

A lavish look at birds of Texas

OF BIRDS AND TEXAS

By Scott and Stuart Gentling (Ralph Carr, 902 Boland St., Fort Worth, Tx 76107, \$2,500)

By Lee Milazzo

Scott and Stuart Gentling's *Of Birds and Texas* probably is the most magnificent book ever produced in Texas.

A strong statement? Yes, but just wait until you see this enormous elephant folio — the pages measure 22-by-24 inches — of 10 sumptuous plates of Texas landscapes and 40 gorgeous renderings of Texas birds, plus notes by the artists and an essay by John Graves, all housed in a huge, sturdy buckram box that weighs at least 50 pounds. Designed and handprinted by master typographers David and William R. Holman (the prints were reproduced by offset lithography), this literal descendant of Audubon's *Birds of America* surely is destined to become a classic of ornithology and fine printing.

Audubon, in fact, is present in *Of Birds and Texas* in several ways. Stuart Gentling attributes his fasci-

nation with birds to his discovery of a copy of the naturalist's book in the library of the Fort Worth Children's Museum. Shortly thereafter, the twin brothers obtained their drivers' licenses and immediately borrowed the family station wagon to retrace Audubon's travels from Pennsylvania to Louisiana (incidentally, they bought their first original Audubon prints in Natchez, Miss.). Many years later, the Gentlings obtained an original watercolor, "The Great Crow Blackbird," which Audubon painted in 1824 and presented to Napoleon's nephew, himself an important ornithologist. This was the first and only Audubon print published in America during the artist's life, and his disappointment at its reception — the engraver changed Audubon's original and even gave himself half credit for it — prompted him to move to Europe. That painting, long thought to be lost, is here reproduced in unaltered form for the first time, as is Audubon's manuscript on the Red-shouldered Hawk.

John Graves' refreshing "Recol-

lections of a Texas Bird Glimpser" is an autobiographical account of his off-and-on interest in birds. Describing himself as a "rank amateur" at birding, Graves even admits that he has been a hunter, and emphasizing "the ritual's rightness," he suggests that real hunters are "closer to natural things than many nature-lovers I've known."

Today, of course, Graves is content to observe birds from his "restricted rock pile" outside Fort Worth: the thousands of gulls flying in raucous disorganized waves, white pelicans "in tight, high, slow-flapping flocks," and "tall whirlpools of silent hawks." And who could disagree with Graves' belief that in the sight of the November migrations of birds "there is exultation that such things still exist in our cramped and deadly times, for however long they may last."

The heart of the book, though, remains the Gentlings' superb portraits of Texas birds. Mere words cannot begin to describe the accuracy and delicacy of their attention to form, or the brilliance and

subtlety of their colors. It is impossible to pick favorites, but just note the Turkey Vulture, which "stands in a symbolic way for the wide open spaces for which Texas is famous"; the Cardinal, long a Texas favorite; the Cattle Egret, a migrant from Africa now common in Texas usually on the backs of cattle and one of the few bird species on the increase; the American Oystercatcher, whose appearance is so striking that it appears to have been carved out of wood and then painted in bold blacks, browns and whites; the Red-shouldered Hawk, which Audubon depicted no less than three times; the rare Red-billed pigeon; the tiny Flammulated Owl; the familiar Roadrunner; and the imperious Wild Turkey, which Ben Franklin preferred as the symbol of the United States (the Gentlings agree).

Did I say that *Of Birds and Texas* probably is the most magnificent book ever produced in Texas? Change that *probably* to *definitely*.

Lee Milazzo is book critic for The Dallas Morning News.



Young Wild Turkey Watercolor 29½"X38½"
by
Scott Gentling