

## **Audubon's *Birds of America*, Havell edition, 1826-1838: Lake Forest Library's Ten Plates, Restored, and on View**

“the most splendid book ever produced in relation to America”

--Alan G. Thomas, *Great Books and Book Collectors* (London: 1975), 210.

J. J. Audubon's *Birds of America* plates, ten Havell-published double elephant folio hand-colored, aquatint-engraved originals (39.5 tall by 28.5 inches wide, or vice versa, based on Audubon's watercolors and other sketching media, published in London, 1826-1838), trimmed.

These ten mixed-media plates, located at the Lake Forest Library at 360 East Deerpath since the early 1930s and a donation, were trimmed apparently to fit the spaces between windows in the west periodicals reading room. The plates were worth relatively little at the time, *ca.* early 1930s. They have been painstakingly restored since *ca.* 2000 by a Chicago Audubon expert conservator, Joel Oppenheimer's firm, with donated funds. According to Alan G. Thomas, British dealer and bibliophile, Audubon's and James Havell, Jr.'s, mammoth-format *Birds of America* is “the most splendid book ever produced in relation to America” and it is “one of the finest ornithological works ever produced.” The “double elephant folio” designation means that a standard sheet of handmade paper was employed in full as one page, sewn together at the left side. A typical folio page is the result of folding such a sheet once in the middle of the long side, a quarto folded twice, etc. These painstakingly created large plates are highpoints of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Western-civilization printing and art, highly prized, with 435 plates issued over thirteen years in fascicules of five each and *only about 200 sets* completed. Audubon and Havell, both contributing to the artistry of the work with Audubon's original paintings and Havell's printed plates and hand-coloring, deserve credit for the superb quality of the completed plates and for the persistence that sustained this long project of unprecedented scale. These ten original Havell plates, trimmed and later authenticated and restored by the Oppenheimer firm in the city *ca.* 2000, are monuments as well to Chicago and Lake Forest culture and collecting a century ago, and among the City of Lake Forest and Lake Forest Library's most prized artifacts.

The Library's ten double elephant-folio plates are notable as images of large birds, among the most demanding of the artist and the printer/colorist. ***All plates but one depict larger-scaled water and wetlands fowl and birds of prey.*** The one exception is the *Cock of the Plains*, better-known as the Sage Grouse, still a bird that is hunted in Wyoming. This exception suggests that the original collector of these ten prints was a hunter. None of these are small-scaled birds, and thus adapt well to being viewed above the bookcases, etc. This collection of mostly related, very arresting water-bird images by America's great early naturalist Audubon highlights in this handsome Library space at once:

--the “most splendid book ever produced related to [North] America,” a great work of 435 plates produced in London in groups of five each over more than a decade. *The Birds of America* captured the attention of Europe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *as appreciated by this community of Chicago-Renaissance booklovers and collectors;*

--early 20<sup>th</sup> century elite Chicagoans' love of nature, of sport, and of art at the heart of their suburban retreat at Lake Forest;

--and honoring Chicago's and Lake Forest's location astride lake-bluff and prairie both, but dominated by the presence of the southwestern-most limit of the mighty fresh-water Great Lakes. The "Great American Egret," one of these plates and among the most sought-after, was and is a seasonal visitor to the Lake Forest area.

Located adjacent to the Library's rotunda, with its images of classic Old-World authors, the striking *Birds of America* plates exhibit an early-national U.S. pinnacle of accomplishment in art, nature study, and bookmaking—the latter even if outsourced to Britain.

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### The Plates

As Danny Heitman observed in a 2011 article in *Humanities*, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/novemberdecember/feature/audubon-the-writer> , British copyright rules in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century kept Audubon from publishing glosses of or articles about his *Birds of America* in connection to the plates. But a project of the Audubon Society has matched up his great images and his writing about each bird, pioneering American nature-writing in its own right, <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america> , with separate pages linked here on most of the birds, gleaned from Audubon's writings as pulled together by scholars in recent decades. **Thus, visiting the elephant-folio plates can be enriched by bringing along an iPad or tablet.**

Here the ten restored framed plates are briefly described as labeled in the *Birds of America*, ***beginning on the right or west side of the door upon entry from the rotunda and proceeding counter-clockwise:***

*Wood Ibis*, Havell Plate 216 [described on the same page as the *Common Goldeneye*, 1966 paintings ed., Pl. 247 for *Wood Ibis*, Pl. 248 for *Goldeneye*, as listed in ...*Library Art*, 2001, (12)] a southern-states water bird sketched likely in April 1821 in a Louisiana wetlands. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/wood-ibiss> .

