



National
Museums
Scotland

A detailed illustration of two colorful parrots, likely Green-winged Parakeets, perched on a brown branch. The parrot in the foreground is shown in profile, facing right, with a bright yellow face and chest, a red forehead, and green wings and body. The second parrot is partially visible behind it, showing similar coloration. The background is plain white, highlighting the birds and the branch. The illustration is highly detailed, showing individual feathers and the texture of the branch.

Audubon's Birds of America

Available
to tour from
2023



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Introduction

This touring exhibition presents an exciting opportunity to display a beautiful selection of 46 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 on show to the 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, books, manuscripts, films and audio. 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 creator, 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.

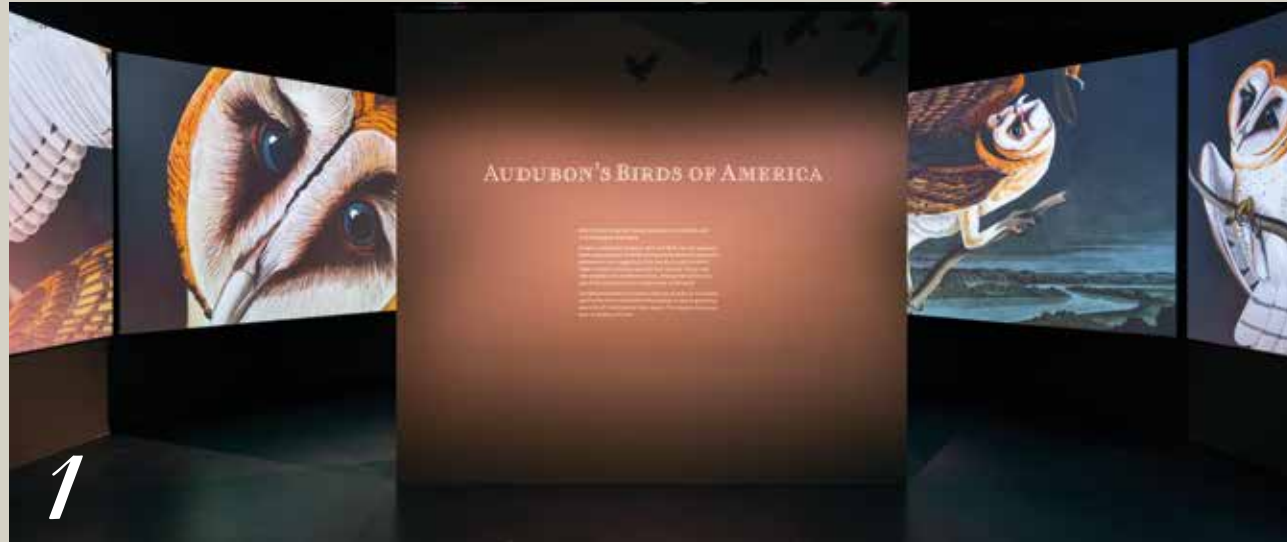
A FRAGILE BEAUTY

Audubon was working at a time when industry, expanding settlements and agriculture were disrupting the natural landscapes of North America. He saw first-hand the dramatic changes this brought about, becoming increasingly aware of the dangers to birds facing habitat degradation. He was among the first to write about these issues in his book *Ornithological Biography*.

After his death, many local conservation societies were established in his name. The Massachusetts Audubon Society was founded in 1896 by Harriet Hemenway and Mirna Hall to campaign against the mass slaughter of birds for their feathers, fashionable for use in millinery. Today, the National Audubon Society continues to protect wild birds across the Americas, and for many Audubon remains a powerful symbol of conservation.



A journey through the exhibition



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

Fascination for nature

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

Birds of America takes flight

Find out why Audubon was rejected by the American scientific community and follow his journey across the Atlantic to England and Scotland, where he was finally able to begin publishing *Birds of America*.

4

The Great Work

Discover the technical skill, artistic audacity and expert team it took to realise Audubon's vision for his 'Great Work.'



5

Scientist or charlatan?

