

SOME AUDUBON LETTERS.

BY GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL.

FOR many years I have had in my possession a lot of Audubon papers, among them the two letters printed below from John James Audubon to his son Victor. For me these letters possess unusual interest — personal rather than ornithological — because of the light they throw on the naturalist's family life, and the suggestions they give as to his business methods and the progress of the great work. Then, too, the first was written just as he was leaving New York to start on his famous Labrador trip and the other just after his return. The letter here printed, however, is not the last one written to Victor before leaving for Labrador, for Miss Maria R. Audubon quotes from one dated May 16, 1833, which we may fairly assume was written from Boston.¹

The two sons, Victor and John, were at this time very young. Victor was about 23, and John only 20. John, in fact, had been so boyish as to cause his father some uneasiness. Yet on this expedition he showed that he possessed qualities which already made him of great service to his father. Later he became a painter of whom his father was proud, and it was John who gathered much material concerning North American mammals, which was published in the "Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America."

The young men referred to in the second letter were, of course, Joseph Coolidge, George C. Shattuck, William Ingalls, and Thomas Lincoln. John Woodhouse Audubon was the fifth.

My father was for many years a near neighbor of the Audubons. I attended a school conducted by Madam Audubon in the Victor Audubon house, where she lived, and as a boy I often saw Victor. I remember him as bedridden from an injury, and he died, I think, in August, 1860.

John Woodhouse I knew very well in the way that a small boy may know a middle aged man. I used to play with the sons of Victor and John Woodhouse about the houses and barns of the

¹ Audubon and His Journals, I, p. 67.

Audubon family, and John Audubon as a friend of my father's was often at my father's house. He was a bluff, gruff, but friendly man, and was always willing to talk about birds, mammals, or, indeed, any natural history object, to any boy who asked him questions. It was to him that I took a small "pigeon" which I had killed near our home, which he identified as a ground dove (*Chamæpelis passerina*). I noted the taking of this bird many years afterward.¹

John Woodhouse Audubon died in 1862.

The Audubon family and many of their kinsfolk were, of course, well known to their near neighbors. I used to see some of the Berthouds, Bachmans, Talmans and Mallorys, the latter being relatives of Mrs. Victor Audubon, Victor's second wife, who was Georgine R. Mallory.

Miss Eliza Mallory gave me the letters here printed. A room in the Victor Audubon house was being cleared out, and the old papers burned, and Miss Mallory suggested that as I was interested in birds, I might like some of these papers. They were bundled up and given to me, while the others fed a bonfire.

Among the papers which I have are many sheets which appear to be the printers' copy from which the "Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America" was set, a long letter from Thomas Lincoln, dated November 17, 1846, describing some of the larger mammals of Nova Scotia, and a half a dozen drafts of bird biographies in the handwriting of John James Audubon, material which no doubt was afterward put into good English by Audubon's great assistant, William MacGillivray. Among this material are also two or three sheets in the handwriting of Prof. Spencer F. Baird, whose association with Audubon was close for some years.

The letters follow.

New York April 28th 1833 —

My Dear Victor —

On opening the box containing the numbers last sent to this place for distribution, we found the contents wet and of course some of them damaged. We have however dried them and made of them that could be done and they will all go on Monday (to-

¹ The Nuttall Bulletin, III, p. 147.

morrow) to their Several destinations — In future I recommend that Each parcel of numbers for the diferent individuals are rolled up in separate Parcel, inclosed in good stout brown Paper, and each directed outside, enumerating the numbers therein contained — then put all the Rolls in a Box — in this manner they all will be less liable to Injury, will not need to be undone here for we have no trouble at all at the Custom House, and it will Save the handling of the Plates at the Compting House.—

N. Berthoud rendered me his account yesterday I send you inclose a Copy of it — and I also send you a Copy of a general & particular memorandum left with him, by the assistance of which the Business is clearly exhibited, so that each Subscriber's Standing with the Work Shows at once.—

