

A RECENTLY-DISCOVERED PAINTING OF BOAT-TAILED GRACKLES

BY JOHN JAMES AUDUBON

DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH

A pair of boat-tailed grackles by John James Audubon. 1824. Executed in watercolor, pastel, pen and ink, egg-white wash and pencil. 10 1/2 by 14 inches (full sheet on board). It was once framed, because mat browning is evident around the edge of the sheet. It is signed in an engraver's script, "Drawn by John James Audubon from Nature." This picture shows two adult birds perched on a bare branch. The lower bird (female) is shown in strict profile, recalling Audubon's drawing style of 1819 - 1821. The male bird is depicted in a three-quarter view with its tail turned slightly toward the viewer, evidently to accommodate the small size of the paper. The drawing style of this bird reflects Audubon's increasing skill and sophistication of the mid-1820s. A grackle egg is placed in the lower right corner of the sheet for scientific enhancement of the painting.

This picture is John James Audubon's first published bird painting. It appeared in 1825 as Plate 4 of Volume I of Charles Lucian Bonaparte's four-volume supplement to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology (1808-1814). Audubon's painting was re-drawn for publication by artist, Alexander Rider, who considerably altered Audubon's original concept and design, ostensibly to fit a smaller printing plate. The re-drawing by Rider is in the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. It is smaller than the Audubon painting by approximately one inch and provides a missing link between the original work and the final version in the supplement. In the printed plate, the male grackle is shown pointed in the opposite direction than in the Audubon original and is looking over its back. Rider's bird is shown in strict profile instead of Audubon's sophisticated three-quarter view, and the egg is reversed

in the plate and is placed in the lower left corner. The spotting pattern on the egg was carefully copied from the Audubon original. The fact, well-known to ornithologists, that no two grackle eggs are marked alike is additional convincing evidence that this work is the long-lost Audubon Original painting.

Authorities are divided as to whether or not this work bears an authentic Audubon signature. Although examples do exist of Audubon writing in an engraver's formal script, the present owners believe that this is not the artist's handwriting. The use of the phrase, "from nature", at the end of the inscription is very rare on Audubon works. In this case, such rarity is useful in corroborating the date of this grackle picture. In all 433 surviving original paintings completed by the artist for his Birds of America, only seven examples exist of this word order. Four of these paintings were completed in New Orleans in 1822, and the remaining three were painted in Philadelphia in April and May of 1824, which is the date assigned to this particular grackle work by Audubon's journal of that year. It is possible that the original sheet with Audubon's inscription and signature was trimmed at the printer's shop, and the legend was re-written by the engraver exactly as Audubon had originally worded it.

Of the three 1824 paintings, there is a picture of a pair of tree swallows which are depicted flying. In the lower left corner, placed somewhat incongruously in the sky, is a painting of a tree swallow egg -- the only such example of a scientifically included egg study in the original drawings for Birds of America with the possible exception of his illustration of the republican cliff swallow in which an egg was painted as a scientific example that was later integrated into a final composition. Since the tree swallow egg does not appear in Plate 100 of Audubon's great book, this picture may also have been painted for Bonaparte's supplement. It is known that Audubon delivered a paper on the migrating habits of swallows in August of 1824 at the Lyceum of Natural History in New York City, and it is quite possible that the tree swallows were painted for that occasion. His forthcoming

appearance before that scientific body probably provided the reason why he also re-worked his 1820 painting of the cliff swallows.

In spite of the fact that Audubon's original concept for the grackle painting which he gave to Bonaparte was altered by Alexander Rider, both men received credit for the work in the inscription printed on the plate. The painting now before us is the second of three versions which Audubon painted of these grackles. The first version is an unpublished painting dating from 1821 now in the collection of the New York Historical Society. The second version -- our picture -- dates from 1824. The third and final version, also in the collection of the New York Historical Society, was painted in 1832. It was published by Robert Havell as Plate 187 of Audubon's double elephant folio, Birds of America. Our 1824 painting, the Bonaparte-Audubon, is not only John James Audubon's first published bird painting, it is the only Audubon bird painting published in the artist's lifetime that remains in private hands. All but two of the original bird studies for Birds of America belong to the New York Historical Society. The two missing works -- the blue-gray gnatcatcher and the black-throated blue warbler -- are lost and presumed destroyed.

