

THE GREAT CROW BLACKBIRD

A recently discovered painting by John J. Audubon

This small painting of Boat-tailed Grackles was acquired by my brother and me early in 1985. It was painted by John James Audubon at Philadelphia in the Spring of 1824. What makes this picture particularly important is that it is the very first Audubon painting from which a print was made, and thus it occupies a particularly interesting part of Audubon's life history. To the best of my knowledge the whereabouts of this picture of The Great Crow Blackbird, as it was often called in Audubon's day, has been unknown since the time it was published more than 160 years ago. Scott and I are delighted to have the opportunity to include this "lost" Audubon in our book along with our own painting of the Great-tailed Grackles, a closely related subspecies. Since this picture was created at a very critical period in Audubon's life, I would like to give an account of the painting's history and how it came to be his first published work.

In April of 1824 John James Audubon arrived in Philadelphia from Louisiana to take up residence in rooms which he rented at the corner of Fifth and Minor Streets. Philadelphia at that time was the leading city of science and learning as well as the most important publishing center in the country, and it was here that he hoped to find a publisher who might undertake the task of presenting his work to the

public. The tin boxes protecting his precious portfolios crammed with bird paintings were waiting for him. As he opened them to see if they had made the journey in good condition, he must have been wondering how he would be received in this cold northern city, the home of America's most famous Ornithologist, the late Alexander Wilson (1767 - 1813). Wilson's great publication, the nine-volume edition of his American Ornithology had been produced there between 1808 and 1814. At the time of Audubon's arrival at Philadelphia, the Wilson books had the reputation of being the finest books of American birds yet produced. In fact Wilson's American Ornithology was the only publication of its kind since Mark Catesby's illustrated work which had been produced in London almost a century before.

Audubon was thirty-nine years old. He was in the middle of his life and practically penniless. By most standards measuring success at that time, he was an abject failure, and he knew it. And yet he was convinced that his paintings were the best depictions of birds yet produced in this country, and he was certain that he had gained a new knowledge and fresh insights concerning the birds of America which would render much of Wilson's work obsolete. However, he was about to face a difficult obstacle, for the persons whom he wished to help him in his enterprise were the very men who had been responsible for publishing Alexander Wilson's work. Whether or not he expected to be well-received in this city we will probably never know, but he was naive if he thought that the men whose reputations and very fortunes were bound up with the Scottish naturalist's publication would be

open-minded and eager to become involved in a new ornithological project which would overshadow the work of Wilson.

In Audubon's day Philadelphia was a conservative city whose social and cultural life was controlled to a great extent by a quiet, firmly established oligarchy. It did not take long for Audubon to be made painfully aware that the scientific and literary leaders of the city with few exceptions were firmly committed to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology and that any newcomer, regardless of the merits of his work, would be greeted with indifference or outright hostility. Three of the most important men whose favor he had most wanted to cultivate decided to oppose him. The leader of this anti-Audubon group was George Ord, the close friend and biographer of Wilson and one of the executors of his estate. He was a gifted naturalist in his own right, and he was exceedingly proud of the fact that he had edited the final volume of Wilson's Ornithology. Another man who soon proved to be no friend was Alexander Lawson, the finest engraver in Philadelphia. He had worked intimately with Wilson to produce the hand-colored plates for all of the Wilson books, and his interest in the American Ornithology was more than an artistic one, for he also owned a percentage of all royalties obtained from the sales of that publication. The third hostile member of this establishment was Titian Peale, son of the Celebrated Charles Wilson Peale whose museum, housed on the second floor of Independence Hall, had been the most famous institution of its kind in America. Though he considered himself to be primarily a naturalist, the twenty-four year old Titian Peale was already

making a name for himself as a painter of natural history subjects. In that Spring of 1824, he was heavily engaged as the primary artist to do the illustrations for an important four-volume supplement to Wilson's publication. Although fifteen years younger than Audubon, Peale was already well-known, not only for being a member of a famous family but also because he had been to the far west, to the Rocky Mountains as a participant in the famous Long expedition of 1820. Finally, there was a fourth member of the pro-Wilson group who nevertheless admired Audubon's pictures and who tried in his own way to befriend the artist. His name was Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino and Musinano and nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Bonaparte was twenty-one years old when he met Audubon. It was he who was sponsoring the publication of the four volume Wilson supplement and underwriting its cost. Most of the Audubon biographies which deal with this important period of Audubon's career treat the young prince sympathetically as a man caught between two camps, between Audubon and the backers of Alexander Wilson. There is little doubt that Bonaparte was very impressed with Audubon's paintings and would probably have purchased his depictions of unknown species for inclusion in the supplement if it were not for fear of incurring the anger of Ord, Lawson and Peale. We will see, however, that his treatment of the temperamental bird artist ultimately proved less than noble.

