

John James Audubon

THE BIRDS OF AMERICA

With a new foreword by Robert McCracken Peck, Fellow of The Academy of Natural Sciences



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Introduction and Descriptive Captions

by William Vogt

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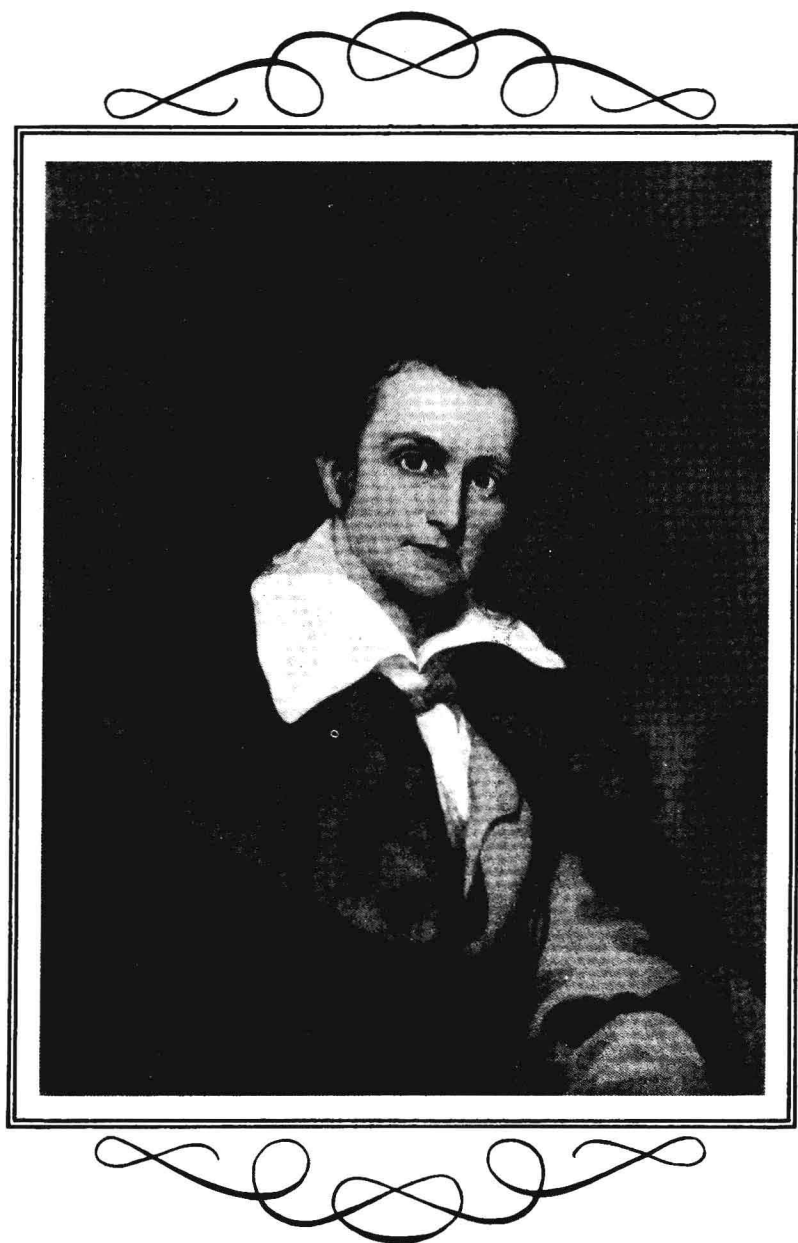
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THE BIRDS OF AMERICA



FROM THE PAINTING BY F. CRUICKSHANK



FOREWORD

By Robert McCracken Peck

The history of American art is filled with figures whose reputations have waxed and waned with the cycles of taste. John James Audubon is one whose popularity and critical reputation have defied the averages and increased exponentially since the issue of the first “double elephant” folio plates of *The Birds of America* in the spring of 1827. The bicentennial of Audubon’s birth—marked by Macmillan’s reissue of *The Birds of America*, the issue of a U.S. postal commemorative, and a spate of special exhibitions, symposia, and television documentaries about the artist and his work—provides an opportunity to reflect on the remarkable phenomenon of Audubon’s achievement.

