

# Audubon Day FAQ

*Updated April 2022*

## **What was Audubon's connection to Louisiana?**

John James Audubon was born in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), raised in France, and first came to the United States in 1803 to manage land owned by his father in Pennsylvania. He came to Louisiana in 1821 from Cincinnati, where he had been working as a taxidermist and drawing instructor after his business in Henderson, Kentucky failed. Louisiana, which he later claimed was his favorite state, appealed to him for several reasons. It is one of the main endpoints of the Mississippi Flyway, a major migration route through which hundreds of species of birds pass yearly. Audubon was also sure he would be able to find work painting portraits of rich planters and businessmen, and also as a tutor to their children. He spent four months in the summer of 1821 to tutor Eliza Pirrie, the daughter of James and Lucy Pirrie of Oakley Plantation, near St. Francisville. Audubon's wife Lucy, an extraordinary woman in her own right, taught school in the same area for a half dozen years, and the couple used money earned in Louisiana to help finance Audubon's 1826 trip to England to begin publishing the *Birds of America*. He returned to Louisiana several times during the 1820's, and again in 1837.

## **When and where were the drawings made? How many were made in Louisiana?**

Audubon made a few of the drawings for *The Birds of America* while in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky between 1808 and 1820, but the largest portion (at least 130 out of a total of 435) were made in Louisiana. A few were done at Natchez in 1822. Drawings done in Louisiana were the basis for more than half of the first 100 plates in the folio *Birds of America*, but Louisiana drawings were interspersed among later plates as well. In addition to Louisiana, Audubon made trips to New Jersey, South Carolina, Florida, New England, Newfoundland, Labrador, and the southeast coast of Texas. Although Audubon never traveled in the West before the folio edition of *Birds of America* was completed, the naturalists John Kirk Townsend and Thomas Nuttall provided him with birds they had collected there, which he included in his fourth volume. The last drawings for the folio were completed in 1838.

In all, the 435 plates in the *Birds of America* elephant folio depict 457 bird species, with some species grouped together in a single image. For a list of where each drawing was made, see *Handbook of Audubon Prints* (Special Collections: QL31 .A9 B36 1998 REF).

## **Did Audubon work by himself?**

No. Many people assisted Audubon. He was accompanied in Louisiana by a teenaged Joseph Mason, one of his art students from Cincinnati. Mason drew all of the plants seen in the images of birds collected in Louisiana. Sketches of about twenty plants were provided by Maria Martin, an artist whom Audubon met in South Carolina. George Lehman traveled with Audubon in the Northeast and Florida and painted many background landscapes. Audubon's sons Victor and John are known to have worked on a few paintings. Perhaps the most valuable assistance came from Audubon's engraver in London, Robert Havell, Jr., who added to or modified the composition of 134 of the 435 engravings.

Audubon was also assisted by non-artists. Henry Ward, an English taxidermist, traveled with him on his first trip to South Carolina and Florida. The naturalists Charles Pickering and Richard Harlan helped identify specimens brought back from the Southeast, and Edward Harris was instrumental in acquiring birds of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains collected by John Kirk Townsend and Thomas Nuttall. An untold number of people aided in the production and promotion of the *Birds of America* in England, most notably Victor Audubon.

### **Did Audubon support slavery?**

In a word, yes. Audubon both enslaved people himself and benefitted indirectly from the slave economy of the Americas. Audubon's father owned a large plantation in Saint-Domingue where he was born and made much of his fortune trading enslaved people. Later, upon coming to the United States, Audubon and his wife owned at least nine slaves during their time in western Kentucky, all of whom they sold as their finances declined. Audubon later worked with other enslaved people, and the couple seems to have owned at least a few people during their time in Louisiana. Moreover, Audubon often spoke against the Haitian Revolution and his family's associated loss of property, while simply ignoring the reason for the conflict's genesis. To say he was a man of his time is accurate, as long as in doing so is not a way of trivializing his connections to the slave economy and cruelties, but instead a recognition of just how deep and pervasive such connections were. (And are.)

[This is to set aside the issue of Audubon's parentage, something scholars still debate. Audubon insisted that he was born to a (white) French chambermaid who had an affair with his father, despite his father already having a multi-racial mistress in Haiti. This seems unlikely, though of course not impossible. Whether or not Audubon's mother was of multi-racial parentage herself – or even if Audubon knew one way or another – the fact that he saw a need to so carefully construct a solidly 'white' lineage for himself is itself telling. Audubon's father's wife later adopted him and one half-sister and raised the two as her own.]

