

All About Audubon

by William Fawcett, Librarian

Photos by Homer Holdren

The Museum has become the fortunate recipient, through an anonymous donor, of one of the finest copies of the elephant folio edition of John James Audubon's magnificent *The Birds of America*. This rare and beautiful work, one of the landmarks of American ornithology, was originally issued in London between 1827 and 1838 and consists of 87 parts of 5 hand-colored, copperplate engravings. The 435 aquatints, measuring 39.5 inches by 29.5 inches, were bound into 4 volumes and originally cost \$1,000, no small sum in those days.

The Museum's copy is of particular value because it is one of two existing copies enriched with an additional 13 plates and was originally the property of Miss Euphemia Gifford, cousin and close friend of Audubon's wife Lucy. Audubon himself, according to a letter addressed to Miss Gifford, took "satisfaction in attending to the colouring and finishing of each separate Plate or Engraving . . ." and designed the "ottoman" with four drawers that has preserved the set so well.

At the Museum the folio will be displayed in a specially constructed glass case containing an environmental control mechanism which will maintain filtered air in the case at an appropriate temperature and humidity level. Large enough to permit one volume to be shown open, the case will also be equipped with a modern electronic burglary device.

The Birds of America was the fruit of many years of hard work, frustration and "rambling" in Audubon's "beloved America." Born on April 26, 1785 at Les Cayes, Santo Domingo (now Haiti), Audubon spent his boyhood in France, where he early evinced an interest in drawing birds. At the age of 18 he was sent to the United States to escape conscription into Napoleon's army and "to make money." He was by his own description "ill-fitted" for the latter and has written: "For a period of nearly twenty years my life was a succession of vicissitudes. I tried various branches of commerce but all proved unprofitable, doubtless because my whole mind was ever filled with my passion for rambling." It was during these rambles that his interest in drawing and studying our fauna, particularly birds, grew to such an extent that, by 1820, he decided to devote his entire efforts to illustrating North American birds. In order to accomplish this task he supported himself by painting portraits and giving drawing lessons and was also supported by his wife's teaching.

By 1826 he had enough material to consider publication and took his drawings to Europe in search of patrons and a publisher. There his work was very well



Great Blue Heron

received. In Edinburgh William Homes Lizars, the well-known engraver and printer, exclaimed, "My God, I never saw anything like this before," and agreed to engrave and publish the work. At the end of November, 1826 Audubon received proofs of the first five plates. "The work," he wrote in his Journal, "from what I have seen of Mr. Lizars' execution, will be equal to anything in the world at present, and of the rest the world must judge for itself." The illustrations were printed life size; and Audubon acknowledged that "it renders the work rather bulky, but my heart was always bent on it, and I cannot refrain from attempting it." With this first "number" he was ready to seek subscriptions and issued his prospectus on March 17, 1827. From this time until 1839 he travelled between Europe and America financing and overseeing the publication of *The Birds of America* and its text, titled *Ornithological Biography* (5 vols., 1831-1839), and index, *A Synopsis of the Birds of North America* (1839).



Whistling Swan

Magnificent 'Birds' goes on display

One of the finest copies in existence of John Audubon's The Birds of America, presented to Field Museum by an anonymous donor, will be placed on public display in the Museum's North Lounge, second floor, on May 9. One page will then be turned each day until all the 448 plates have been shown. Members of the Museum will enjoy a preview of the "elephant folio" on Members' Night, May 8.

Lizars engraved the first ten plates but was stopped by difficulties with his colorers. After a considerable delay Audubon transferred the publication of his work to Robert Havell and his son "because the difficulty of finding colorers made it come too slowly, and also because I have it done better and cheaper in London." Together with skilled assistants, the son produced the plates and the father, under Audubon's direction, supervised the coloring. At one time 50 people were engaged in these tasks.

After publication of the final volume Audubon returned to the United States and settled in New York. Until his death on January 27, 1851 he continued his

study of our natural history and produced other important works, including *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*.

Audubon's life was a particularly fascinating and important one and interested readers will find the following two books by Alice Ford of great value: *John James Audubon* (University of Oklahoma Press; Norman, Okla., 1964) and *Audubon, By Himself* (Natural History Press—Doubleday; Garden City, N. Y., 1969). The original water-color paintings have been recently reproduced in 2 volumes (American Heritage Publishing Company; New York, 1966).

Members' Night, May 8 - Be sure to mark your calendar!

Long before Members' Night arrives, plans are underway in all of the departments for special exhibits and activities. Take this miniature landscape for example, complete with an active volcano that spews forth every 15 minutes. The youngsters were lucky enough to be around when staff members in the geology department were testing the exhibit. This is just one of the special attractions that await members, 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. on May 8.

Here are some of the highlights behind the scenes:

A look at the new Neanderthal family; botanical books as treasures; anatomical exhibit—Giant Panda

Also a varied film program throughout the evening:

Audubon (His life and travels); The Loon's Necklace; Gorgosaurus; Apollo 11; lantern slides; natural history tours sponsored by Field Museum

And these extras:

A treasure hunt; entertainment in Stanley Field Hall

Photo by Fred Huysmans



THAR SHE BLOWS! Alice and Matthew Orr watch model volcano as it erupts on schedule.



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