Never one for false modesty, Audubon himself described *The Birds of America* as an “extraordinary work.” So it was: 435 plates with life-size depictions of 1,065 individual birds, sold by subscription in groups of 5 plates, or volumes of 100 and more, over an eleven-year period. Never before had such an ambitious project been attempted. That it was carried off so well and by a man with no formal training in art, natural history, or publishing seems little short of miraculous.

Everything about *The Birds of America* was large: the scope of the work, the years of research involved, the extent of supervision required for its production, and of course, the dimensions of the book itself. Each of the 435 plates measured 39½ by 26½ inches, and each had to be individually hand-printed and hand-colored, a monumental undertaking by any standard. Nevertheless, the final number of complete sets was small—probably under two hundred. How then did the book have such a huge impact, and why has its fame increased with time?

Of the many factors that contributed to the initial success and continuing influence of *The Birds of America*, its scientific value, artistic strength, popular subject, remarkable size, and strategic distribution were among the most crucial.

The bibliographical history of North American ornithology prior to Audubon is surprisingly spare. Mark Catesby’s *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (1731–1743) was the first book to contain a significant

number of detailed color plates depicting North American birds. The 220 hand-colored etchings that illustrate the volume include 109 bird species, each with a plate and accompanying text.

The next major advance in information on North American birds came in 1791, with the publication of William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida*, an influential book in which the naturalist-author chronicled a four-year trip through the wilds of southeastern North America (1773–1776). *Travels* did not contain any illustrations of birds, but it did include some new behavioral descriptions, important information on distribution, and a listing of 215 bird species—almost double Catesby's total.

With Bartram's encouragement and help, Alexander Wilson, a Scottish-born weaver, schoolteacher, and aspiring poet, wrote and illustrated the first book devoted exclusively to North American birds, *American Ornithology* (1808–1825). This nine-volume work contained pictures and detailed descriptions of 279 bird species. Wilson's book, later supplemented by Charles Lucien Bonaparte, was the most complete work on the subject until Audubon's *The Birds of America* (1827–1838) and its later, textual companion, *Ornithological Biography* (1831–1839), which contained 489 bird species.

The many insightful, firsthand observations that Audubon included in his *Ornithological Biography* would have given this publication—and Audubon—lasting importance even without the plates of *The Birds of America*, but it was certainly the paintings that brought Audubon to the attention of the world and maintain his reputation today. In both books Audubon provided valuable information in a style that could excite even those with no prior interest in birds. The combination assured attention; the quality of presentation guaranteed lasting success.

In an attempt to gain artistic (and social) credibility and thereby increase subscriptions for his book, Audubon sometimes claimed to have studied with the great French neoclassical painter Jacques Louis David. Although there is no evidence to support this claim, and most of Audubon's biographies have discounted it, it is often repeated in cameo accounts of his life. Ironically, through his self-aggrandizement Audubon gave some of the credit for his own artistic genius to another artist. In fact, it was his departure from the prevailing neoclassical taste that has given Audubon such an important place in the history of American art.

In depicting the birds of his adopted land, Audubon went well beyond the clinical profiles dictated by scientific and artistic tradition. His compositions had strength and power, his birds had personality and life, and his botanical and landscape backgrounds, often painted with the help of assistants, conveyed a sense of grandeur that captured the excitement of a new, Romantic age.

Audubon's brilliant departure from the long tradition of scientific illustration ruffled some feathers in the scientific community. His critics considered

the emotional content of his paintings incompatible with objective scientific analysis. They cited several of his predator-prey subjects (particularly the Mockingbird [21], Brown Thrasher [116], and Bob-white [76]) as being scientifically inaccurate or unnecessarily anthropomorphic.

Of course, some of the criticism Audubon received was valid, but much of it was petty and inconsequential, growing from the personal animosity and jealousy of a small group of contentious naturalists who had tried to discredit the project from the very start. Fortunately, most of Audubon's patrons were willing to overlook or tolerate these relatively minor points of scientific disagreement. They recognized *The Birds of America* as the watershed work that it was.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive reception of *The Birds of America*, Audubon's companion volume on mammals, *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (1845–1849), never achieved the same level of success. This may have been due in part to Audubon's declining powers as an artist and his decreased level of direct involvement with the project. With a text by the Reverend John Bachman, and more than half of the 150 lithographic plates drawn by Audubon's sons, Victor and John, the book fails to convey the intense personal interest and enjoyment Audubon expressed so eloquently in *The Birds of America* and *Ornithological Biography*.

