

Audubon at Illinois:

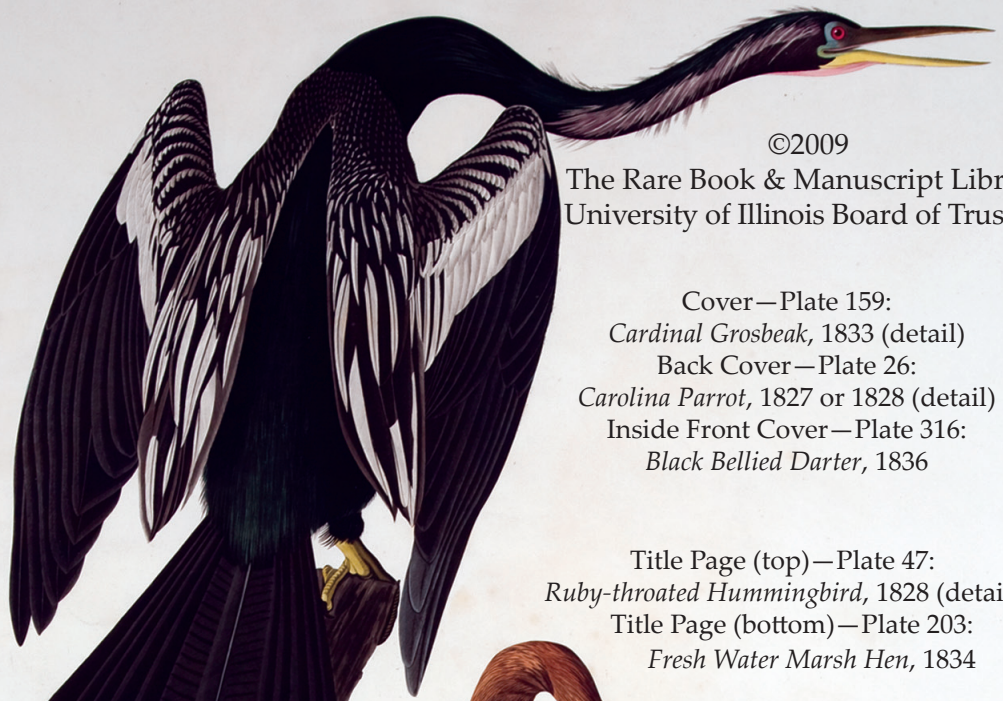
Selections from the University Library's

Birds of America



Krannert Art Museum

January 30 — May 24, 2009



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University of Illinois Board of Trustees

Cover—Plate 159:
Cardinal Grosbeak, 1833 (detail)
 Back Cover—Plate 26:
Carolina Parrot, 1827 or 1828 (detail)
 Inside Front Cover—Plate 316:
Black Bellied Darter, 1836

Title Page (top)—Plate 47:
Ruby-throated Hummingbird, 1828 (detail)
 Title Page (bottom)—Plate 203:
Fresh Water Marsh Hen, 1834

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ISBN 978-0-9788134-2-0

Black-bellied Darter
 PLOTUS ANHINGA, L.



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Curated by Jo Kibbee

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With support from Jack and Kathy Chamblin
and
France@Illinois, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
Department of French



Nº 41

PLATE CCIII



Audubon at Illinois

John James Audubon (1785-1851) never lived in Illinois, but his masterpiece of natural history, *Birds of America*, has a permanent home in The Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Born on his father's plantation in what is now Haiti and raised in France, Audubon made his home and reputation in America. This exhibition celebrates Audubon's mastery of ornithological drawing with a selection of plates that reflect the diversity of avian

species found in Illinois. Selections for the exhibition include examples of birds that thrive in the backyards of central Illinois, as well as those inhabiting shorelines, wetlands, woodland, and prairie. Some birds, including the Northern Cardinal, reside in Illinois year-round, while others are rare visitors, such as the Roseate Spoonbill, sighted in southern Illinois following Hurricane Gustav in 2008. Once found in Illinois, there is controversy as to whether the Ivory-billed Woodpecker is extinct, with reports of sightings in Louisiana in 2004. The Carolina Parrot and the Passenger Pigeon will not be seen again in Illinois, or anywhere.

