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OF BIRDS AND TEXAS

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Of Birds and Texas

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The first impact the book makes is its size. It arrives in a heavy-duty cardboard encasement six inches thick and two feet wide by three feet long. Weighing nearly 50 pounds it is almost too large and too heavy for one person to transport. The linen-covered clam shell box slides out of its encasement, cushioned at its corners and at several strategic locations with molded styrofoam attached to cardboard sheets. The ingenuity and meticulousness of the design of this protective padding only hints at the attention to detail and superlative quality of the art that the viewer is about to behold.

Inside the clam shell box are the contents of a remarkable, new Texas publication by Scott and Stuart Gentling and John Graves entitled *Of Birds and Texas*. The work consists of an important new essay by John Graves, one of Texas' best writers, and 50 exquisitely



beautiful offset color lithographs of the work of Scott and Stuart Gentling in two linen-covered portfolios. Of the 50 plates, 10 are landscapes of Texas and the remaining 40 are of birds either native or migratory to Texas. The text and plates are printed in the Great Imperial Folio size of 22 x 28 inch pages. The pages are unbound and printed on acid-free Mohawk super-fine paper by David Holman at the Wind River Press in Austin, Texas. This monumental volume is limited in edition to 500 copies for sale and 25 artist copies. Each copy is numbered and signed on its colophon

page by the Gentlings and by Graves. Each print in the book is numbered consistently with the colophon page and is signed by one or both of the Gentlings.

Upon opening the box, the viewer is again impressed by the hugeness of the work. Now the clam shell box



"I had several very tempting opportunities to have the book published elsewhere by widely recognized publishers, but it has always been my aim to have this book produced within Texas, entirely by Texas artists and craftsmen," stated Stuart Gentling (left). He and his brother, Scott (right), pose with their masterpiece, *Of Birds and Texas*.

is more than twice its original size and it requires a sturdy table for unfettered viewing. Two pages of detailed instructions guide one's examination. As each page is viewed or read, that page is slid to the left on top of the previous page. This feels awkward at first, but it is this brilliant design feature that keeps the large pages free of bends or creases. As a person finishes each portfolio, he or she simply slides the pages back in reverse order. The right-hand half of the clam shell box is so well-designed that it aligns the pages perfectly flush within their portfolio. The box and the portfolios are designed and handcrafted by Austin bookbinder and conservator Craig Jensen, a master craftsman at his art. All the materials used by Jensen are acid-free, archival quality.

Portfolio One begins with the Gentling brothers' dedication and a foreword by Harry Tennison, world sportsman, conservationist, and currently president of Game Conservation International. Stuart and Scott dedicate the entire project to John James Audubon. Within this dedication the viewer encounters the first hint of the beauty of the plates to come, Scott Gentling's portrait of Audubon. The small portrait, less than 6 inches tall on a page 28 inches tall, literally jumps off the paper. Audubon's keen and piercing blue eyes seem happy, appreciative, and certain that the observer will be deeply moved by the beauty that is to follow. The text of the dedication, in an informal and personal way, tells us that the twin brothers' inspiration for art careers began in their teens when they discovered an Audubon book at the Fort Worth Children's Museum (now the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History). The two began to make studies of their own from Audubon's work and from life and nature around them. The theme of Audubon is strong throughout the entire work. First in influence, then in style, and finally in two reproductions of Audubon's work. (More on these in the descriptions of Portfolio Two.)

The inspiration for the book came in 1966, but actual work on it did not begin until 10 years later. It took Stuart, who conceived the project, that long to convince Scott to join him. At that point a remarkable collaborative effort began. An example: Stuart conceived the paintings similar to the majority of Audubon's paintings with birds perched on or within foreground detail but with white backgrounds. Scott persuaded his brother to forego the white and replace it with detailed backgrounds. In several instances Scott added the backgrounds

after Stuart had painted the birds and the foreground! The brothers worked eight years on the plates.

In Portfolio One, the tone for the excellent writing in the book is set by John Graves' essay "Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser." Graves is the author of *Goodbye to a River* of which A.C. Greene, author of *50 Best Books On Texas*, says "I rank it the finest piece of Texas writing ever done." Graves calls himself a "glimpser" because he seems to feel that his interest in birds has never amounted to serious scholarship. However, as is characteristic of his style, Graves is too modest, because this work adds to his already important body of insightful essays.

Within Portfolio One are 10 landscapes which show the artists' dry brush watercolor techniques in a style by which they are best known. Whether it be Plate I's sublime use of light and shadow on a mission door or Plate IX's haunting, voodoo images of scarecrows made by the superstitious black people of Floyd Valley, East Texas, all 10 landscapes exquisitely demonstrate the Gentling's artistry.

Then, in Portfolio Two, we come to the heart and soul of this magnificent undertaking, the 40 bird plates. The first plate is the American Turkey Vulture, which fills the plate and spills out into the margins of the huge page. Once again the immense size is apparent. In fact, the birds in 39 of the 40 plates are depicted life-size. Not all the avian subjects of these 39 plates are as immense as the vulture, but they are all painted in precise proportion to their environment. The Mourning Dove in Plate XXXI is perfectly sized in relationship to the Glen Rose dinosaur track, as is the Purple Gallinule to its "pedestal" in Plate XVII, and as are the House Wrens to the boots in Plate XXII.