### **When and where was *The Birds of America* published? Why wasn't it published in the United States?**

Audubon initially considered having *The Birds of America* published in the U.S., but met with little enthusiasm. He received a cold reception when he approached George Ord, a prominent Philadelphia naturalist, and Alexander Lawson, the engraver of Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* (considered a cutting-edge work at the time, but, from an artistic perspective, inferior to Audubon's work). Ord thought Audubon's paintings could not be used for scientific purposes, and both he and Lawson may have feared him as a rival.

In Great Britain, however, Audubon's project sparked great interest. Whereas scientists in Philadelphia and New York had scoffed at Audubon as an amateur and an unschooled frontiersman, in Britain his background made him seem all the more interesting and exotic. The engraver William Lizars of Edinburgh was thrilled to take on the project in late 1826, but had to give it up less than a year later, after engraving the first ten plates, when his workers went on strike. The work was continued by Robert Havell Sr. and Jr. of London, and completed there in 1838.

### **How many prints do the four volumes contain?**

The volumes contain 435 prints.

### **How were the prints made and colored?**

*The Birds of America* was produced by the process of copper-plate engraving. Unlike woodcuts and wood engraving, in which the raised surface was inked and pressed into paper alongside the pieces of movable type (relief printing), engraving is an intaglio process, whereby lines are incised into a plate of metal and filled with ink, which is then pulled out of the grooves when a sheet of paper is pressed firmly on the metal. Engraving requires greater force to be exerted on the paper than that used by metal type, and thus a different roller press. You can see the impression left by the copper plate surrounding each of the bird illustrations.

Called engravings as shorthand, the prints are actually a combination of engraving, etching, and aquatint, sometimes all on the same plate. The combination of these three processes was necessary to recreate the complexity of Audubon's originals and mechanically reproduce them in such a way that allowed for quality control from print to print.

Engraving is relatively straightforward: lines are incised into the smooth, polished surface of the metal plate (in this case copper) using a burin, a sharp metal tool that cuts into the soft copper. This process leaves smooth, sharp, even lines of varying width, according to the size of the tool used. Because of the force required to cut into the metal, it doesn't work as well for light or extremely fine lines, crosshatching, or shading of any sort.

In etching, the copper plate is covered with wax ground that is resistant to acid. Artisans then scrape away the ground using an etching needle (or other similar tool) to reveal the metal plate. That plate is then washed in acid, which 'bites' into the metal where it has been uncovered by the needle. Once the remaining ground has been removed and the plate inked, the resulting print affords the artist some control over tone, resulting in areas of shading not possible with engraving. Etching is particularly well suited for fine, detailed cross-hatching.

Finally, aquatinting gave the printmaker even greater control over shading. Beginning by covering a plate evenly in an acid-resistant rosin, the printmaker heats that powdered mixture to adhere it to the plate. The plate is then treated to an acid bath, and where the particles of the resin remain the plate is un-bitten and they will print white, the areas around those small particles will hold ink and print darker. Acid-resistant 'stop-out' is also applied to any area of the plate meant to remain completely white. Multiple acid washes and multiple treatments of rosin create varying levels of shading, ultimately offering the soft 'watery' feel for which the process is named.

After one (or more) of these techniques had been used, the plate was inked and wiped clean, leaving only the ink in the incised lines. It was then put into a press and printed onto a sheet of paper moistened to better receive the ink and draw it out of the complex lines bitten into the copper plate. Each black-and-white print was then hand-colored by a team of about fifty watercolorists, many of whom were women. Each worker was responsible for applying one color at a time.

### **What happened to the original copper plates?**

They were shipped from London to New York in 1839, but some were damaged by a fire in 1845. , Near the end of her life Lucy Audubon was living in poverty and sold the remainder of the plates for scrap after no other purchasers could be found. Around 1873, as the plates were being melted down at the Ansonia Brass and Copper Company in Connecticut, Charles Cowles, the fourteen-year-old son of the general manager, realized what they were and saved about seventy. Today, these are in various libraries and museums around the world. Audubon State Park in Henderson, KY, where Audubon ran a general store, has two of the original plates and pulled new prints from it in 2013, which are for sale from their gift shop.