It was quite natural for these people to be suspicious of any potential competition, especially from an outsider. As an artist,

Audubon had been coming into his own since his journey down the Mississippi River four years before, and any casual comparison of his work from this period with the paintings of Wilson and Peale quickly demonstrates the overwhelming superiority of Audubon's talent. Clearly this newcomer would prove to be a threat. George Ord made his hostility to Audubon and his work very clear from the moment of their first meeting. He considered Audubon to be no more than an undisciplined amateur. He was especially critical of the artist-naturalist's singular approach to the painting of birds shown pursuing their activities amidst botanical arrangements drawn from the bird's natural habitat. Flower and botanical depictions as well as the inclusion of landscapes for backgrounds were for Ord nothing more than distractions which violated the scientific purity of direct bird illustrations. Lawson and Peale were of the same mind. In fact Lawson went a step further to tell Audubon that his work was too soft and painterly to be printed correctly and that he should look to the examples created by Wilson and Peale and follow the practice of depicting birds in profile, preferably on a single branch uncluttered by floral decoration.

Charles Lucien Bonaparte, as has been noted, was more sympathetic to his fellow emigre' Frenchman, but the young man needed the good will of Ord, Lawson and Peale in order to accomplish his aim of publishing the Wilson supplement. He did not want to discourage Audubon. Although the bird artist's paintings might not display the scientific purity demanded by Wilson's followers, they did show a skill and a sophisti-

cation never seen before, and Audubon might be of use for future projects. In spite of the fact that Lawson had flatly stated to Bonaparte that he would not engage Audubon's work, the Prince believed that an Audubon illustration could indeed appear in the supplement if the artist would submit a picture conforming to Lawson's strict demands. He had such hopes in mind when he paid a visit to Audubon's room one day in May.

Audubon had been in Philadelphia for almost a month, and his fortunes were at their lowest ebb. He was not just penniless, but in debt. Though he had made some sincere friends in the city including the famous painter Thomas Sully as well as the naturalist Charles Alexander LeSeur, he had failed to interest the literary establishment of Philadelphia in his bird project. The small exhibition which he held to raise funds to pay his expenses had been poorly received, and he had not been able to attract a sufficient number of paying students to satisfy his growing list of creditors. While the Prince carefully inspected each picture as Audubon pulled them one by one from his portfolios, the bird artist must have been in such a state of mind to accept any proposal that might get the name of Audubon before the public.

A painting of Boat-tailed Grackles caught the Prince's eye. It was a picture which had been painted more than three years before at Bonnet Carré Church a few miles above New Orleans. Wilson had not illustrated this distinctly southern species. Would Mr. Audubon be interested in re-drawing the Grackles on a smaller piece of paper, placing the birds on a single branch and showing them in profile in

accordance with the format of Wilson's publication? For once, John James Audubon's pride did not intervene. He had little choice if he was to show anything for the long trip he had made to Philadelphia. Audubon replied that he would repaint the picture if Bonaparte and Lawson would agree to make no changes in the work once it was done. The Prince agreed. In the next few days, Audubon created the picture that you see reproduced here in this book. Though well-painted in its own right, it is clearly a departure from the standards that he had already established in his best work. The artist must have realized that what was about to be his first published painting, his publishing debut, so to speak, was in essence a compromise of all the qualities by which he had hoped to establish his reputation. His one hope, besides getting his name and work before the public in an important scientific publication, was that this small picture just might placate Lawson and even Ord. As far as Titian Peale was concerned, this little Grackle painting, though an artistic compromise, was still more beautifully drawn and painted than anything the young Philadelphian artist had done, and the public would see the difference.

