

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Audubon's Birds of America

In 1851 the General Assembly of the State of Iowa created fifty-one new counties, one of which was Audubon County. The new county lay on the Missouri slope in western Iowa and was named for John James Audubon (1785-1851), the famous American naturalist and ornithologist. The town of Audubon, which serves as county seat for Audubon County, was one of six post offices honoring Audubon and listed in the *United States Postal Guide* a century later. However, Audubon was the only town large and important enough to be included in the *Columbia Encyclopedia*.

Members of the General Assembly had good reason for honoring the great naturalist in this manner. Only eight years before, in 1843, Audubon and a small group of his scientific friends, had made a trip up the Missouri River on a steamboat to Fort Union to record animal and bird life found along the way. His reputation had preceeded him for the elephant edition of his *Ornithological Biography* (which was engraved and printed in



London between 1827 and 1838) had won him instant fame on both sides of the Atlantic. The complete set had been issued in 87 separate parts serially, each part containing five bird prints. Subscribers paid about one thousand dollars for the complete set that numbered 435 prints.

Since the elephant edition had limited circulation because of its great cost, Audubon succeeded in getting a "Miniature" edition published in New York in 1839, four years before he embarked on his Missouri River exploit. A total of 1095 of these were sold by subscription which only helped to broaden the fame and popularity of the gifted naturalist. Most of the reproductions in the present issue of *The Palimpsest* were lithographed, printed and colored by J. T. Bowen, Philadelphia.

The appearance of Audubon's "timeless" contribution to American Culture was greeted with enthusiastic applause. The following comments are typical:

I have seen in Europe drawings of birds by the first masters, but I do not hesitate to declare that those of Mr. Audubon for strength, expression, and exquisite resemblance far exceeds them all. *Thomas Sully*

The bird portraits by Audubon were the equal of any ever published in Europe or abroad . . . the greatest monument ever erected by Art to Nature, surpassing in magnificance anything of the kind ever likely to be painted. *Baron Cuvier, Paris*

He distances Wilson and all other competition at home



and abroad . . . surpasses perhaps the work of any other one man who has ever lived. *John Burroughs*

The rarity of the original elephant folios has been demonstrated as recently as November of 1969. For years the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago had housed an incomplete set of these originals in its library. When news was received in the United States that a splendid, complete volume of the original elephant edition would be auctioned at Sotheby's in London, Kenneth Nebenzahl, distinguished rare book, print, and map dealer of Chicago, attended the exciting event. Competition was keen but a bid of \$216,000 finally gained the much-coveted Audubon book for Nebenzahl. The auction was referred to in the international press "as having established a new price record for a printed book." Kenneth Nebenzahl estimated in 1971 that if good single prints of the Audubon elephant edition were bought individually they would command fifty per cent more than the "record" price of \$216,000. And a good original of the Wild Turkey would command \$6,000 to \$7,000.

A generous benefactor had enabled this great work to find a permanent home in most appropriate surroundings. In March of 1970 the Field Museum of Natural History proudly announced that it had acquired, as one of the most important acquisitions in the history of the Museum, one of



the two existing 448 plate sets of Audubon's elephant folio *Birds of America*.

The Audubon *Birds of America* now in the Field Museum is unique in that there are only two copies in existence. According to Nebenzahl:

The subscriber was his wife's well-to-do cousin, Miss Euphemia Gifford, of Duffeld Bank, Derby. When Miss Gifford had first ordered her set in April of 1831, Audubon had hastened to write her of his gratitude for her patronage, his pride in adding her name to his list of subscribers, and the warmth of his wife's affection for her. Earlier they had named their first child, Victor Gifford Audubon, after Lucy's cousin Euphemia.

In addition to being a carefully selected group of prints by Audubon himself, the Euphemia Gifford edition contains 13 extra plates, one of only six sets which were ordered by Victor Gifford Audubon, and only two of which exist today—the Field Museum copy and the second owned by a foundation in Texas.

Iowans may be interested to learn that the Field Museum turned over its duplicate set of Audubon prints to Kenneth Nebenzahl who advertised them in the Autumn, 1970, issue of his little magazine—*The Print Collector*. The prices quoted for the 206 prints range from \$350 to \$2,500. Only three of the 206 prints listed fell below \$400 and all three of these had some imperfection which brought the figure below the \$400 mark. On the other hand there were fourteen out of the 206



original prints listed that ranged from \$1,000 to \$2,500 in *The Print Collector*. This select group included:

<i>Plate</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Price</i>
51	Red-Tailed Hawk	\$1,400
141	Goshawk & Stanley Hawk	1,250
151	Turkey Vulture	1,250
161	Audubon's Caracara Eagle	1,500
167	Key West Quail-Dove	1,000
234	Ring-Necked Duck	1,000
247	White-Winged Scoter	1,000
252	Double-Crested Cormorant	2,250
266	European-Common Cormorant	1,500
297	Harlequin Duck	1,250
351	Great Gray Owl	1,300
372	Common Buzzard-Swainson's Hawk	1,200
381	Blue and Snow Goose	2,500
426	California Vulture— American Condor	2,500

The total cost of the 14 prints listed is \$19,900. The remaining 192 prints have a listed cost of \$108,385. Although the reproductions do not match in quality those of the original elephant edition, Iowans interested in gleaning further information than is found in this issue of *The Palimpsest*, may consult the 435 pictures in Audubon's *Birds of America*, printed by Macmillan and Company in 1937.

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