



National
Museums
Scotland

Audubon's Birds of America



Available
to tour from
Summer 2022

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Introduction

This touring exhibition presents an exciting opportunity to display a beautiful selection of over 40 plates from one of the world's most famous and valuable rare books, *Birds of America* by John James Audubon (1785–1851).

Birds of America is a landmark work of ornithological illustration which took almost 12 years to complete. Today only 120 copies are known to exist, and they are rarely on display. The plates featured in this exhibition, each measuring almost one metre (39 inches) in height, are drawn from the National Museums Scotland library collection. The majority have never been shown in public and have undergone years of conservation treatment in preparation for their inaugural display and tour.

This exhibition is a new interpretation of the making and significance of this incredible body of work and the story will be complemented by letters, taxidermy, manuscripts, photography and films. It will explore the book's historical context and consider why Audubon's artistic style was so ground-breaking. Lastly, it will question how this book came to influence natural sciences today and what we can learn from its legacy.

The exhibition will address some of the complexities and controversies surrounding the book's maker, John James Audubon. In addition, it will show how the intelligentsia in Edinburgh, Scotland influenced the book's formation and led to its publication following Audubon's rejection by the scientific community in Philadelphia, USA.

An important conservation thread runs throughout the exhibition and is highlighted at the end, raising awareness of our impact on nature and how bird populations have changed since the 19th century. Visitors should be left feeling motivated and inspired to protect the natural world.

Exhibition Aims

Story and Legacy

To tell a rounded story of the making of *Birds of America*, one of the rarest and most expensive books in the world, and to explore its legacy in natural sciences, the conservation movement and the human understanding of nature.

Controversies and Myths

To present the complexities and controversies around the achievements, claims and personality of John James Audubon, including those which are ethically challenging.

Edinburgh

To highlight Audubon's relationship with and experience in Edinburgh, and the role played by the city's scientific and artistic circles in the making of *Birds of America* and other publications.



Significance Today

To explore the significance of *Birds of America* today in the context of the current global twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change, and to encourage the visitor to be motivated to explore and protect the natural world.

National Museums Scotland Collection Showcase

To present the newly-conserved Audubon material held by National Museums Scotland, on display as a set for the first time.



1. *Bonaparte's fly catcher* – plate 5
2. *Brown Lark* – plate 10
3. *Prairie warbler* – plate 14

A Journey Through the Exhibition



1

Meet the Birds of America

Introducing the world's most expensive book and its artist John James Audubon. This section will immerse visitors in the sensory beauty of the *Birds of America* illustrations through an emotive film.



2

An Art and a Science

Placing *Birds of America* in its artistic and scientific context, examining the work of other bird illustrators and their influence on Audubon, and exploring why his work was so ground-breaking in comparison.

3

Audubon in Edinburgh

A chance to explore late-Enlightenment Edinburgh and learn how the buzzing city's intelligentsia played a role in the making of *Birds of America* – a sharp contrast to Audubon's rejection by the scientific community in Philadelphia, USA.



4

The Great Work: The Making of a Masterpiece

The technical and artistic achievements that helped Audubon realise his vision. A series of short films will enable visitors to explore the expertise of the artists, engravers and colourists behind the book he referred to as his 'Great Work.'



5

Naturalist or Showman?

Focusing on the critical reception to Audubon's work and exploring his importance in identifying and naming new species as well as the controversies around his science, some of which are still debated today.



6

Birds of the World

How some of the birds that Audubon depicted are faring today and underlining why the beauty and fragility of nature – as reflected in Audubon's 'Great Work' – is our responsibility to protect.

Exhibition Narrative



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1. *John James Audubon* by John Syme
© 2018 White House Historical Association
 2. *Great-footed Hawks* – plate 16 (detail)
- Opposite: *Baltimore Oriole* – plate 12

Meet the Birds of America

The exhibition will open by immersing visitors in the beauty of the *Birds of America* illustrations through an emotive film. This section will introduce *Birds of America* and John James Audubon. Visitors will be impressed by the ambition of the project and publication and intrigued by Audubon's complex character. Audubon was born in Haiti, the illegitimate son of a slave-trader and plantation owner and a chambermaid. He moved to France before settling in America at 18 years of age. A short film will address some of the myths and controversies that surround Audubon to this day.



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An Art and a Science

This section delves into the artistic and scientific context of the early 19th century when *Birds of America* was realised. This was a time which saw increasing engagement with nature in both the arts and sciences, fuelled by the Industrial Revolution and the Romantic movement.

Here, the objects and interpretation will explore what made Audubon unique. It will draw a clear contrast between the work of his predecessors and contemporaries allowing visitors to appreciate the ground-breaking approach taken by Audubon. Bird illustrations were often stiff and unnatural, unsurprising as they were often drawn from study skins or taxidermy in lifeless poses. Audubon depicted scenes from nature, pinning birds into lifelike poses which he had observed in life, and painted on the spot. This practice made Audubon's art uniquely lively, full of personality and drama, and truly exquisite in its detail.