But the public was never to see the painting of the Boat-tailed Grackles as Audubon had conceived it. What appeared in the Wilson supplement in 1825 had been greatly altered from his original painting. The female was clearly based on his painting, but Audubon's simple and elegant three-quarter view of the male had been replaced by a stiffly posed, thick-legged bird whose body in strict profile was pointed in the opposite direction, its head turned and looking over its shoulder.

This male Grackle was a different drawing altogether. The only thing that had not been significantly changed was the grackle egg, though it had been reversed in the engraving and was now in the lower left hand corner of the page. The speckles on the egg had been transferred to the print exactly as Audubon had painted them. It was the only direct correspondence between Audubon's original painting and the print as it appeared in the Bonaparte-Wilson supplement. To add further insult, a phrase was engraved in the lower left corner of the plate which read, "Drawn from Nature by John J. Audubon and A. Rider." Another artist had re-worked Audubon's painting and was sharing credit for it! I believe that Audubon was correct in thinking that this had been done behind his back after he had left the city for New York and had returned to Louisiana via the Ohio Valley and the Mississippi River. He was certain that the changes made in the print were a deliberate attempt to minimize his contribution to the supplement, small as it was, and he expressed his outrage in a letter to Bonaparte.

Bonaparte, in responding to Audubon's angry letter, told the artist that he (Audubon) had incorrectly recorded the measurements of the book page upon which the picture was to appear and because of this the grackle painting was an inch too long to be included in the book in its original format. Since Audubon was no longer in Philadelphia and since the Prince knew that he would resent it if Titian Peale were to alter the work, he employed a respected artist by the name of Alexander Rider for that purpose, and he had given credit in the plate to both men. Young Bonaparte's excuse has a hollow ring to it even today, especially

for one like me who is an artist with experience in dealing with design problems. Had the publishers wished to keep the Audubon painting relatively intact with a minimum of change, the head of the upper bird could have been traced and re-drawn showing the grackle's head turned and looking over its shoulder. The female could have been traced and moved toward the left side of the picture without altering her pose at all. The egg could also have been treated in the same manner, and all these changes would have been sufficient to make the picture the proper size. The fact that this was not done makes me believe that Lawson, Ord and Peale had no intention of allowing Bonaparte to submit a painting by an outsider and potential rival to be included in the supplement without taking some action to suppress it or minimize its impact. If the elegant lines of Audubon's painting had been altered with sensitivity and respect for their original beauty, the resulting printed image would certainly have shown the work of Wilson and Peale in a bad light.

John James Audubon's experience in Philadelphia in 1824 had a profound impact that was to influence him for the rest of his life. He had learned some very hard lessons in that city. The ill treatment which he received at the hands of the Wilson clique clearly proved that there was not yet room enough in America for two great ornithological publications. If he was to make a name for himself and get his work before the public, he would have to go to Europe where there were enlightened minds, established fortunes, and engravers of great skill capable of bringing to the world the kind of book that he was now formulating in his mind, a book that would surpass every ornithological

publication yet produced. Oddly enough, it was Charles Bonaparte and a Philadelphia printer named Fairman who first suggested to Audubon that he could get his work properly published only in Europe. Audubon asked Bonaparte if he would consider underwriting the cost of a trip to Europe to find a publisher, but the Prince refused.

In that year of 1825, Audubon's horizons must have looked bleak indeed. He had returned to Louisiana as a failure. He was without funds, a failed businessman, and a husband who could not by himself support his wife and two teenage sons. He had few friends among this country's scientific establishment, and he had no helpful contacts abroad. The publication of this Boat-tailed Grackle painting in the Bonaparte-Wilson supplement had proven a bitter disappointment. Thus, at the age of forty, he was facing an uncertain future which appeared to offer few prospects. Now that he had accepted the fact that his only hope lay in seeking his reputation abroad, how could he ever succeed in the sophisticated world of European science and letters when he could not even do so in his own adopted country? How could he, a self-trained bird artist with much ornithological experience but with no real scientific and literary training, be accepted by men of wealth and learning who were respected by educated people around the world? And, finally, how could he who was practically a pauper afford a trip to Europe or ever have a chance to finance the ambitious publication of his American birds?