The selected plates in this exhibition provide scientifically significant illustrations of American birds, of course, but they also demonstrate Audubon's great artistry. From the marauding Blue Jay to an inquisitive Carolina Parrot, Audubon sought to capture not only the physical likeness of the birds he painted, but also their *essence*. He unflinchingly depicts the harsh realities of the natural world, as seen in his portrayal of a family of Virginia Partridge (Northern Bobwhite) under attack by a Red-Shouldered Hawk, and the Golden Eagle carrying off a white hare. Plates of the Barn Swallow and Great Tern are elegant in their stark simplicity, while others, such as Henslow's Bunting and the Pinneated Grouse (Greater Prairie Chicken), depict birds in their natural habitats—habitats that are increasingly jeopardized by development.

Audubon was very much a product of his time. Though he would later decry the wanton killing of birds, particularly for the fashion industry, Audubon was himself an avid hunter and worked from specimens he had killed. The tiny figure of a hunter in the plate of the Snowy Heron, or White Egret is thought to be a self-portrait.



Audubon drew and painted from specimens he arranged, but his watercolors were transferred to the engravers' plate by the talented Robert Havell, Jr. The prints themselves were produced by a combination of engraving, aquatint, and etching, and were hand-colored in Havell's studio. The work was particularly challenging since Audubon's birds were depicted life-sized and required large sheets of paper (averaging 38 x 26 inches) for the prints. Audubon chose wove paper (made on a very fine wire mesh) from the J. Whatman Mill in Maidstone, England—the finest paper available at the time. A total of 435 plates were printed and sold by subscription in groups of five. The plates were later bound in four volumes and, owing to their impressive size, are often referred to as the double elephant folio. Audubon also published a five-volume commentary on the natural history of the birds, entitled *Ornithological Biography* (1832). This work is held by The Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Thanks to the vision of the late Robert B. Downs, Dean of the University Library from 1943 to 1971, the Library acquired an original set of *Birds of America*. Downs had long hoped to secure this crown jewel for The Rare Book & Manuscript Library's already impressive collection of rare ornithological books. In 1948, he seized an opportunity to purchase it from the Brooks School in North Andover, Massachusetts. The set is one of only 120 remaining complete sets of the original printing.

The massive, leather-bound volumes were housed in The Rare Book & Manuscript Library, where the open pages were displayed in a specially-constructed case. The original display conditions were not optimal, however, and the plates themselves were badly in need of restoration. In 1988, the Library Friends undertook an extensive fundraising effort to restore the prints. At that time, the volumes were disbound and each individual plate was professionally and painstakingly restored. Thanks to the foresight and generosity of the University of Illinois Library Friends, Audubon's legacy will continue to inspire and delight generations to come.

References:

Low, Susanne. *A Guide to Audubon's Birds of America*. New Haven and New York: William Reese Company & Donald A. Heald, 2002.

Vedder, Lee A. *John James Audubon and The Birds of America: A Visionary Achievement in Ornithological Illustration*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 2006.



PLATE I.



Drawn by J.J. Audubon M.P.S.

Great American Cock Wild.—VULGO. (WILD TURKEY)—Meleagris Gallinapa.

Plates in the Exhibition

(some shown in detail)

Plate 1: *Great American Cock Male* (Wild Turkey), 1827 or 1828
Hand-colored engraving by W. H. Lizars (1788-1859)

As Audubon's favorite bird, the wild turkey holds the distinction of being the first plate in the collection.

Plate 7: *Purple Grackle*
(Common Grackle), 1827
or 1828
Hand-colored engraving
with etching by W. H.
Lizars (1788-1859)



Plate 181: *Golden Eagle*, 1833
Hand-colored engraving with
aquatint and etching by Robert
Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Audubon professed to have studied with French Neo-Classical painter Jacques Louis David (1748-1825), though scholars dispute his claim. However, Audubon's monumental *Golden Eagle* reflects the influence of painters from his native France.