Another, more compelling explanation for the difference in public response, however, involves the subject matter of each work. Even if it had been entirely written and illustrated by John J. Audubon, *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* probably would have remained in the shadow of his earlier ornithological achievements—for of all natural subjects, birds and flowers have traditionally had the broadest public appeal. That Audubon's were American birds and flowers (the latter usually portrayed in his plates by his collaborators Joseph Mason, Maria Martin, and others) has added immeasurably to the long-term interest in, and demand for, his work.

At the time of the first publication of *The Birds of America*, North American subjects were of special fascination to amateur naturalists in England and Europe, many of whom had the financial resources to provide the badly needed sponsorship for the enterprise. Of the 308 original subscribers for *The Birds of America*, almost half came from overseas. Since that time, increased American interest has resulted in the sale of some of Audubon's English and European folios to American collectors and institutions. Unfortunately, the seemingly insatiable demand for Audubon's work has also encouraged the breakup and sale of bound sets of *The Birds of America* on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, fewer than 134 double elephant folios survive intact.

From the very beginning, the remarkable size of *The Birds of America* has played a role in its success. The physical dimensions of the double elephant folio immediately set it apart from the scores of other beautifully illustrated

bird books that enjoyed such popularity in the nineteenth century. Robert Havell, Jr., and the other engravers who worked with Audubon pushed the printing technology of the day to its limit, producing life-size aquatint engravings of even the largest American birds. While the tremendous size of the plates made the volumes unwieldy to handle and difficult to store, it also made them the conspicuous focal point of any library. As volumes have been split up and sold, the individual prints have continued to command special attention and preferential display at least in part because of their size.

When Audubon left the United States for England in 1826 to arrange for the publication of *The Birds of America*, he hoped to secure a total of five hundred subscribers to finance the undertaking. In numbers, he fell short of his goal, but the subscribers he did enlist were an impressive and extremely influential group, running the political gamut from Daniel Webster and Henry Clay to the kings of France and England, and included many of the most important institutional libraries in the Western world. Their patronage went a long way toward guaranteeing the acceptability, visibility, and lasting fame of his work.

Audubon could have started his publishing career with a smaller, less expensive book than the double elephant folio. The popularity of his octavo edition (1840–1844), which incorporated the text from *Ornithological Biography*, suggests that there was a market for such a publication, but Audubon was determined to see his “great work” produced on a scale befitting the scope of the undertaking and in a manner worthy of his magnificent subjects. The great cost associated with the double elephant folio of *The Birds of America* (\$1,000 per set) meant that only the wealthiest and most influential individuals and organizations could afford it. By thus limiting his initial audience, he was assuring a selective distribution, which would eventually give the book its greatest impact. Later, Audubon’s own octavo edition and Julius Bien’s full-sized chromolithographs of plates from *The Birds of America* further increased the book’s popularity. In the twentieth century, an abundance of less expensive reproductions, the first of which was Macmillan’s volume in 1937, made Audubon’s previously rare images accessible to households all over the world.

Time, the greatest test of any work of art or science, has added luster to *The Birds of America* and changed forever the way we see its magnificent plates. To some, these once-novel perceptions of a wild, young America have become a moving visual requiem. The Carolina Paroquet [26], Passenger Pigeon [62], and Ivory-billed Woodpecker [66]—some of Audubon’s strongest, most memorable plates—represent species now gone forever. Yet, in many ways, the vision and masterful artistry of these and other Audubon images transcend the subjects they depict. Like great paintings, great writing, or great music from any age, Audubon’s birds, abundant or extinct, will live forever as the masterworks of one of America’s most gifted artists.