The Balance in our favour in N. Berthoud's hands is \$1358.91 — We have due *South of this* \$1834.48. and at Boston \$1220.00 — altogether \$4413.39. — The Boston amount will be ready for me when I reach there on Thursday next.— I take from N. B's hands here \$800:00.— 300 \$ of which I give to your Dear Mother — when at Boston I will take 500 \$ more and send the Balance to N. Berthoud — he will then have about \$1278.91 of cash out of which he will send you 100 £ say 480 \$ leaving still with him about \$798.91. besides what he will collect from the South the amount which is mentioned above, *all of* which I hope will be collected ere I return to this Place, as early as I can without losing the opportunity of doing all that can be done.

You will easily perceive by all this, that we have been extremely fortunate of late on this Side of the Water, and the 400 £ forwarded to you will fully enable you to meet the demands of Havell &^c for the 20 Volumes you have to send here & other emergencies.— We have at Present 51 Subscribers in the U. States, without the name of Doc^r Croghan from whom not a word has been heard, and also without that of *Baron Krudener* who is now at Washington City, but who has not taken any cognisance of the letter I sent him. N. Berthoud is going to write to him and I hope the Baron will take the work.— he certainly ought.

I found the Plates sent here better coloured than usual and with your present assistance I greatly hope the goodness of the Work will still improve.— Nicholas will forward you Two very beautiful Numbers — the Plates are as follows,

N ^o 37.	Plate 181.	Golden Eagle.....	Figures	1
	" — 182.	Ground Doves.....		5
	" — 183.	Golden crested Wren.....		2
	" — 184.	Mangrove Humming Bird.....		5
	" — 185.	Bachman's Warbler.....		2
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N ^o 38.—	" — 186.	Pinnated Grouse.....		3
	" — 187.	Boat Tail Grackle.....		2
	" — 188.	Tree Sparrow.....		2.
	" — 189.	Snow Bunting.....		3.
	" — 190.	Yellow bellied Woodpecker.....		2

I should have sent you 2 more Numbers had I The Two large Plates for them, but hoping that I may meet with something Large & perhaps New I Shall not do so, until I return which will be Still time enough.— I am very anxious to See the 2d Volume finished and for this reason invite you to push the Work, as much as you can & have it very well executed meantime.

The State of Maryland is Subscribed to by D. Ridgely M. D. Librarian of that State. he desires the 1st Volume and the following numbers forwarded as soon as can be.— Send it here — as he has authorized N. B. to draw on him for Payment.— Miss Harriet Douglass also desires to have her Number sent here for the Future.

I hope the Copies for Co^l Perkins & others at Boston & vicinity, as well as for W^m Oakes, & John Neale will soon arrive.—

April 30th — Since the above, I have obtained Two more Subscribers — the names of whom are

1. Rich^d F. Carman. New York
1. L. Reed ——— Do Do.—

I was told last night that the State has also Subscribed, but cannot tell until I see this day's Paper — Whilst at the Lyceum of Natural History last evening, I was promised their Subscription on Monday next — being the Society's day of business.

I have concluded to send the 2 Numbers of Drawings by this Packett — The Tin case containing them, will be given to the especial care of the Capⁿ on whom you will do well to call immediately.— I have *given* a 1st Volume to Nicholas Berthoud; there are many enquiries made to see the Work and it answers that purpose well.

John & I leave for Boston either this afternoon or tomorrow — perhaps tomorrow as we have much to do. — It is not probable that Ed^d Harriss will join us at East Port and go to Labrador with us — I shall write to you by every opportunity as these may occur, and doubtless from Halifax.