### **Where are the original drawings?**

The originals are at the New York Historical Society. They are reproduced in *Audubon's Aviary: The Original Watercolors for The Birds of America*. (Special Collections: McIlhenny QL681 .O47 2012 Over)

### **What does “published by subscription” mean?**

Taking subscriptions was a common way of raising the money needed to print expensive books into the nineteenth century. Subscribers would make a down payment and then pay for individual installments as they were produced. Subscriptions were taken throughout the eleven years of production of *Birds of America*, requiring at times that Havell return to previous plates and pull new prints to meet the needs of new subscribers. A final list of the subscribers was published in the companion work, *Ornithological Biography* (1831-1839). They included individuals and institutions in Great Britain, France, and the United States.

### **How did subscribers receive the prints?**

Subscribers received five prints at a time in 87 installments. Packets contained one large bird, one medium bird, and three small birds. (Technically, the sizes referred to the size of the copper plate, but in fact they generally tracked to the size of the birds depicted.) Most subscribers had the prints bound according to their own taste after they had assembled a complete set, but Audubon did take orders for pre-bound sets.

### **What did the *Birds of America* cost originally?**

Audubon's work was originally sold in installments of five plates each, for two guineas per installment. A complete set cost £184 14 shillings. In the United States, the set was sold for \$1,000 (the equivalent of about \$25,000 today). Audubon realized that few people could afford such an expensive work, so he also published a smaller edition in 1840-1844 (called the royal octavo, petite, or *Birds in Miniature* edition), priced at \$100. It was this edition and its subsequent reprintings that reached the largest audience and which made Audubon the most money.

### **What are the prints worth today?**

The *Birds of America* is one of the most valuable books in the world. A complete copy was sold at auction in 2010 for \$11.5 million, which at that time was the highest price ever paid for a printed book. (The record was surpassed in 2013, when one of only eleven surviving copies of the Bay Psalm Book—the first book printed in what is now the United States—sold for \$14.2 million.) In 2018 what was thought to be one of only thirteen copies of *Birds of America* still held in private hands was sold for \$9.65 million by Christie’s in New York; a year later a copy sold for \$6.64 million. While the market for such luxuries fluctuates widely, LSU’s copy likely would fetch between \$8 and \$11 million on the open market.

Individual prints from the *Birds of America* range in value from a few thousand dollars to more than \$100,000. Value depends on condition and the popularity of the bird; big birds tend to sell for more than small birds.

### **Does each volume focus on specific types of birds?**

No. Subscribers’ packets contained a mix of birds. However, volume three contains a large number of sea birds.

This method of selling packets of large and small birds may have been a good marketing strategy, and certainly allowed Audubon to continue to work on collecting specimens while printing was underway, but the entirely arbitrary order that this produced was critiqued by scientists of his day, who would have preferred that the birds were arranged by taxonomic class. Later octavo editions did attempt to do this, though this was many years after the original folio edition. Audubon later published his own taxonomic system – a bit of a fad for ornithologists at the time.

### **This isn’t what this bird is called today. Where do these bird names come from?**

Many of the names were supplied by Audubon, or were the names by which the birds were known in his time, but today they are known by a different name. For current names, see Susanne M. Low, *A Guide to Audubon’s Birds of America* (2002) or the National Audubon Society’s *Birds of America* website: [www.audubon.org/birds-of-america](http://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america).

### **What do the words “drawn from nature” mean?**

Prior to Audubon, artists typically portrayed birds in a stiff, formal manner, and many had never seen how the birds actually looked and behaved in the wild, working instead from stuffed birds collected sometimes years before they were painted. Audubon, in contrast, carefully observed the birds in their natural habitat and tried to paint them as quickly as possible after killing them so he could accurately represent their colors, which fade after a bird dies. To get their proportions right and create a lifelike pose, he used a system of wires and pins to affix the birds to a gridded board. This allowed him to stage the birds as he had seen them and as he had seen them behave in life – and not just as lifeless specimens.

[Note: While Audubon claimed to always draw from specimens that he had taken and which he had

observed, he actually purchased a number of specimens (93) from John Kirk Townsend, who had traveled west to the Pacific Ocean with Nathaniel Jarvis White. These specimens account for roughly 70 of the finished plates. Audubon also records purchasing specimens at markets in New Orleans, and – most famously – purchased a live golden eagle in Boston.]