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



6

A fragile beauty

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



Exhibition narrative



1

Meet the Birds of America

On entering the exhibition, visitors are immersed in the beauty of *Birds of America* through large projections of exquisite details from the prints, accompanied by music and birdsong. This section introduces *Birds of America* the book, and its creator John James Audubon. Visitors will be impressed by the ambition of the project and publication and intrigued by Audubon's complex character. Born in Haiti, Audubon was the illegitimate son of a chambermaid and a plantation owner who traded in enslaved people. He moved to France before settling in America at 18 years of age.

1. *John James Audubon* by John Syme
© 2018 White House Historical Association
 2. Immersive projections highlight the beauty of Audubon's work
- Opposite: *Baltimore oriole* – plate 12 (detail)



1

2



2

Fascination for nature

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.

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. This section includes a series of short films which explore Audubon's artistic development, and one which addresses the ethical complexities of his life.



1

12



2

3

Birds of America takes flight

In 1824, Audubon travelled to Philadelphia, then the intellectual centre of the United States, hoping to find support to publish his paintings of birds. However, Audubon had publicly criticised the celebrated naturalist Alexander Wilson, who would become known as 'the father of American ornithology'. Wilson was popular with the scientific community, whilst Audubon was viewed as an outsider, and was rejected by them.

Audubon realised he would have to look to Europe for support instead. In 1826, he arrived in England, and shortly afterwards decided to visit Edinburgh, Scotland. At this time, the city was buzzing with the scientific and philosophical ideas of the late Enlightenment. The city's elites, captivated by Audubon's adventurous 'American woodsman' persona and the romance of the far-off frontier, welcomed him with incredible warmth and enthusiasm. It was in Edinburgh, and later London, where he was finally able to make *Birds of America* a reality.

We encourage and will support hosting tour partners to adapt this section for their own audiences, whether broadening its focus or drawing out stories from Audubon's life that have local relevance. An optional film is available which introduces the cast of characters Audubon met in Edinburgh and explains how work on publishing *Birds of America* began.

1. *Prairie warbler* – plate 14 (detail)

2. *Purple grackle* – plate 7 (detail)

13



1

Northumbria University © 2019

The Great Work

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.

This section also reveals 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).

A short film gives a demonstration of the engraving process, enabling visitors to understand how Audubon's watercolour paintings were made into the printed book plates shown in the exhibition. A second film gives a glimpse behind the scenes at the National Museum of Scotland labs, where the plates underwent painstaking conservation before being put on display.

1. Conservation of Barn owl – plate 171

2. *Le petit caporal* – plate 75



2



1. Fish hawk – plate 81 (detail)

2. Roscoe's yellow-throat – plate 24

1



Roscoe's Yellow-Throat

SYLVIA ROSCO.

Plant. Alder. Swamp Oak.

Drawn from Nature and Engraved by John J. Audubon, F.R.S.E., M.C.S.

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

2

5

Scientist or charlatan?

This penultimate section explores Audubon's legacy as natural 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 examines the controversy and criticism that Audubon sparked with his work, some of which is debated to this day.



1



2

6

A fragile beauty

The final section of the exhibition deals with Audubon's conservation legacy – raising awareness of man's impact on the natural world. It takes an uncompromising look at how bird life is faring today. Because of hunting, habitat loss and now climate change, 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 closes with a thought-provoking and emotive film, considering the future of birds and reminding visitors that the beauty and fragility of nature must be protected.

1. Purple finch – plate 4 (detail)

2. Carolina parakeet – 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 person. 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 audiences with an interest in design and interiors, as well as nature and wellbeing.

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



Audubon and phenology

Phenology is the study of the timing of natural events, such as the flowering of plants, the migration of birds, and the appearance of insects. It is a branch of biology that is concerned with the study of the seasonal cycles of life. Audubon's *Birds of America* is a classic example of a work that has influenced the study of phenology. The illustrations in the book show birds in various seasonal states, such as nesting, migrating, and feeding. This has helped to establish a baseline for the timing of these events, which is essential for understanding the impact of climate change on the natural world.



Exhibition details

The exhibition premiered at National Museums Scotland from 11 February–8 May 2022

Size

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

Objects

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

Schedule

Available to tour from 2023. Standard hire periods are three to four months. To protect and preserve these works on paper, the exhibition is available to tour for a limited time only.

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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Above: Mocking bird – plate 21

Cover: Carolina pigeon or turtle dove (detail) – 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.