Mr Inman has painted my Portrait in Oil, and *I say* that it is a truer portrait of me than even the Miniature. — Now my Dear Victor exert yourself in the having all the Volumes compleated which I have written for — See that they are carefully packed with Paper between each &^c &^c &^c I shall not close this until I have given the Box to the Capⁿ and when I hope to add the Subscription of this State. —

2, o'clock — I have just returned from the bustle of the Lower part of the City — *the State has* Subscribed! Therefore add that valuable one. There is no Packet for London Tomorrow, therefore the Drawings will go off on the 10th of May by the Capⁿ in whose particular care they will be given. — These 10 Drawings have been insured this morning against *all Risk*, for 2,000 \$ at $\frac{1}{2}$ per Centum — I hope you will receive them in perfect order; they are carefully packed by myself in a Tin Box securely sodered &^c &^c.

We have now 54. Subscribers in America.

Mr Inman is going to Paint the Portrait of your Dear Mother, and I have not a doubt that it will be "good & true"

The Weather is extremely Warm — the Thermometer ranges at nearly 72. The Martins are flying over the City and Tomorrow I shall fly toward the Coast of Labrador — If fortunate I shall bring a load of Knowledge of the Water Birds which spend the Winter in our Country and May hope to Compete in the study of their Habits with any Man in the World.

My Good Friend Charles Bonaparte as (I am told) taken unbrage at a Passage in My Introduction (first Volume) Which proves how difficult it is to please *every one* — I am going to write to him by Duplicate to try to *correct* that Error of *his* — God ever bless You my Dear Son and May We all meet Well & Happy