### **What do the numbers in the corners of the plates signify?**

The Arabic numerals refer to the installment number (prints were issued in installments of five). The individual plate/print number was given either in Arabic or Roman numerals.

### **What do the letters “FRS” and “FLS” after Audubon’s name mean?**

These are abbreviations for “Fellow of the Royal Society” and “Fellow of the Linnaean Society,” two British scientific organizations of which Audubon was a member of. Members were elected and membership was a great honor. Audubon was only the second American inducted into the Royal Society since Benjamin Franklin.

### **Where does the term “elephant folio” come from?**

The word “folio” designates a size of paper. A sheet of paper that is twice the size of a folio sheet is called an elephant folio, double folio, or double elephant folio (the terms are synonymous). In the case of the *Birds of America*, a sheet of elephant folio paper is 29 ½ by 39 ½ inches. This was the largest size of paper available from English papermakers at the time of Audubon’s publishing project. The smaller “Royal octavo” edition takes its name from a sheet of paper called “Royal” which was folded four times to create eight leaves or sixteen pages.

### **How many copies of the *Birds of America* were published?**

No one knows exactly how many complete sets were published. Audubon’s son Victor estimated 175. Scholars guess that no more than 200 sets were printed. A total of 279 subscriptions were taken, but some subscribers cancelled their subscription or failed to pay, and so did not receive all 435 prints, resulting in incomplete sets. Audubon published a final list of subscribers in 1840 that listed 160 people who had received all of the prints, though there were certainly some other complete sets in circulation. (Such as Audubon’s own copy, now held by the Stark Museum of Art in Orange, TX.) Some uncolored plates were given away as gifts or samples.

### **How many copies survive?**

A few sets have been destroyed over the years by fires, floods, and war. Others have been intentionally broken up by collectors and dealers so that the prints could be sold individually for a higher profit.

Roughly 120 complete sets are known to exist today. Most are in institutions and a small number in private hands. LSU is one of just four Southern universities to own a complete copy (the others are Duke, the University of South Carolina, and the College of Charleston). The R. W. Norton Art Gallery in Shreveport owns a set, as does the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans. Audubon’s

personal copy is at the Stark Museum of Art in Orange, Texas, near Lake Charles.

### **What is the history of LSU's copy?**

The original owner was Hugh Percy, third Duke of Northumberland (1785-1847), who enrolled in 1836 as one of the last English subscribers for the *Birds of America*. The set was offered for sale by the antiquarian dealer Bernard Quaritch of London in 1963. LSU purchased the volumes in 1964 with a \$65,000 grant from the Crown Zellerbach Foundation, affiliated with a company operating a paper mill near St. Francisville. (Note: The set was not donated by the McIlhenny family.) The volumes' condition had deteriorated by the early 2000s. In 2008, they were restored by Don Etherington of North Carolina with a \$99,000 grant from the Coypu Foundation, which was created by John S. McIlhenny prior to his death in 1997.

[Pop culture note: the Duke of Northumberland's home was Alnwick Castle, which was featured in first two the Harry Potter films as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.]

### **What other Audubon materials does Special Collections hold?**

The library owns more than 100 unbound prints from *Birds of America*. We also have the first edition of *Ornithological Biography* (1831-1839), the companion text to the elephant folio; the first octavo edition of *Birds of America* (1840-1844); an archive of 32 drawings (some by Audubon himself) used in the production of the octavo edition; a few original Audubon letters; two Audubon manuscripts for essays published as part of the *Ornithological Biography* ("Bear Killing: Scipio and the Bear" and "The Hurricane"); the first octavo edition of *Quadrupeds of North America* (1849-1854); and dozens of scholarly works about Audubon.

### **Why aren't you wearing gloves?**

While in the past gloves have been worn to protect books from the oils on our hands, experience showed that the gloves made people clumsier and more likely to damage books through tearing or holding pages too tightly. Current best practices in the field call for regular and thorough hand washing and no gloves when dealing with almost all books, regardless of their age or value.

### **How can I see LSU's copy of the Audubon elephant folio?**

The best way for the public to see the elephant folio is at Audubon Day. Because of the work's size and high value, it may be viewed at other times by appointment only, for scholarly research purposes.

Selected prints have been digitized in the Louisiana Digital Library. The University of Pittsburgh has digitized its complete set and made it available on the web at <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/a/audubon/>.

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