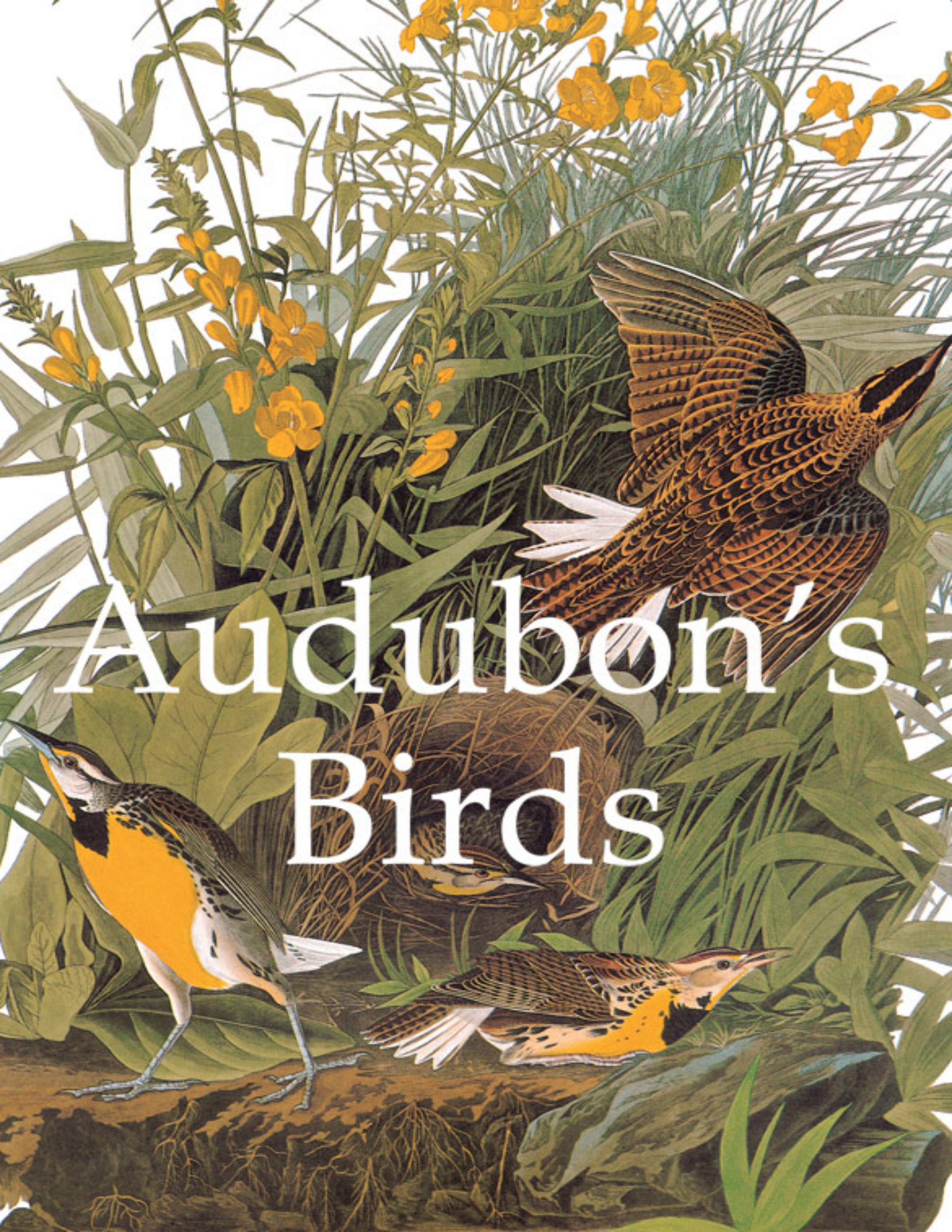




Audubon's Birds

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Foreword

“I am well-received everywhere, my works praised and admired, and my poor heart is at last relieved from the great anxiety that has for so many years agitated it, for I now know that I have not worked in vain.”

— John James Audubon, 1826

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Bald Eagle, Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Plate 11, Falconine Birds

Biography

1785: John James Audubon is born on the island of Santo Domingo (now Haiti) on 26 April, son of a French sea captain and plantation owner, and his mistress.

1789: Arrives in France where he spends his childhood raised by his stepmother, Mrs Audubon. There, he takes a lively interest in birds, nature and drawing.

1803: Settles in America to escape conscription into the Emperor Napoleon's army.

1805: Returns to France.

1806: Goes back to America to escape the emperor's army again.

1808: Marries Lucy Bakewell.

1809: Birth of his son Victor Gifford, first of his two boys (the second named John Woodhouse).