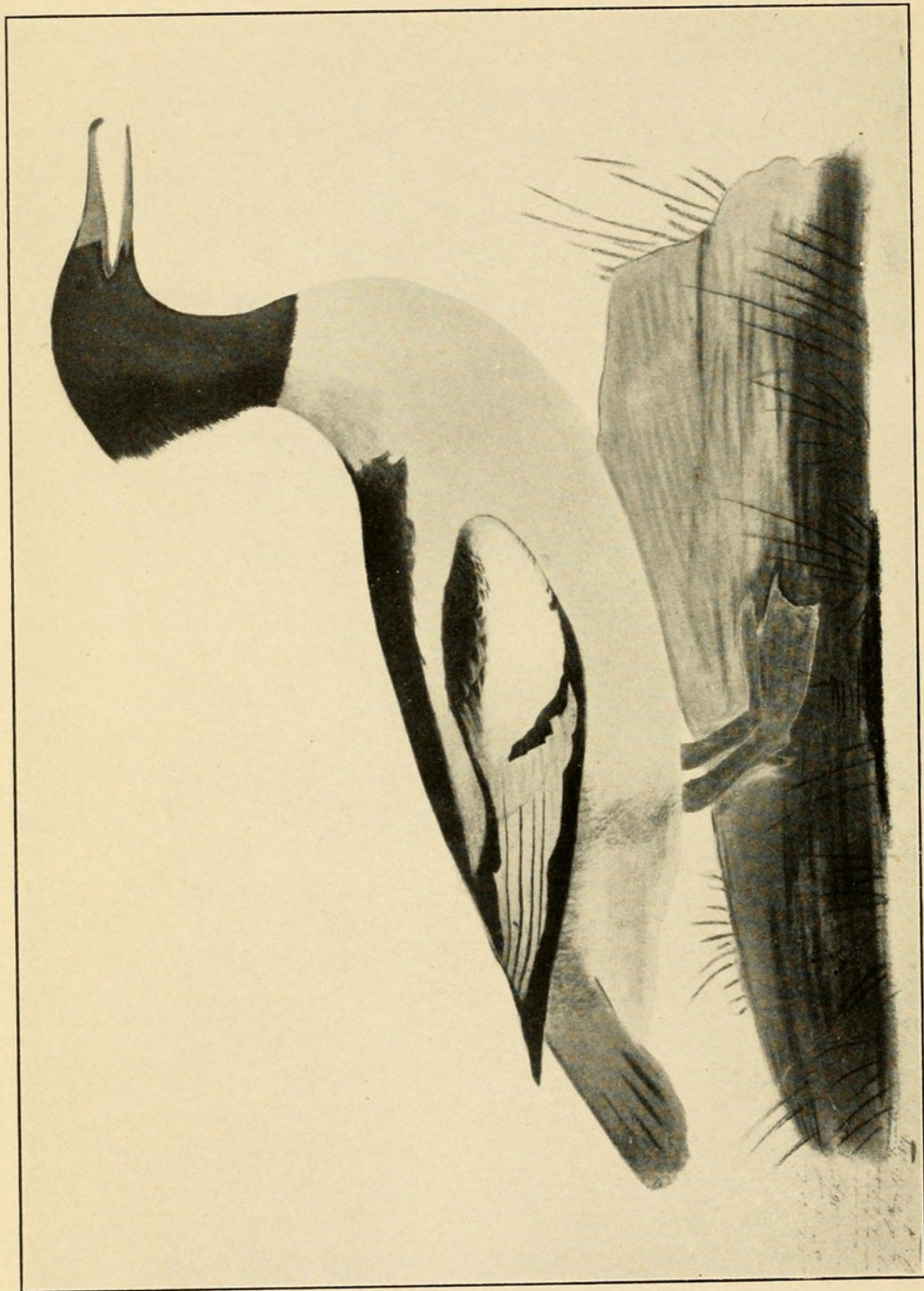
Yours ever affectionately,

John J. Audubon.

New York 9th Sept^r 1833 —

My Dear Beloved Victor.—

John and myself returned here in excellent health, day before yesterday, and had the good fortune to find our Dearest friend your Mamma quite well also — indeed, the whole family here are well.— before I answer or note the contents of your many valuable letters, I shall give you a sketch of our Voyage and a list of the new Birds &c which we did procure.— We sailed from Eastport on the 6th of June, followed the coast of Nova Scotia to the entrance of the Straights of Cansso through which we passed and were much pleased with, as it is truly beautifull resembling somewhat the Hudson River.— we made towards the Madgalane Islands, visited them, found them poor, no birds &c and proceeded to the famous Gannet Rocks and there saw a grand sight of Gannets & other water birds engaged in incubation.— went on to the Island of Anticotte and on the 11th day from our departure at Eastport anchored in an harbour at the Esquimaux Islands on the Coast of Labrador in Company with several fishing vessels. The aspect of the Country of Labrador was as new to us as it proved itself to be Wild, Rocky, Barren of Large Trees, covered with the deepest and richest coloured mosses and the richest of dwarfish vegetation peeping out of the mosses that one can Imagine — on first landing the whole appeared to us delightfully curious, but no sooner did we attempt to proceed in Search of Birds that we found our progress over the Country so difficult and so Irsome that our Spirits became much dampened, the more so indeed when we discovered that very few Birds were there to be found — to walk 10 miles per day was as much as the strongest of our party could well endure, and we all returned every evening as much fatigued as if we had walked 60 Miles on a Turnpike road.— for three hundred Miles of that Coast which we visited the Country was always the same; few trees of a very small size, Deep swampy moss ever and anon growing over hard, dark red looking Granit, supported by the constant foggy dampness of a chilling atmosphere without scarce an Inhabitant and becoming Wilder and Wilder as we proceeded; we landed first at latitude 51. visited, [some] hundreds of Sea Islands; Some hundreds of Inland lakes all Supplied with melted Snow waters — Snow laid deep in every Valey unexposed to the Sun and



MERGANSER.

