortening* when drawing flying bird scenes by distorting the perspective side to side and front to back, so that the depiction appears more animated. This broke with the strict adherence to measurement by previous bird presenters.

Lacking formal artistic training, Audubon accidentally happened upon many of his major breakthroughs. One day, trying to cover up a water drop, his rubbing of chalk and ink led him to a mixed media approach that helped him get proper hues for softer colors. Also while under-painting multiple coats, he found that when he applied pastels, his colors were more vibrant. Unfortunately, because he was a perfectionist, this led to major bonfires of previous works and the redoing of many of his bird drawings. In short, Audubon was the first artist to incorporate and stretch the limits of expression in his drawings of birds and wildlife.

The other contribution that Audubon passed on to future generations was the concept of conservation. He knew that nature would not "last forever." Although he killed the bird specimens in order to draw them, he was disturbed when it came to the wanton slaughter of wildlife.

He was particularly upset with the destruction of the Passenger Pigeon and also with the practice of "egging," a despicable set of events that included: the raiding of vast nesting sites, the forcing of females to lay anew by crushing their eggs, the collecting of the newly laid ones, and the constant returning the entire breeding season for the gathering of more. As a witness to this procedure in the Tortugas with the Sooty and Noddy Terns and again with various seabirds off the coast of Labrador, Audubon felt that these nurseries would disappear, "unless some kind government interposes to put a stop to all this shameful destruction."

When greed became the main motive for the killing of wildlife, Audubon drew a very definite line and abhorred any rationale given in its defense. He believed in "purpose and responsibility" when it came to relating to the natural world and had no idea that a major

organization and movement would bear his name in later years for the purpose of upholding his core values.

We are indebted to the vision and the creative drive of this great American naturalist.