1810: Receives a visit from Alexander Wilson, one of the first ornithologist painters of America. He realises his drawings are better than Wilson's so he decides to produce a work on all American Birds. Settles with his family in Henderson, Kentucky.

1820: Moves to Cincinnati and follows the Mississippi towards the south to discover the birds of Louisiana (which meant at that time a quarter of the American continent). There he meets the last free Indians.

John J. Audubon

1826: He sails to Europe to raise money for the printing of his *Birds of America* and presents his work to the English botanists.

1826: First plate printed.

1828: Presentation of his work to the French botanists, meets Pierre Redouté.

1829: Goes back to America to fulfil his study of birds.

1831-1839: Publication of his *Ornithological Biographies* in five volumes.

1832: Expedition in the Carolinas and in Florida to observe tropical birds.

1833: Expedition to Labrador, Canada, on the settlements of arctic nesting.

1837: Expedition in Texas.

1834: Starts his exploration of West America.

1838: His 435th and last plate is printed on 20 June.

1843: Last expedition of Audubon to Yellowstone River.

1845-1848: Publication of the *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*.

1851: John James Audubon dies on 27 January.

1886: Founding of the National Audubon Society.



Preface

“Audubon could have been anything: a great philosopher, a great orator, a great poet, a great statesman, a Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Montesquieu, a Chateaubriand. However, he was unable to be other than a naturalist, painter, and American ornithologist, a Buffon of the Northern States, but a Buffon of genius, spending his life in virgin forests and writing with the enthusiasm of solitude a few pages of the great animal epic of creation.” (Lamartine, *Cours familier de littérature*, Paris, 1865).



Portrait of John James Audubon

John Syme, 1826
The White House Collection,
Washington D.C.





When John James Audubon decided after his meeting with Alexander Wilson in 1810 to paint and describe all the birds of North America, surely he never imagined that it would entail a lifetime of travels, scientific as well as artistic discoveries, and a pursuit of quality to the final proof of the published prints. That is the personality of this French American ornithologist, unique in his field, who succeeded in describing and illustrating all birds of the North American continent, there where his predecessors were confined to the former French and British colonies to the explored territories.



Greater Flamingo

Phoenicopterus ruber
Plate 431
Ducks





Yet, his legacy does not stop there. The originality of his illustrations marks a turning point in the history of representing nature. Audubon's depictions are life size, thus requiring him to multiply the number of birds appearing on the same plate, or bend the necks of others as with the Greater Flamingo. In addition, he portrays them in a natural setting, far from scientific exhibits of stuffed specimens displayed on perches. Consequently, his birds live, hunt, hatch, peck, fly, and soar.

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica
Plate 173
Swallows





This humanity in representing our environment, in the tradition of Enlightenment thinkers, immediately received its deserved respect in Europe from 1828 onward.

Audubon's impressive oeuvre is composed of two parts: 435 plates, drawn between 1808 and 1838, and 435 notes, *Ornithological Biographies*, later written to accompany the previously published plates. Here again, Audubon exhibited a passion for perfection which pushed him to supervise the colouring and printing of each of the 87,000 requisite plates for the 200 copies of this work.



Artic Tern

Sterna paradisaea
Plate 250
Gulls





Finally, the text, including a description of the family, followed by the genus, and finally the species of each bird, is as much a source of scientific information as artistic. Once again, Audubon let the Romantic spirit of his time shine through his work whose harmony and quality are still, if not more than ever, recognised today.



In the following edition, you will find 120 of Audubon's 435 plates in addition to descriptions of the forty five bird families to which he dedicated a lifetime identifying. Therefore, we invite you to discover, thanks to this unprecedented approach, the vanishing universe of this nature lover.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Pheucticus ludovicianus
Plate 127
Finches





FAMILY I
Vulturinæ. Vulturine Birds or
Vultures

Bill of moderate length, stout, cerate; upper mandible with the tip elongated and decurved; lower mandible rounded and thin-edged at the end. Head rather small, or of moderate size, ovato-oblong, and with part of the neck destitute of feathers. Eyes of moderate size, without projecting ridges.

External aperture of ears rather small and simple. Skin over the fore part of the neck bare or merely downy.



California Condor

Gymnogyps californianus

Plate 426

Vulturine Bird





Tarsus rather stout, bare, and shorter than the middle toe, hind toe much smaller than the second; anterior toes connected at the base by a web; claws large, moderately curved, rather acute. Plumage full and rather compact. Wings very long, and subacuminate. Oesophagus excessively wide, and dilated into a crop; stomach rather large, somewhat muscular, with a soft rugous epithelium; intestine of moderate length and width, coeca extremely small. The young when fledged have the head and upper part of the neck generally covered with down. Eggs: commonly two.

Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura
Plate 151
Vulturine Bird