FROM AN ORIGINAL WATERCOLOR BY JOHN JAMES AUDUBON.

we had to keep constant fires and clothe ourselves as we would do at Eastport in Winter — Yet the Musquitoes, and Black flies & Horse flies were as troublesome as they are in the swamps of Florida — we had storms almost every other days and rain in abundance — Yet we never gave up the task before us, that of procuring New Birds and ascertaining the habits of all the species which resort to that dreary Country during Summer to breed. We fell in Company with the British Surveying Schooner the *Gulnare*, commanded by Captain Bayfield R. N.— Lieut. Bowen, &c. and Doc^r Kelly — all these persons being highly Scientific and Gentlemanly, were most agreeable Companions to us, and we enjoyed their Society much.— we gradually reached the Straits of Belle Isles about the 20th of August.— on the 15 July this passage was still much encumbered with floating Ice and Icebergs. on the 15 of August we had an Iceberg within 2 Miles of us fastened to the bottom, and looking most beautifull.— The season closing upon us we returned sailing along the Northwest coast of Newfoundland which we found stil more elevated, rugged and Wild looking than the Labrador coast; we anchored at the head of St. Georges Bay, Spent there a Week and ransacked the Country as much as the difficulty of walking would permit, and sailed for Pictou (Nova Scotia) near which we landed and from thence sent the *Ripley* round to Eastport where She arrived safely 2 days before us. We crossed Nova Scotia by way of Truro, Halifax and Windsor; at the latter place we saw the tide rise 60 feet — took a steamer to St^t John's, New Brunswick and arrived at Eastport all well and without having met with a single accident of note, or felt a moment of sickness except that occasionned by the motions of our vessel Whilst tossing over the Gulph of St^t Lawrence; the vilest of seas.— The Young Gentlemen under my care proved all to be excellent and useful Companions, and I frequently felt as if all belonged to our family. Yet I was glad to give my charge over, for my anxiety was truly great and often raised to a high pitch, when ever we encountered a storm out of Harbour.—

We have secured 8 New Birds which have given us 2 Superb large plates, and 6 Small ones.— The New Species consist of 2 Falcos, 1 Finch, 1 Titmouse, 1 Cormorant, 1 Curlew, 1 Fly catcher, — The other I cannot recollect just now. I made 25 Drawings,

all of which are not finished; but I have more than enough to Compleat the 2^d Volume to my entire satisfaction.— The 2 large plates are one, a covey of the Willow Grouse, male female & Young, very beautifull. The other the *Labrador Falcon* male & female, large & beautifull, John killed both these.— The knowledge I have acquired of the Water Birds and of those of the land which visit us only during Winter, is most valuable and I have Written *all I saw* — Our voyage has been very costly.— about 2000 Dollars; but I am glad I went, it will give me and the Work a decided superiority over all that has ever been undertaken or perhaps ever Will be of the Birds of Our Country.— Now I will give you an account of my plans for the present Year, and indeed for the next, *adopting however Whatever you* My Dear Son will say in return to this Subject I wish to Leave New York in about Ten days for the express purpose of procuring Subscribers, a good number of which I hope can be procured in the U. S.— and to proceed by way of Philadelphia to Baltimore, remain there a fortnight or So — then to Washington City where I expect to have the heads of the diferent dep^{ts} to Norfolk, Richmond & Fredericksburgh in Virginia and to Charleston and Savannah further South — at Charleston your Mamma and John to remain the Winter at our friend Bachman's who invited her to do so when he was here this Summer. Could I procure an additional number of 50 it would be a most valuable Journey, and I would besides [acquire] some information about Birds if not any New such.

Havell's last letter to us, shows I think a good disposition to continue the work on the same terms he has heretofor done it, and I think that the letter which I am going to write to him and of which I send you a copy inclose will restore him to his proper senses.— I feel confident that he does not lose *by our Work*, whatever he does in other speculations, and *I think* that should we remove it from his hands into any other persons that his name would soon suffer as well as his business.