INTRODUCTION

By William Vogt

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON

—“The American Woodsman”—was born April 26, 1785, at Aux Cayes, the son of a French naval officer and a *créole de Saint-Domingue*. Dr. Francis H. Herrick has published strong documentary evidence of this romantic, if humble, origin. Those who would identify Audubon with one of the numerous Lost Dauphins that ubiquitously popped up, like prairie dogs, after the French Revolution have been able to adduce no testimony more eloquent than a fancied Bourbon resemblance and several cryptic statements by the naturalist himself. It is easy to discount Audubon’s own hints when his capacity for self-dramatization is remembered, and when one considers how bitterly his pride and ambition would have suffered had the true circumstances of his birth been made known.

Like that other famous West Indian illegitimate, Alexander Hamilton, he adopted his North American home whole-heartedly. Although his speech retained, to the end, a Gallic seasoning, and his use of a dagger in self-defense seemed objectionably “furrin” to many of his fellows of the frontier, he nowhere felt himself at home except among the birds of America. His devotion to the swamps of the Mississippi valley, the forests of the Ohio, the rich coast of South Carolina, was little short of a passion. With the wilderness everywhere at his back door he turned without regret from more lucrative and humdrum ways. He has been romanticized, and all but canonized, as one possessed by a noble ideal. Actually, like many a biology professor and game warden since, he was thoroughly—and selfishly—enjoying life in the woods, fields, and marshes.

This is not the place to dilate on Audubon’s extraordinary life. Though one may be inclined to challenge Stanley C. Arthur’s statement, in his admirable

new biography, "As a man he is far more interesting than aught he accomplished," this is only because of the sweep of Audubon's accomplishments. His rise to fame, after vicissitudes that to most men would have been heart-breaking, parallels other American success stories; and his climb was aided, like that of thousands of Americans before and since, by his very American cultivation of the art of salesmanship. Ben Franklin knew the effectiveness of plain Quaker garb at the French court. P. T. Barnum built a fortune on hyperbole. The American Woodsman clung to his unfashionable dress in London—though he had been eager enough to dress well in New Orleans—and allowed his long, bear-greased locks to be shorn only after many importunities by his friends.

Few of the men who wrested its virgin fruits from this continent dealt so fairly with it as Audubon. He compounded its riches to his own benefit; but, unlike most pioneers of his period, he contributed far more than he took away. Others fouled the rivers, destroyed the soil, pillaged the forests, and slaughtered the wild creatures. Audubon, loving that rich land as few men have loved it, before or since, captured within his books, and saved for us who must painfully correct our ancestors' mistakes, the essence of America that was.

The stature of Audubon the artist can best be judged by an examination of his work. Posterity has established him among the American immortals. The prices of his original plates have placed them beyond the reach of the ordinary man. Set after set has been broken up—the number of sets issued was under two hundred—and sold over the counter. For the first time this volume makes the 435 plates of the Elephant Folio available at a price within reach of the general public.

Audubon vowed he would never paint stuffed specimens, and took ornithological art out of its glass case, for all time. If some of his realism—as in the gory-beaked Duck Hawk—now seems overtheatrical, it should be remembered that he was in vigorous revolt against the stodgy methods of painters of his day. The dramatic always appealed to him, and his ability to dramatize his subjects brought forth an instant response from scientists and connoisseurs. Most of the bird paintings they had seen resembled mummies rather than living birds. A Gordon Craig would probably damn Audubon as a truckler to mere effectiveness; had his work been less startling, however, it is doubtful if it—or he—would have survived.

Audubon the naturalist has, in the recent revival of appreciation, been overshadowed by Audubon the artist. His scientific abilities are less striking than his skill with the brush, and he was preceded in America by another eminent ornithologist, Alexander Wilson; but his *Ornithological Biography* (written

with the help of William MacGillivray) still has far more value than many a bird book issued in the twentieth century! There have been thousands of bird students, professional and amateur, since he floated down the Mississippi; but among his accounts of North American species are still some of the most complete and accurate that have ever been published. And his wide-ranging, vigorous mind anticipated by a century the experimental investigation of bird behavior that plays an increasingly prominent part in American ornithology.