*King Duck*, Havell Plate 276 [*King Eider*, 1966 Audubon paintings ed., Pl. 75], restoration funded in memory of Dr. Stephen S. Infantino (by his spouse, Cindy, head of reference in 1990s-early 2000s). Apparently shown in a rocky Atlantic coast setting, this view of a male on the left and female on the right may have been painted in the winter of 1832-33. Ranges for breeding from Labrador north to the Arctic, and rarely venturing south to Massachusetts in winter. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/king-duck> .

*Blue Goose & Snow Goose*, Havell Pl. 381 [Pl. 265, 1966 paintings ed.], restoration funded by long-time staff member Judy Beebe Gummere, in honor of the Friends of Lake Forest Library. "The Snow Goose is one of the most studied avian species in North America," with

these two variants of snow geese of the same species confusing bird scholars into the era of DNA studies and had been thought of in Audubon's time and much later as two species (Mowbray, Cooke, and Ganter). Audubon painted his auction-purchased pet blue goose in Boston, c. 1832, and added the (white) snow goose later. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/snow-goose> .

*Black-Throated Diver*, Havell Pl. 346 [Pl. 278 as *Artic Loon*, 1966 paintings ed.], restoration funded by the Friends of the Lake Forest Library. Audubon's 1834 painting likely is based on an 1820 drawing and on specimens found in England. The birds on the right and left are in their mating season plumage, with the bird in the center in winter dress. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/black-throated-diver> .

[*W*] *hooping Crane*, Havell Pl. 226, restoration funded by the Friends of the Lake Forest Library. This is "one of the largest figures in *The Birds of America*," according to the 1966 painting edition, Pl. 8. Painted in 1821-22. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/hooping-crane-0> .

*Marsh Hawk*, Havell Pl. 356 1966 paintings ed., Pl. 124]. Dating from 1820 (bottom) and c. 1836 (top and center). Widely distributed in the U.S. and beyond. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/marsh-hawk> .

*Great American Egret* [*White Heron*], Havell Pl. 386 [*Common Egret*, 1966 Audubon paintings ed., Pl. 389], restoration funded by family and friends in memory of former LF Library Trustee Leonard C. Everson. This male white heron with mating season train (rear lacy feathers) painted at Charleston in 1832, after earlier efforts in 1821 and 1832. The online series has not added an Audubon text for this plate, 386, as of October 2019. The Society's bird guide though offers information on the Great Egret, referred to from the entry for Pl. 386: <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/white-heron> .

*Cock of the Plains* [not labeled; *Sage Grouse*, 1966 Audubon paintings 1966 ed. Pl. 399], Havell Pl. 371. Painted with a female left and male right, probably at Charleston in the winter of 1836-37. Of the ten examples here, this one is not a water bird, though is hunted in Wyoming. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/cock-plains> .

*Common Cormorant*, Havell Pl. 246 [*Great Cormorant*, 1966 Audubon paintings ed., Pl. 145, restored by the Friends of Lake Forest Library. Mother and chicks painted July 1833 at Labrador; male at right added later, perhaps March 1834. The online series has not added a text for this plate, as of September 2019. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/common-cormorant>

*Golden Eagle*, Havell Pl. 181, restored by the Friends of Lake Forest Library. Painted over fourteen days, at Boston, winter 1833, from a specimen captured in the White Mountains. Longest time to paint, except the Wild Turkey, according to Audubon. <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/golden-eagle> .

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Sources:

Audubon, *The Original Water-color Paintings...for The Birds of America* (Crown reprint of American Heritage Publishing, 1966), with a key to *Birds of America* Havell ed. plate numbers, Appendix, xxxvi-xlv. Call number 598.097 AUD.

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