Because of Texas' geographic position along three major migratory routes of many North American birds, Roger Tory Peterson reports that three-quarters of all known bird species between Mexico and Canada take up at least temporary residence in Texas. The Gentling brothers have used this fact to their advantage by depicting numerous unusual migratory birds. The American Woodcock, the Bufflehead Duck, Rivoli's Hummingbird, and the Surf Scoter are all migratory birds. However, the Gentlings do not ignore Texas' well-known indigenous species such as the Mockingbird, the Scissor Tailed Flycatcher, the Roadrunner, and the Cattle Egret. While this is not a scientific book and is not com-

prehensive in species or gender, a broad scale of birds (both male and female) is represented.

The style of the brothers is reminiscent of Audubon's realistically painted birds in stylized positions. This is what Stuart calls "romantic realism" and is evident through the work. The painting of the Black Crowned Night Heron shows this style perfectly. The heron sits high above the Brazos River on a perch in the soft but luminous night of a full moon. His wings are cocked as if something has disturbed him and in the next moment he will fly away. In a truly realistic portrait, we would not be able to see all its coloration and the detailed feathers of its underside because the bird is silhouetted against the full moon.

A divergence from Audubon's style is the use of detailed backgrounds. In Plate XVI, the Wild Turkey, we witness the only bird not life-size. That hardly matters because we are drawn by the beauty, the luminescence of the bird's wing feathers. The background captivates us. The bird

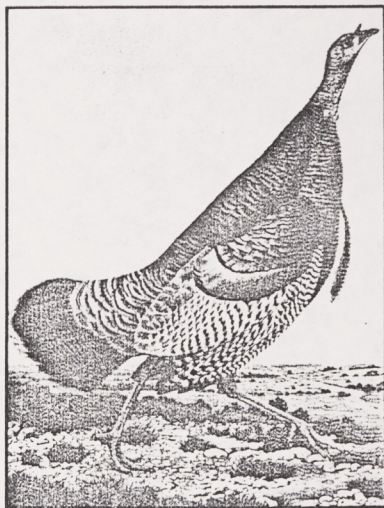


Plate XVI
Wild Turkey



Plate XI
Turkey Vulture

stands in the middle of a patch of limestone pebbles, so real, so detailed that one can almost feel them and see the dust that would remain on our hands if we could reach down for a handful and let the pebbles sift through our fingers. The vegetation is accurately the parched grass of the Hill Country during the summer. A nearby dirt road meanders its way to the horizon through an occasional scrub oak and cedars. Then as one's eyes approach the horizon the yellow grasses turn to a purplish line of the low rolling hills where the Hill Country meets the plains. It is the landscapes that bind the work together, brand it Texan, and give it that superlative depth that will entertain observers after dozens of viewings.

In addition to being inspired by Audubon and influenced by his works, *Of Birds and Texas* makes a significant contribution to Audubon scholarship. First, the commentary for Plate XXVII, the Red-shouldered Hawk, is a facsimile reproduction of the first page of a manuscript Audubon wrote on

this species for his *Ornithological Biography* (Winter 1830), his published commentaries for his *Birds of America* (1826-1837). This original manuscript was written in 1830 as the text for Audubon's own portrait of the Red-shouldered Hawk. The unedited manuscript is published in *Of Birds And Texas* for the first time. It leaves Audubon's spelling, punctuation, and charming syntax intact and thus it provides a unique window into the great bird painter's thinking processes.

Most importantly, on page 87, published for the first time in its unaltered state, is Audubon's painting of a male and female Boat-tailed Grackle. Prior to the Gentlings' discovery, this Audubon painting had been dubbed a "lost Audubon." In 1824, Audubon journeyed to Philadelphia to locate a publisher for his growing body of work. Unfortunately the Philadelphia scientific and publishing communities were too focused on the then upcoming supplement to Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1808-1814) by Charles Lucien Bonaparte. Audubon's only success was the inclusion of a single, greatly altered version of the grackles in Plate IV in Volume One of Bonaparte's supplement. Therefore in its original form the plate of the Boat-tailed Grackles has never been published. Bonaparte's alteration and Audubon's cold reception at the hands of everyone in Philadelphia made him resolve to go to Europe to find a publisher for his *Birds of America*.

The story of how the Gentlings acquired the work and authenticated it is one of the most interesting and exciting parts of their personal commentary. Briefly, Stuart noticed this small painting for sale in an art dealer's catalog in January 1985. At that time no one could prove it was an Audubon work. However, based on clues from the catalog and from a conversation with the dealer, Stuart surmised that this was indeed a lost Audubon and he immediately purchased it. Since that time, the New York State Historical Society (the leading authority on Audubon painting) authenticated the work. Until May 1987, the Gentlings owned the only Audubon original bird painting published in the artist's lifetime. On May 28, the watercolor was auctioned at Sotheby's in New York for \$253,000.

What has been created by Scott Gentling, Stuart Gentling, John Graves, Craig Jensen, and David Holman is a unique collaborative effort that has resulted in a new Texas masterpiece. If San Marcos book collector Al Lowman ever gets around to writing the *Printing Arts in Texas II*, he will surely

have to rank *Of Birds And Texas* at least equal to *The King Ranch* as "one of the most important books ever published in Texas" if not the most important one. In a year in which our state celebrated its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, amidst many superficial sesquicentennial souvenirs, *Of Birds And Texas* is an unsurpassed commemorative of depth, integrity, and lasting beauty.

Mack Lee has been an Austin bookseller for 11 years.