



CATTLE EGRETS



ZONE-TAILED HAWK

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

TEXT BY SUSAN FREUDENHEIM/PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB WHARTON

The Gentling brothers' avian artistry

Many people have studied the birds of Texas, and many artists have painted them. In the course of a year, more than 540 species can be sighted within the vast borders of this state. Texas' position midway between the Atlantic and Pacific seaboards and at the gateway to the tropics in Mexico makes it a stopping ground for multitudes of migrating birds, both exotic and common; and because of its variety of terrain, Texas is a year-round home for a host of others.

To honor both the sesquicentennial of Texas' independence and the bicentennial of the birth of the greatest bird painter of all time, John James Audubon (1785-1851), Fort Worth artists Stuart and Scott Gentling have published *Of Birds and Texas*. A monumental portfolio of offset color lithographic prints from their watercolor paintings of birds, this joint project has been in the works for eight years and will be completed in December.



GREAT-TAILED GRACKLES



PIGEON HAWKS



BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

Of the 50 plates, 40 are carefully detailed paintings of the twin artists' favorite birds shown in their natural habitats. Texas author John Graves has written a major essay as accompanying text, an extraordinarily eloquent journal of his life with birds titled "Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser." These contributions also are accompanied by a short foreword by Harry Tennison, sportsman, conservationist and family friend. His anecdotal history brings the artists to life.

With every turn of the great imperial folio pages (they are each an impressive 22x28 inches), it becomes clear that this was a labor of love. And as Stuart is quick to point out, the limited-edition book (525 copies) has been his dream since 1966, although it took him more than a decade to persuade his twin brother to collaborate.

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Both are conservative artists who work in a very detailed, naturalistic style, and Stuart knew that together they could create a product that would be more than just the sum of two artists' work. The nature of the collaboration is remarkable to anyone who knows the kind of ego that governs artistic integrity; in this case Stuart and Scott worked together on almost every aspect of the creative side of the book, dividing their labors only for efficiency. Stuart's greater knowledge of the life and habits of birds made him the logical choice to execute initial outline drawings for each of the bird paintings, while Scott, in almost every case, made the final paintings. But the work of each artist is almost impossible to differentiate from the other's.

Both artists have added written commentaries for each picture, and Stuart has contributed a lengthy introduction. As twins, these two have developed a unique bond that overcomes competition. When asked about the differences in their approaches, Scott replies immediately: "That's easy, I'm better than he is." And Stuart just laughs, and agrees.

The two artists are best known for their landscapes, still lifes and, in Scott's case, portraits. Neither artist is a scientific naturalist, and neither really fits in to the extremely small but highly specialized clique of bird painters that travel the globe for documentary studies. Stuart, quite simply, loves birds, and both artists have been Audubon enthusiasts since their teens.

In fact, in 1956, at age 15, a time when they were as interested in pranks and science projects as anything else, Scott and Stuart discovered a portfolio of Audubon prints at the Fort Worth Children's Museum (now the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History), and the two began to make studies of their own from the master's work and from life. "I began my career by painting copies of Audubon prints," says Scott. "I could easily sell them to my mother's friends, but eventually I had a great desire to do some originals for myself.

"In fact, Stuart drew the first bird I ever painted. But I only painted birds

then for a short time. And it was years before I would again, when Stuart persuaded me to do this project."

Once committed, Scott has hardly been reluctant. Both brothers are justifiably proud of the book; each has found ways to personalize the product, incorporating aspects of their own ideas and avoiding the look of a scientific rendition. "My first idea was to paint them against white backgrounds," says Stuart, "but Scott convinced me that he would only work on it if they could be seen in the landscape." That decision was critical, since it is the situation of the birds in trees, against skies, on the ground and in their nests that makes the images so striking.

The book includes an image of three orange-and-black Lichtenstein's orioles shown in silhouette against the leaves of a tree and the clouds of the sky. Looking beyond the accuracy of the birds' images, the triangular composition painted in a shallow foreground area is reminiscent of the abstraction of Japanese art. Science is complemented by an extraordinary sense of design, making the artistic side of the work almost more striking than the documentary aspects.

Another image, this one of a solo snow goose, shows the bird twisting his neck to look back behind him. Far more interesting than a straightforward pose that would show the bird head-on or in uncontrived silhouette, this image helps to capture not only an interesting angle, but also some of the character of the creature.

There is no attempt to be comprehensive in the book; sometimes both male and female are shown, sometimes only one. All such decisions are subject to the artists' interests. And while the landscapes are always accurate in the sense that they depict the natural habitat of each of the birds—at least during their migratory stay in this state—many are invented from the artists' memories.

At 42, after three decades of painting, Scott says that his visual memory is so strong that he can paint landscapes without needing to work outdoors. In many instances, Stuart has drawn the bird against a blank background, leaving Scott free to invent: "When I see a pose of a bird," Scott says, "it's often

so vivid for me that I can immediately conjure up a landscape to go with it. I can feel how the wind is carrying it, or how the branches support it. And I remember seeing the bird, sometimes years before.

"I'm not really a naturalist," Scott continues. "I go for an emotional and visual tone in my pictures. It's almost impossible for me to explain what I mean by that with words, but I always know what it is when I'm working. Painting is easy for me, but getting that tone in the work is really hard. That's the art. I think it comes close to music. Music is my absolute obsession and it's always playing when I work."

"In a way this is not just a bird book," Stuart adds. "It's almost like a diary. That's why we called it *Of Birds and Texas*, to show that it's our view of what we like."

The book also contains some extras; 10 additional prints of paintings done individually by both Scott and Stuart provide background on the artists' work. "Scott and I are really not wildlife painters and we aren't planning to make a career of this, so we thought it important to show some of the other work we do," Stuart says. Furthermore, Stuart has written a lengthy introduction that explains the history of the project and their attachment to Audubon's work.

In addition, to add a touch of sincere sentiment, they have included a portrait of Audubon by Scott as well as a reproduction of one of his earliest, previously undocumented paintings. This small painting of boat-tailed grackles was painted by Audubon in Philadelphia in 1824 and was published in a revised form (to the artist's horror) in Charles Lucien Bonaparte's supplement to Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*. Never published in its original form, the painting was considered lost until it was discovered by the Gentlings in a New England shop. Its inclusion here sets the tone for the elements of scholarship, personal enthusiasm and historical perspective that have governed this project. □

Of Birds and Texas can be purchased for \$2,500 from Ralph Carr, 902 Boland St., Fort Worth 76107. Telephone: (817) 332-7059.