Though he was plagued by all these questions and doubts, his faith in his own abilities as a painter was unshaken. He knew his paintings

were better than the pictures by artists with whom he was familiar. If he could only show his work to enlightened people who had no petty axes to grind and ultimately to the public through a well-printed publication, the beauty and the merits of his enterprise would prevail. His pride had been sorely wounded in Philadelphia, but it was exactly this pride which was the source of his ambition, his phenomenal drive. The rebuffs and disappointments which he received in that city filled him with a great resolve. What is equally important is that he was forced to focus upon a definite goal, and ideas which he had been harboring for years in the back of his mind concerning the publication of his work were given a terrible clarity and a sense of urgency which they had not possessed before. He was determined to overwhelm the Wilson books by publishing a monumental creation which would include all the known birds of America. And what is more -- each bird would be depicted life-size, from the largest crane to the smallest hummingbird. Such a work would have to be printed on Elephant Folio size pages measuring $26\frac{1}{2} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$ inches, an awesome format never before contemplated, and there would be more than four hundred reproductions!

He knew that he could defeat the petty men of Philadelphia by conquering the world of European science and letters, but in order to do this, he would have to acquire a more technical knowledge of ornithology. He would then be able to introduce himself with great confidence to people of learning as a man of science as well as art. And he had another asset. He would take advantage of the natural curiosity

which at that time existed in Europe concerning all things American. He would present himself as a man of the New World, a new kind of man, an enlightened man of the frontier -- an American woodsman! In adopting such a pose, he would be following in the footsteps of Benjamin Franklin who charmed Europe by appearing both sophisticated and simple at the same time. As a novelty, he would be sought after to deliver lectures or to serve as a dinner guest in the homes of the wealthy. In lecture halls and lyceums or in the great houses of persons of importance, he would have the opportunity to show his beautiful paintings and attract potential subscribers. In this way, he would be promoting himself and his work much in the same way as had Alexander Wilson nearly twenty years before in his travels throughout America. But Audubon would do it on a grander scale. In fact, he would do everything more grandly.

It took almost two years for Audubon and his wife, Lucy, to save enough money for him to make the trip to Europe and eventual fame. After a false start, he settled on a printer who was to handle the entire printing project and who was to establish his own fame in the bargain. His name was Robert Havell, and there in his London shop Audubon's The Birds of America was produced between 1827 and 1838. Though Audubon went on to fame and fortune, he also went on to further controversy. He was never able to settle his quarrels with George Ord and friends, and these seemed to become more bitter with the passing years. He remained cautious in his relations with Charles Bonaparte though the two men remained on relatively good terms. His treatment

in Philadelphia had given him an unforgettable initiation into the sometimes dog-eat-dog world of professional science and publishing. For the rest of his life, he fiercely guarded his professional reputation, and he often became quite niggardly about sharing credit with well-deserving collaborators. More projects lay ahead for Audubon until his death in 1851. His commentaries to his bird paintings, the famous Ornithological Biography, were published in London between 1831 and 1839, and in the United States with the help of his sons, Victor and John Woodhouse Audubon, he published the small octavo size edition of his birds with text (1840-1844) and his famous Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America (1845-1848). Both of these later works were produced in Philadelphia and issued with great success, a fact that must have brought much satisfaction to him in his later years.

When I look upon my wall and see John James Audubon's original painting of the Boat-tailed Grackles before me, so many thoughts go through my mind. This is the very picture which figures so prominently in the biographies which I have read about the man over the last thirty years. The story of this painting is the story of such a critical time in his life that it marked a momentous turning point when he was forced to focus his energies and ideas to make one great desperate bid for an opportunity to bring his work before the world. In the wake of all the fame and adulation of his later years down to the present day, this little Grackle picture has been all but forgotten. It is a great honor for Scott and me to be able to have this work and to have the opportunity to publish it in our own book for the first time as

Audubon created it and as he would have wanted it to be seen. I hope that, by doing so, we will add to the reader's enjoyment and in our own way be correcting an old wrong. It is a pleasing thought that this painting provides a very real link between our book and two of the most famous publications of American birds in the history of our country -- The American Ornithology of Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon's The Birds of America. I hope that Mr. Audubon would agree.