



Carolina parakeet, or Carolina parrot (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), from John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*, 1827–38

Rare bird

Showing the more complex and conflicting reality of John James Audubon

Audubon's extraordinary art has given him a unique status among naturalists. His dramatic representations of the birds and mammals of North America are instantly recognizable and are endlessly reproduced in different formats and media and on all manner of products. His most famous work, *The Birds of America*, is monumental on every statistical measure: the 435 life-sized, hand-coloured portraits of American birds were produced between 1827 and 1838 in a gigantic "double elephant folio" format (39.5" x 28.5"); Audubon said they cost him a total of \$115,640, a sum of over \$2 million at today's values, which he raised himself through an exhausting campaign of subscriptions, exhibitions and marketing; and in 2010, an original set of the complete work sold for \$11.5 million, the highest price ever paid at auction for a printed book. Audubon has subsequently given his name to countless parks, schools, streets, wildlife refuges and environmental organizations in the US, most notably the National Audubon Society, which has some 500 local chapters and over a million members spread throughout the country and describes its purposes as follows: "Our mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biodiversity".

Audubon seems, then, to have made a triumphant progress from wildlife artist to ecological icon. And that is indeed the reputation he sought to create, not least through the many moralizing remarks in his equally monumental written publications, in particular the 3,170-page *Ornithological Biography*, conceived as the prose companion to his *Birds of America*

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John James Audubon

THE MISSOURI RIVER JOURNALS
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and published in five volumes between 1831 and 1839. In this he commends to his readers his field observations, "which I have been able to gather in the course of a life chiefly spent in studying the birds of my native land, where I have had abundant opportunities of contemplating their manners, and of admiring the manifestations of the glorious perfections of their Omnipotent Creator"; and he goes on to admonish American farmers for killing so many thousands of crows every year, when they should be "less presumptuous in their stance before nature".

This picture of Audubon places him neatly at the head of a great tradition of early American environmental protest, which runs through Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* (1850), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864). Marsh summarized the concerns of this movement with the remark, "But man is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords", and Audubon seems to have anticipated just these concerns.

We have long known, however, that this was only a partial view of Audubon. The most famous portrait of him, painted by his sons John Woodhouse and Victor Gifford Audubon (1841), shows the great man sitting with his

rifle propped easily over one knee and ready for action. He had as good an eye for shooting as for painting, and both were passions for him. He was a tireless and enthusiastic hunter, way beyond any need to procure specimens for drawing or game for the pot, and his journal entries are full of eager tallies of the daily carnage, including the slaughter of countless buffalo and such other soon-to-be extinct species as the Carolina parakeet and the Passenger pigeon.

We also knew that the text we have of Audubon's very extensive journals is both partial and heavily edited. The originals would have been a treasure trove of eyewitness observations about the youthful United States and its wildernesses, comparable in historical importance, surely, to Thoreau's *Journal*; but many of them were lost in a huge fire in Manhattan in 1835, while most of the rest were also destroyed by fire, though this second time it was no accident. After preparing her edition of her grandfather's surviving papers, *Audubon and His Journals* (published in 1897, nearly fifty years after his death in 1851), Maria Rebecca Audubon burned the originals.

One reason Maria gave for this act of literary vandalism was to keep some painful and embarrassing family matters from public exposure; but in the case of the later journals she was evidently also rewriting material to represent Audubon as a "refined and cultured gentleman" and a visionary environmentalist more in tune with changing attitudes to hunting and conservation in the second half of the century. And we now learn from this splendid new edition of Audubon's last travelogue, *The Missouri River Journals* of 1843, edited by Daniel Patterson, just how extensive and

calculating was this attempt to control the public perception of Audubon's heritage. Patterson's volume is a model of its kind: meticulous, patient scholarship with some carefully balanced but revealing conclusions of great general interest. By diligent investigation Patterson discovered in a library archive some partial copies of the original *Missouri River Journals*, and in a detailed series of comparisons between the two texts, cross-checked against the journals of three of Audubon's travelling companions on this expedition, he has laid bare the scale of the deception. One example will illustrate. In Maria's 1897 edition, Audubon at one point reflects on "the immense numbers [of Buffalo] that are murdered almost daily on these boundless wastes called prairies"; and he concludes, "But this cannot last; even now there is a perceptible difference in the size of the herds, and before many years the Buffalo, like the Great Auk, will have disappeared; surely this should not be permitted". But the original 1843 text remarks only that so many Buffalo are still to be found, despite the numbers killed, and wholly omits the regretful "conclusion".

Patterson's new text presents us with a far more authentic Audubon. Patterson sees him as a complex figure – a man driven by, and at some level aware of, various strongly conflicting passions. Others just thought him hypocritical. A son of his great friend, the Scottish naturalist William MacGillivray, was on the point of shooting a nesting lapwing, when Audubon stopped him, protesting, "I hate to see birds shot when breeding". To which the young man replied, "By any person but yourself".