Plate 12: *Baltimore Oriole*, 1827

Engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878) and colored by Robert Havell Sr. (1769-1832)

Audubon frequently employed the talents of other nature artists to paint the richly-detailed backgrounds for his birds. These uncredited artists include thirteen-year-old Joseph Mason, whose work is represented here. Other collaborators include George Lehman and Maria Martin, as well as his wife Lucy Bakewell Audubon and sons Victor and John.

Plate 159: *Cardinal Grosbeak* (Northern Cardinal), 1833

Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)



Plate 102: *Blue Jay*, 1830 or 1831

Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Audubon ascribed human qualities to the birds he studied: "...more tyrannical than brave, and, like most boasters, domineers over the feeble, dreads the strong, and flies even from his equals. In many cases, in fact, he is a downright coward"—*Ornithological Biography*

Plate 97: *Mottled Screech Owl* (Eastern Screech Owl), 1830

Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 47: *Ruby-throated Humming Bird*, 1828

Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 173: *Barn Swallow*, 1833
 Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)



Plate 21: *The Mocking Bird* (Northern Mockingbird), 1827 or 1828
 Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Audubon's critics disputed the accuracy of his representation of the timber rattlesnake, arguing that the fangs do not curl outward at the tips and noting that these snakes rarely climb trees.





Plate 76: *Virginia Partridge*
(Northern Bobwhite), 1830
Hand-colored engraving
with aquatint and etching by
Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 211: *Great Blue Heron*, 1834
Hand-colored engraving with
aquatint and etching by Robert
Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

The heron's seemingly awkward pose is an example of the compositional device Audubon employed by necessity to meet the challenge of fitting a life-sized portrait onto a 38 x 26 inch sheet of paper



Plate 306: *Great Northern Diver or Loon* (Common Loon), 1836
Hand-colored engraving with
aquatint and etching by
Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)



Plate 321: *Roseate Spoonbill*, 1836.

Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr., (1793-1878)

Though not a common bird in Illinois, the Roseate Spoonbill has recently been reported along the Mississippi River in southern Illinois, most likely as a consequence of Hurricane Gustav (2008).

Plate 242: *Snowy Heron or White Egret* (Snowy Egret), 1835

Hand-colored engraving, with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 66: *Ivory-billed Woodpecker*, 1829

Engraving, with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878) and colored by Robert Havell Sr. (1769-1832)

"I have always imagined, 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."

—*Ornithological Biography*





Plate 62: *Passenger Pigeon*, 1829
Engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878) and colored by Robert Havell Sr. (1769-1832)

Plate 203: *Fresh Water Marsh Hen* (King Rail), 1834
Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 316: *Black-bellied Darter* (Anhinga), 1836
Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)



Plate 309: *Great Tern* (Common Tern), 1836
Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 70: *Henslow's Bunting* (Henslow's Sparrow), 1829
Engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878) and colored by Robert Havell Sr. (1769-1832)

Plate 26: *Carolina Parrot* (Carolina Parakeet), 1827 or 1828
Engraving with etching and coloring by Robert Havell Sr. (1769-1832) and Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Plate 122: *Blue Grosbeak*, 1831 or 1832
Hand-colored engraving with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)





Plate 186: *Pinneated Grouse* (Greater Prairie Chicken), 1834
Hand-colored engraving, with aquatint and etching by Robert Havell Jr. (1793-1878)

Special thanks to Alvan Bregman, Valerie Hotchkiss, Gregory Lambeth, Laura Larkin, Heather Murphy, Carrie Pirmann, Diane Schmidt, and Vicki Trimble for their help with this exhibition.

Additional picture credits:

Page 2—John Symes, *John James Audubon, 1785-1857, The Naturalist as Frontiersman*, Oil, 1826

Page 3—Plate 242: *Snowy Heron or White Egret* (Snowy Egret), 1835

Page 4—Plate 70: *Henslow's Bunting* (Henslow's Sparrow), 1829

Page 13—Plate 97: *Mottled Screech Owl* (Eastern Screech Owl), 1830

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