* * * * *

In the brief text that accompanies these plates, this general plan has been followed: The modern names, both vernacular and scientific, are given. The ranges, based on the *Check-List* of the American Ornithologists' Union, will suggest in which *parts* of the country the various species should be expected. Under *Habitat* an attempt has been made to indicate in what *sort* of country one should look for the birds, especially in the breeding season. During migration, of course, birds may appear in all manner of places. Not long ago a Woodcock dropped, exhausted, on a roof outside the Audubon Society offices in New York City, and considerable difficulty was experienced in convincing interested people it had not been planted as a publicity stunt! Under *Identification*, conspicuous, diagnostic characteristics have been suggested, as far as space permits. There are exceedingly few North American birds that cannot be readily and certainly recognized in the field, and it is by the natural tags—white outer tail-feathers in the Vesper Sparrow, for example—that students know them. Relatively few attempts have been made to describe songs, since in most cases this cannot be done in English syllables. Readers are urged to consult Aretas A. Saunders' *Guide to Bird Songs*, which provides a system without the use of musical notation.

Largely, no doubt, as a result of Audubon's influence, the birds of North America have been portrayed and described far better than those of most other parts of the world. A small ornithological library, as a key to the world of birds, will repay the investment many times over. For identification in the field, Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds* and the more recent *Field Guide to Western Birds* have no equal. We are also fortunate in having superb state publications on birds; it is well for the student to add one of these to his library. He need not wait for his own state to publish, if a near-by state has produced a good book. For example, Arthur H. Howell's *Florida Bird Life* will be found extremely useful throughout most of the Southeast. No finer regional bird books

have been produced than T. S. Roberts' *Birds of Minnesota* and E. H. Forbush's *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*. In this same category are William Leon Dawson's *The Birds of California*, Florence Merriam Bailey's *Birds of New Mexico*, W. E. Clyde Todd's *Birds of Western Pennsylvania*, and P. A. Taverner's *Birds of Canada*. Frank M. Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America* is all but indispensable in the region covered (his bibliographies are invaluable), and Mrs. Bailey's western *Handbook* occupies approximately the same niche on the opposite side of the continent.

To one making the acquaintance of birds, the local list (usually costing only a few cents) is most helpful in telling what birds are where, and when. Usually the nearest natural history museum library can give information concerning these lists.

Identification, in natural history, is only the beginning of wisdom. While it is pleasant to recognize birds, wherever one may be, and while thousands of bird-lovers the world over eagerly compete in the effort to acquire the largest possible day, year, and life lists, birds are worth far more attention than a casual glance, a certain identification, and a check on a field card. Indeed, there is evidence that increasing numbers of bird students realize this fact, and that they are turning from a quantitative to a qualitative approach.

Few fields have benefited more from amateur effort than natural history. This is especially true of ornithology, in which some of the brightest names are those of non-professionals. Everyone interested in birds may, by a constructive use of his time, contribute materially to the advance of the science. In the process, the bird watcher will find birds far more fascinating than he has dreamed, and will correspondingly enjoy his hobby. To anyone who has spent a few hours in close observation of birds at their nests, or during their courtship period, these creatures will provide unending delight.

To make such a study, and to make it significant, requires no equipment beyond notebooks and knowledge of what has already been published; though a pair of binoculars, and bird banding apparatus, will speed the explorer on his way. As an introduction to the world of the living bird, I strongly recommend *How Birds Live* and *The Art of Bird-Watching*, by E. M. Nicholson; *Bird Behavior*, by F. B. Kirkman; *Wild Birds at Home*, by F. H. Herrick; *The Book of Bird Life*, by A. A. Allen; and the opening pages of Chapman's *Handbook*. Since the life stories of only four American species have been adequately written, this particular form of bird study challenges the ingenuity, skill, and knowledge of everyone who has been stirred by a Red-wing's February song.

To the beginner, there is one further suggestion: make the acquaintance of fellow hobbyists, and join the local bird study group, if possible. Bird watchers are, generally, friendly folk who are more than willing to share their experience and knowledge. Much bird study is carried on as a social avocation, and one of its pleasantest rewards is the memory of days afield with co-workers. They not only help one to find and know the birds of one's region; they give the beginner the confidence in his powers that he probably lacks. The ability to recognize birds is within reach of anyone. Among the quickest and most accurate field students I have known are boys and girls in their teens. I have an eleven-year-old friend who, like a veteran, names the Ducks and shore-birds on the wing. Her only unusual intellectual equipment is a complete unconsciousness that such identification is difficult.