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Audubon in Edinburgh, Scotland

This section will focus on Edinburgh's role in the realisation of *Birds of America*. In 1826, Audubon travelled to Edinburgh for the first time following his rejection by the scientific community in Philadelphia. At this time Edinburgh was a city buzzing with new scientific, philosophical and cultural ideas of the Enlightenment which Audubon will have experienced at first hand.

It was in Edinburgh where he began working with the Scottish artist, William Home Lizars, to engrave and start the process of publishing *Birds of America* as a four-volume folio, funded by subscribers. His diaries and letters offer intriguing details of his encounters, his impressions of the people he met, and their impact on him.

We encourage and will support hosting tour partners to include stories of Audubon's time spent in other areas of the world which may be of interest and relevance to their local audiences.



The Great Work: The Making of a Masterpiece

This section is the apex of the exhibition, with a bound facsimile edition of *Birds of America* as the centrepiece, showing the breath-taking scale of the book which measures 100 x 130 cm (approx. 51 x 39 inches) when open.

Distinct subsections around this central exhibit reveal the technical audacity of the project, the artistic techniques involved, and the practical implications of these. One example is Audubon's insistence that all illustrations would show the birds life size. This required enormous paper sheets, almost the largest available at the time. Even then, some species had to be depicted in bizarre contortions to

fit on the double elephant folio pages, each measuring 96 x 66 cm (approx. 38 x 26 inches).

Several short, engaging films are planned to showcase the expertise involved in realising Audubon's vision, such as engraving and aquatint. The section will close with a film about how conservators at Northumbria University (UK) and National Museums Scotland are providing insight into the paper and pigments used in *Birds of America*.





1. Fish Hawk – plate 81 (detail)

Opposite: Roscoe's Yellow-throat – plate 24



Roscoe's Yellowthroat

SYLVIA ROSCO.

Plant. Vierge. Swamp Oak.

Drawn from Nature and Published by John J. Audubon, F.R.S.E., M.W.S.

Engraved, Printed & Coloured by R. Havell and Son.

5

Naturalist or Showman?

This penultimate section explores Audubon's legacy as artist and scientist and his continuing relevance to nature conservation today.

Audubon was the first naturalist to depict birds in their habitats, showing their behaviour, diet, social groups, and raptors with their prey. He identified 25 species that were new to science, but he also made errors in identification. This section will include the controversy and criticism that Audubon sparked with his work, some of which is debated to this day.



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Birds of the World

The final section of the exhibition deals with Audubon's conservation legacy – raising awareness of man's impact on the natural world. It will take an uncompromising look at how the bird populations of America and around the world are faring today. Because of climate change, hunting, and habitat loss many of the species Audubon depicted are now highly vulnerable or extinct, such as the Carolina Parakeet.

Through the display of objects and a film presentation, visitors can explore how our natural world has changed since the 19th century. The exhibition will be brought to a close by taking a look at vital conservation work that is ongoing reminding visitors why the beauty and fragility of nature is worth protecting.

1. *Purple Finch* – plate 4 (detail)

2. *Carolina Parrot* – plate 26

Target Audience

Audubon's *Birds of America* is aimed at an adult audience interested in the key themes of art, birds, the natural world and conservation. We anticipate that it will have strong appeal to existing museum and exhibition visitors who will appreciate the rare opportunity of being able to see so many of these iconic plates together, in real life. Most copies of *Birds of America* are bound, and plates are rarely on public display, particularly in this quantity.

The exhibition will be an opportunity to bring in new audiences motivated by a love of birds and ornithology alongside those interested in the climate crisis. *Birds of America* has also been a source of influence for designers, frequently seen on social media, and will appeal to a younger audience with interest in design and interiors along with concern for the environment.

There is also an opportunity to attract museum-loving families interested in the natural world.





Exhibition Details

The exhibition will premiere at National Museums Scotland in Spring 2022

Size

The exhibition requires a minimum space of approximately 500–650 metres squared or 175–215 linear metres.

Objects

Approximately 40 original double-elephant folio framed prints, each measuring 113 x 83 cm (approx. 44 x 32 inches). Letters, notebooks, leaflets and mounted taxidermy birds will also be included. Light levels of 50 lux must be achieved.

Schedule

Available to tour from Summer 2022. Standard hire periods are three to four months. To protect and preserve these works on paper, the exhibition tour is available for a limited time only.

Publication

Audubon in Edinburgh by John Chalmers, published by National Museums Scotland is available to accompany the exhibition.



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1. *Great American Hen & Young* – plate 6 (detail)
2. *Blue Yellow back Warbler* – plate 15
3. *Yellow-breasted Warbler* – plate 23 (detail)

Included in the hire fee:

- Original framed plates from *Birds of America* and supporting objects
- Curation and exhibition concept by National Museums Scotland
- Exhibition Design Toolkit (including design concept, graphic templates, elevations and colour palettes)
- Administration and tour management
- Exhibition crating
- Exhibition text in English
- Audio visual software of the exhibition films
- Marketing Guidelines and Media Kit

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For more information contact

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Above image: *The Mocking Bird* – plate 21

Cover image: *Carolina Pigeon or Turtle Dove* – plate 17

We create inspiring and memorable visitor experiences. Through our touring exhibitions we offer our internationally important collection and diverse research to a broader range of audiences, revealing the many fascinating stories these objects tell.