It was Audubon's 1824 experience in Philadelphia while making his unsuccessful first attempt to find a publisher and the callous manner in which this grackle painting was treated in publication that made him resolve to go to Europe to seek a master printer for his American birds. The story of Audubon in Philadelphia is an important part of every biography of the artist, but until the recent discovery of this picture, long thought to be either lost or destroyed since its appearance in the Bonaparte supplement 160 years ago, it has been impossible for researchers to know exactly what happened to the great bird artist's first published work and why it was altered in publication.

AUDUBON IN PHILADELPHIA

John James Audubon arrived in the city of brotherly love in early April of 1824 after a long and arduous journey from Louisiana by riverboat and by foot. Although he was later to claim otherwise, he had in fact come to see if he could gain official recognition for his paintings of birds and perhaps find financial backing and a publisher who might bring his work before the world. Philadelphia at that time was America's leading scientific and publishing center. The bird artist was nearly penniless as he walked the busy streets. He regretted that he had only a few letters of introduction by which he hoped to meet ~~a few of~~ the city's important art and science leaders. → At the age of 39, he could look back on his own life as a series of false starts and financial failures that had ended in the humiliation of bankruptcy and even a jail term for debt. His wife, Lucy, now supported the family as a governess and teacher on a Louisiana plantation, while his two young sons were farmed out as apprentices to Lucy's kin in Kentucky. The only good to highlight these years of failure was his growing skill at drawing and painting American birds in their natural habitats. Ever since he had made a momentous trip down the Mississippi River by flatboat in the winter of 1820-1821, he had been formulating an ambitious idea to depict all the known birds of North America and to publish them, life-size if possible. As he settled into his modest lodgings at the corner of Fifth and Minor Streets, he was at least confident that his bird studies had never been surpassed by any American artist and that the scientists and publishers of the city would certainly recognize his talents and embrace both him and his work.

With a letter of introduction, he soon called on Doctor James Mease, a close friend of his wife's family. Mease received the artist cordially and soon introduced him to many of the scientific leaders of the city, including Charles Lucian Bonaparte, the twenty-one-year-old nephew of Napoleon who had come to this country with his uncle (and

father-in-law), Joseph Bonaparte, the exiled King of Spain. Even at such a young age Charles Bonaparte, who still claimed his title of Prince of Musignano and Canino, was well-known in scientific circles in Europe and America as an important ornithological taxonomist. In fact, he was currently collaborating with several prominent Philadelphians to produce a four-volume supplement to the famous American Ornithology of the late Alexander Wilson.

Young Bonaparte immediately invited Audubon to come to the Academy of Natural Sciences to show his work to the membership. It was a membership filled with men who had been and still were staunch supporters of Wilson's publication. Alexander Wilson, the Scottish-born artist and naturalist had died in 1813, but his nine-volume American Ornithology, an important pioneering effort, was still the first and foremost work on American birds published in this country. The soon-to-be-published Bonaparte supplement had the valuable sponsorship of George Ord, a prominent academician, the executor of Wilson's estate and the naturalist's biographer. Another strong Bonaparte supporter was Alexander Lawson who had printed Wilson's work. Both these men had invested time and money and their prestige to insure Wilson's place in history as the "father of American Ornithology". Ord and Lawson owned rights to the Wilson publication and were likely to be ill-disposed toward any outsider whose bird paintings might rival or surpass the work of Wilson. The forthcoming Bonaparte supplement, with scientific commentary by the Prince and with hand-colored plates engraved by Lawson from drawings by Titian Peale and Alexander Rider, would insure the primacy of the American Ornithology by adding a hundred newly-discovered birds to the original Wilson publication.