One more matter should be stressed: conservation. It is inconceivable that any book about Audubon today could ignore this important activity, with which his name has almost come to be synonymous. In no aspect is his prescience more remarkable than in his early understanding of conservation. His bird biographies show a comprehension of wild life similar to that which has been achieved by modern ecological research; much of his defense of the Crow, for example, might have been written by a researcher of the 1930's.

Only eleven years after Audubon's Labrador trip, the Great Auk was exterminated—at least, the last recorded specimen was taken. Twenty-six years after his death, the Labrador or Pied Duck vanished. From that day to this, other species have been wiped out, or driven down into the twilight zone. Some of this destruction of America's wild life has been incidental to destruction of habitats by advancing civilization. Much of it, however, has resulted from direct killing for profit or sport. The Passenger Pigeon and the Eskimo Curlew were recklessly slaughtered by market hunters. Colonial sea birds, and plumed Egrets, were all but wiped out over much of their range, for the profit of a few dealers in millinery supplies. The Bald Eagle, the symbol of a proud, free nation, has been exterminated from much of the country largely because it is a big, tempting target. Hawks have been destroyed by hundreds of thousands in the mistaken belief that they are responsible for the almost universal scarcity of game. Herons, Cormorants, White Pelicans, Terns, and Kingfishers are butchered by fishermen on a similar false assumption that they are the cause of the lack of food and sport fishes.

Opposed to this destruction there has been a public-spirited body of conservationists, who find life more worth living because it includes birds. Through their support, lost ground has been regained, and birds that a third of a cen-

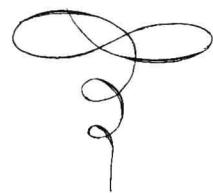
tury ago seemed doomed have been restored to something like their normal numbers. Even the ravages of civilization, which a few years ago seemed inevitable, have been assayed by scientific investigation, and by a broad social evaluation that counts more than today's dollar. Forests, grasslands, soil, water and—above all—marshes, that are the necessary habitats of our wild life, are now coming to be recognized as indispensable in our land economy if this nation is to continue to prosper. The conservation education that, alone, can save the land on which this democracy depends for its existence, still has far to spread. The very fact that it has a vigorous existence, however, keeps alive the hope that yesterday's America may still persist tomorrow.

Acknowledgments: Dr. T. S. Roberts, author of *The Birds of Minnesota*, Mr. Roger Tory Peterson, author of *A Field Guide to the Birds*, and Mr. Arthur H. Howell, author of *Florida Bird Life*, have generously given me permission to quote from their important works, and Mrs. William Leon Dawson has granted me the privilege of drawing on *The Birds of California* by her late husband. I have also turned frequently to Ridgway's *The Birds of North and Middle America*, and to A. C. Bent's unequalled *Life Histories*. Mr. Leon F. Kelso of the U. S. Biological Survey, and Mr. Richard H. Pough, Mr. Joseph J. Hickey, Mr. John T. Zimmer, and Dr. Robert C. Murphy, have given valued advice and criticism. Mr. Peterson has read the entire text and made invaluable suggestions and corrections; all responsibility for errors, however, remains mine. Mr. Charles Banks Belt has considerably smoothed my way by lending me his octavo edition of Audubon's *Birds*. The librarians of the American Museum of Natural History have been characteristically helpful in making the Museum's library available to me. And throughout the planning and preparation of this text, my wife has given indispensable advice, criticism, and assistance. To all these I express my sincere appreciation and thanks.

The
BIRDS OF AMERICA;
from
ORIGINAL DRAWINGS
By

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON,

*Fellow of the Royal Societies of London & Edinburgh and of the
Linnæan & Zoological Societies of London
Member of the Natural History Society of Paris. of the Lyceum of New York,
&c. &c. &c.*



LONDON.

Published by the Author.

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NOTE

THE 435 plates in this volume were originally published by Audubon, in London, during the years 1827–1838. A superb set of these original “Elephant Folio” plates—a set believed to be the finest in uncut state in America—has, through the courtesy of the owner, been followed in making the present reproductions.

The bird names accompanying the present reproductions are those adopted in the *Check-List* of the American Ornithologists' Union.

Further information about the original plates is to be found in the *Transcript of Legends on the Original Plates* in the back of the present volume.