I am truly delighted at the contents of all and every one of your letters my Dear Victor.— I am indeed proud to have such a son — I look on your prudence, your improvements and your Industry as unparralled in a young man of your age, in a Word I look upon you as on a true friend and a most competent partner in the completion

of the arduous undertaking before us.— I cannot say any more, than that I and your Mother are quite Happy at the knowing that you are so well able to do all for us and for yourself that we could possibly desire.— to go on in the same manner is all we can wish, and we feel perfectly confident that you will do so.—

We are all anxiety to hear from you after your return to England from your visit to the Continent, and [should] you not have procured a single subscriber, it is well to [have] ascertained the fact that none were there, besides the knowledge which you have acquired of the Nations you have visited — a knowledge which no description can ever convey.— to speak the French Language alone will be of great import to you.— We hope that you Draw, Some, and also that you study music at your leisure hours, however few these hours may be.—

When at Philadelphia I will ship direct from that City the Bird skins, shells &c not belonging to our private Collection for you to dispose of as opportunities offer.—

I am greatly in want of *One dozen or So* of the best French water colour brushes of assorted sizes made in Paris —

Pitois can send them to you. They cost from 5 to 8 Francs each and are made good only by Vial Lebault, successeur de Cherion, Fabricant de Pinceaux N^o 61. Quai de l'horloge du Palais, pres du Pont Neuf, a Paris. *Some very large, none very small.*

In the first volume of the "Birds of America" there exists 2 repetition of species, "The Female Turkey" and "the black and Yellow Warbler" — and in the 2^d Volume one repetition — "the Young of the White headed Eagle" This renders the numbers of actual species less by three than 200 the proper number intended these Volumes should Contain — I now think that the character of the work, and the fame of the author, would be greatly enhanced, by *giving* 3 extra small plates in the last number of the 2^d Volume; it would be fulfilling to the very letter the promises to subscribers contained in *The Original Prospectus*, and would the more enable us to enforce the taking in of the Work by all those who have affixed their own signature to the original list of subscription, and have so unwarrantedly abandoned it since the time they subscribed.— The extra cost of these three plates would certainly be considerable, but it would I think work well and exhibit an unpre-

cedented Generosity in Works of Any Description — Think of this, talk of it to our most excellent friend Children, and write to the Rathbones also on that subject and let us know all — Meantime I shall send you the Drawings for the 2 last numbers, the very last consisting of 8 Drawings instead of 5. — These numbers surpass all that have been published in point of Interest and beauty. — although there will not be any more labour for the Engraver or Colourers than previously. —

I would regret indeed to be obliged to remove the Work from Havell's hands unless forced to do so by not meeting with another person equally competent and at the same prices which we now pay, it would have to be done; for between us, I think it very ungrateful in him to have even mentioned such an Intention. — He says you both agree very well *now* — I hope it will be long the same thing, and I am quite sure that your diligence at overseeing the Work was a great source of discontent on his part — but we have to look for and to think of our own Interests quite as much as any other in this boisterous World of ours.

Present my thanks to Friend Bell of the London Atlas and ask of him to publish the long paragraph in the paper which accompanies this — I am writing to the Duke of Sussex — deliver the letter yourself. — Remember me most kindly to Cuthbertson who is indeed a most excellent friend of ours.

When you have a good opportunity, see if the 2 first Volumes could be printed *in Colours* and bound in Paris, the Price &^c, You furnishing *English Paper* for which I think *no duty* would have to be paid in France, for Such a work —

I would like to go to England the 1st of June next to publish the 2^d Volume of Biography, and yet I would like to remain in the U. S. one Year more to compleat the Water Birds as far as in our power. Send us your Views on all subjects and we will [decide] as may be best from your letters —

Tell Havell that the Water Birds will not be more troublesome than the Land Birds and that although some Landscapes or portions of backgrounds will be attached to each Drawing; these will not be more than equivalent to the Plants &^c of the Land Birds. I am glad that what you say of *the Young Engraver* there coincides with my opinion of him — Keep Kidd at work as much as possible



Grinnell, George Bird and Audubon, John James. 1916. "Some Audubon Letters." *The Auk* 33, 119–130. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4072159>.

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