These men and their friends were in the audience assembled at the Academy that April afternoon as Audubon showed his portfolios of bird paintings and demonstrated his unique method of depicting birds. His presentation was not a success. While the nervous bird artist found many who were sympathetic, he soon experienced hostility

from the supporters of Wilson. Self-conscious about his indifferent education and his lack of scientific credentials, Audubon was nevertheless proud of his paintings, and he tactlessly pointed out their superiority to Wilson's work. In the days that followed, Audubon was to be made painfully aware that his lack of tact had permanently alienated most of the Wilson people and had created two powerful enemies in George Ord and Alexander Lawson. Charles Bonaparte at least appeared to be the exception. The Prince saw merit in his fellow Frenchman's pictures, and he perceived that the artist might be of use for future projects. Bonaparte knew that he would have to remain cautious in his support of Audubon to avoid angering those whose help he needed to publish his Wilson supplement. Ord's dislike of Audubon soon developed into a personal animosity. With a scathing wit, he belittled the artist as a country bumpkin whose paintings were artificial and melodramatic. He was especially critical of Audubon's romanticized bird poses and the unnecessary confusion of his floral backgrounds. Such "decorations" lacked any semblance of scientific purity. Lawson agreed and went further to declare that Audubon's birds were incorrectly drawn and too softly painted for etching or engraving. When Bonaparte spoke up for the newcomer, saying that he would purchase any of Audubon's paintings of new species and Lawson would have to publish them, the outspoken printer answered, "You may buy them, but I will not engrave them."

In spite of the support of a few newly-made friends who appreciated his talents, Audubon was simply not able to overcome the barriers of opposition erected by George Ord and friends. Ord successfully blocked Audubon's election to membership in the Academy, and this was a critical blow to his attempts to gain scientific acceptance. The artist must have felt that he had been very naive if he thought the beauty of his paintings, so obvious to him, would alone be sufficient to gain his entrance into the Philadelphia science and publishing establishment. By May it was apparent that his trip to Philadelphia was a big disappointment. He had not been able to raise enough money from a small

exhibition of his bird paintings or to find enough pupils to pay for a prolonged stay in Philadelphia. Sufficiently rebuffed to know that he would never get his birds published in Philadelphia, Audubon was preparing to leave for New York when Bonaparte visited him at his lodging. He had come to make an offer. If the artist would paint a simplified and scientifically acceptable picture of a new species not yet depicted for the supplement, the Prince would persuade Lawson somehow to engrave the work. Audubon could at least make a modest publishing debut in a major scientific publication, and such an appearance would be an important aid toward gaining a much needed scientific credibility. Audubon agreed.

The Prince thumbed through the paintings in Audubon's portfolio and pulled out a watercolor showing a pair of boat-tailed grackles. The artist had painted this work in January 1821 on a flatboat moored near Bonnet Carre Church just above New Orleans. That painting depicted two adult grackles on a branch of Spanish oak with hanging strands of Spanish moss, the female perched above the glossy, bluish-black male. Audubon agreed to redraw the birds on a smaller piece of paper, placing the birds on a single branch and showing them in profile in accordance with the format of the supplement. The artist took special care to make the re-drawing superior to the first study. To enhance the scientific aura of the new painting, he added an illustration of a grackle egg to the lower right hand corner of the page. When this new version was completed a few days later, Audubon presented it to Bonaparte with a request that the picture not be further altered. The Prince promised that no one would touch the design.

As Audubon left for New York, he probably worried whether or not the Prince would be allowed to keep his promise. He also knew he had no other choice but to take a chance on Bonaparte's sincerity if the public in America was ever going to have an opportunity to compare the beauty of his unique drawing style to the unsophisticated renderings of Wilson, Peale and Rider. Bonaparte was not to keep his promise. He eventually gave in to pressure from Ord and Lawson, who were

determined that no work by Audubon be allowed to overshadow the work of the supplement's artists or in any way challenge the authority of Wilson. Even in its simplified version, Audubon's grackles still displayed a superiority that would be obvious to the public. Alexander Rider was employed to completely re-draw the grackles to make them stylistically compatible with the other plates in the forthcoming book. Rider re-drew the female with lines that were close to Audubon's original drawing, but the male grackle was a new bird altogether. In his drawing, Rider reversed the male's direction and turned its head so that it was looking over its back. He also placed the grackle egg on the other side of the sheet. However, the egg's markings were recorded faithfully from the Audubon painting.

