

BirdWalk Newsletter 6.11.2017

Walks Conducted by Perry Nugent

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Above portrait is actually a self- portrait in his younger years while the portrait on the right was painted by John Woodhouse Audubon depicting him later in years.

“A true conservationist is a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children.”

J. J. Audubon

John James Audubon “Father of Ornithology”

(born 1785 - death 1851)



When people think of birds, they think of John James Audubon and the society which was established in his honor over 50 years after his death. His paintings are world renowned even to this day. He was a very interesting fellow who led an adventurous life. Born in Haiti of a

French settler and his French-Creole mistress/servant, John James Audubon started out in life as an illegitimate son, but was raised by his stepmother in France. It was in France that his love for the outdoors and art started to take root. Due to France's war with England, at 18 years of age he was sent back across the ocean to Mill Grove Estate close to Philadelphia. His escape from serving in Napoleon's army enabled him to conduct detailed studies of birds and paint them in America. He hunted them by gunshot, and studied their anatomy, size, shapes, coloring, and behaviors in order to depict these birds on canvas. He was a business man, however, and when the economy and his supply business stalled, he went broke and went into debtor's prison for a short while. Once released, he had nothing, so he began anew by traveling along the Mississippi River collecting and painting his birds. With painting supplies, his gun, and a young intern, he began writing detailed notes about the fauna and flora in a field journal and began painting more seriously. According to an article by John Platt for Mother Nature Network, he was described as having a ferocious amount of energy, determination, and dedication for his work- "he was known to rise at 3:00am for his hunting and research trips, return after noon, draw all afternoon, then return to the field for a few hours in the evening." His wife raised the children and hired herself out as a tutor to earn money. Eventually, in 1826, he set out across the ocean once more, but to England not France, in order to expose the European world to his work. His enthusiasm and the art culture of the times made it a "perfect timing" venture, and his art became a huge success. He made important friends and acquaintances in Scotland and England, and began printing his work and writing life histories to go along with his paintings. Even though there were other ornithologists compiling information about birds of the Americas, J.J. Audubon became the most talked about artist and

educator of the New World's avian presence. *Birds of America* became his published collection which included at least 435 life-size prints from his original art collection. To date, only Roger Tory Peterson and David Sibley can even come close to his notoriety. He finally settled in New York City and is now buried in Trinity Cemetery.

Interesting Facts:

- Audubon did not become an American citizen until 1812- just over 10 years after he immigrated with a false passport at 18 years old.
- Because of failing eyesight, his last work, *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, was finally completed with his son's help and through collaboration with his friend, the Reverend John Bachman.
- Reverend John Bachman's daughters married J.J. Audubon's sons!
- George Bird Grinnell was tutored by Lucy Audubon (JJ Audubon's wife) and eventually was one of the founders of the Audubon Society.
- Alexander Wilson was actually the first to paint and describe America's avians.
- J.J. Audubon was one of the first people known to band birds and discover that birds return to the same place the following year. He tied string or yarn around the legs of Eastern Phoebe.
- Even though Audubon shot every type of bird which he painted, he was a conservationist at heart. He felt he needed the close inspection of each of his subjects, but did not actually enjoy the killing of them. He stated, "The moment a bird was dead, no matter how beautiful it had been in life, the pleasure of possession became blunted for me."

In John James Audubon's writings and paintings, he mentions areas of Charleston where he observes these birds or uses backgrounds of Charleston scenery. For example, his plate 231, Long-billed Curlew, the town of Charleston is seen clearly in the background. On a side note, this print can be seen on the wall of Grace's house in the Netflix sitcom called "Grace and Frankie". In other prints, different plantations or cottages are used in the backgrounds to illustrate the Charleston area. The dialogue which goes along with the Lesser Yellow Legs, the Little Blue Heron, the Black Vulture, the Salt-water Marsh Hen, and the Night Heron are just examples of his use of Charleston as his backdrop in his journals.

John James Audubon is known as a legendary artist, naturalist, and conservationist. Looking back on his life, he is also thought of as a man of strength, courage, and perseverance.

Happy Father's Day, John James Audubon, for being our "Father of Ornithology".

Resources: "John James Audubon Biography.com", Biography .com Editors, 2016; John James Audubon- "The American Woodsman: Our Namesake and Inspiration", *Audubon*; "5 things you didn't know about John James Audubon", John Platt, *Mother Nature Network*, 2011; Caroline Howell interview, *Magnolia Plantation and Gardens*, May, 2017.

Sunday, June 11th, was a warm day respectively, so the birdwatchers set out for locating as many birds as possible for a summer day. 40 species were logged, while 7 participants kept watch. The Little Blue Herons and the Wood Ducks showed up with their babies. The Common Moorhen were seen in the large rice impoundment with babies as well. Anhinga, a Least Bittern, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Tri-colored Heron, Green Heron, Black-crowned Heron, Glossy Ibis, American Coot, Laughing Gull, and Least Tern all made the list. 8 Turkey Vulture were seen above, a Mississippi Kite was located by the group, and 2 Red-shouldered Hawk made themselves known.

American Crow, Fish Crow, Purple Martin, Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackle, and Boat-tailed Grackle all made their impressions with the bird watchers. Red-bellied, Down, and Pileated Woodpeckers were either seen or heard along the trails. Other passerines sighted were: Chimney Swifts, Great-crested Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Tit mouse, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Parula, Prothonotary Warbler, Summer Tanager, and Northern Cardinal.