When Audubon saw the plate as it appeared in the Bonaparte supplement, he was furious. Bonaparte tried to explain that the original painting had been an inch too large for the plate size upon which it was to be engraved, and Rider had been called in to make the necessary alterations to make Audubon's design fit. Since Audubon had gone on to New York and was unavailable to do the work, Bonaparte was forced to rely on Rider's discretion. Credit for the plate was given to both men. The Prince declared that the finished plate was one of the most handsome in the book. Audubon made several angry references to this incident in later years, but until the Bonaparte-Audubon painting was re-discovered recently, researchers and historians have had to guess about the alterations and why they so angered the great bird artist. It should be obvious today when looking at Audubon's original grackles for the supplement that the whole composition could have been reduced to proper size by only turning the male's head so that it would be looking over its back. The female bird could be moved an inch to the viewer's left, and the egg could be moved to the left side of the sheet. Most of Audubon's unique outlines would have been preserved intact -- if that had been the publishers' aim. Audubon well understood this treatment for the calculated insult that it was intended to be, for it implied to the world that his own work had to be "corrected" by a

more skilled hand to make it scientifically appropriate for publication. Such re-working also insured that, for the time being, Audubon's true talent would be kept from view.

This message from Ord and Lawson and, to some extent, from Charles Bonaparte was unambiguous to Audubon. Never had he felt more like an outsider in his adopted country. Even the printer, Fairman, who was sympathetic to his work had to agree with Bonaparte that it would be better for Audubon to seek a printer in Europe where there were facilities and skilled artisans capable of publishing his birds life-size. When Audubon had asked Bonaparte if he would finance such a trip, the Prince made excuses and backed off. The manner in which his painting of boat-tailed grackles had been handled and the way he had been received in Philadelphia convinced him that his only hope lay in Europe. In 1826, with money from his wife's savings, he sailed for England. After a rather fitful start with one publisher, he finally met Robert Havell of London, whose incomparable printing skills were to bring the Birds of America into being. This monumental undertaking required eleven years of unceasing labor, resulting in one of the most spectacular publications in history. It made both Audubon and Havell famous. Even his enemies in Philadelphia eventually had to acknowledge that his book was an incomparable publishing feat.

There is an interesting postscript to this story. The Bonaparte-Audubon grackle painting and his Philadelphia antagonists were very much on his mind when, in 1832, at Charleston, South Carolina, he undertook a third water-color of the boat-tailed grackles, the version which became Plate 187 of Birds of America. Carole Slatkin, Assistant Director of the New York Historical Society which owns the largest collection of Audubon original paintings in the world, has offered some unique observations about Audubon's thinking as he created this third and final version of the boat-tailed grackles. She writes that "Audubon relied not at all on his earlier versions (except to place them in an oak tree with Spanish moss) but actually recreated in an infinitely more accomplished image the Lawson engraving (the adulterated

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version of Audubon's 1824 painting). He used the position of the male grackle in the Rider/Lawson engraving for a much more finely executed female complete with closed beak as in the engraving, but unlike either of the earlier versions, and turned Lawson's open-beaked female into a calling male, reversing the position and adding the detail of the foot lifted spontaneously off the branch. He thus amply displayed his surpassing mastery over Lawson's engraved work."

It has already been noted that the painting before us is Audubon's first published bird painting. (A sketch of a ruffed grouse was also printed on a New Jersey bank-note in 1825.) And the Bonaparte-Audubon grackles of 1824 is the only Audubon bird painting published in the artist's lifetime that remains in private hands. All but two of the original paintings executed for Birds of America now belong to the New York Historical Society. The two missing works -- the blue-gray gnatcatcher and the black-throated blue warbler -- are lost and presumed destroyed. Carole Slatkin has also observed that "the New York Historical Society does not own three versions of any other Audubon watercolor -- not to mention one that figured so prominently in Audubon's career and in the playing out of American nineteenth century natural history -- and it is a remarkable experience to observe the phenomenon."