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Great-Tailed Grackle by Scott Gentling and Stuart Gentling, 1985. Dry brush watercolor, 26 × 20 inches. *Courtesy Fort Worth Museum of Science and History.*

Of Birds and Texas: A Review Essay

Of Birds and Texas. By Scott Gentling, Stuart Gentling, and John Graves.
(Fort Worth: Gentling Editions, 1986. Pp. xii + 124. Acknowledgments, dedication, foreword, introduction, captions, color plates, \$2,500.)

Those interested in the bird life of Texas have been fortunate in the number of good books that have been published over the years, beginning with the most famous of them all, John James Audubon's magnificent *Birds of America* (Edinburgh and London: J. J. Audubon, 1826-1838). That splendid achievement sits at the pinnacle of natural history publishing, "a heroic undertaking," as the English critic Sacheverell Sitwell once commented.¹ It is even more treasured today for its artistic merit than it was for its scientific contributions to ornithology when it was first issued.

It is no accident that dozens of reviewers have been reminded of Audubon's feat by Scott and Stuart Gentling's *Of Birds and Texas*, for the Gentlings had Audubon and his double elephant folio publication very much in mind when they began their work. The result merits the reference. The finished "book" is actually two linen-covered portfolios containing 137 22 x 28 inch folio sheets of text and color plates placed inside a handsome, linen-covered box. Among the pages are fifty-three color plate reproductions of the Gentlings' paintings, John Graves' essay, "Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser," a foreword by Harry A. Tennison, a Fort Worth sportsman and conservationist, and lengthy acknowledgments, dedication, introduction, and captions by the Gentlings, all designed and hand-printed in Centaur Monotype by David Holman at the Wind River Press in Austin. Writing in the *Dallas Morning News*, book critic Lee Milazzo concluded that *Of Birds and Texas* is "the most magnificent book ever produced in Texas." Al Lowman of the Institute of Texan Cultures said that he could think of "no counterpart in southwestern printing history," and A. C. Greene, writer and

¹Sacheverell Sitwell, quoted in Waldemar H. Fries, *The Double Elephant Folio: The Story of Audubon's Birds of America* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), 836.

co-director of the Center for Texas Studies at the University of North Texas, lost his renowned critical reticence by pronouncing it the "most stunning and prodigious book in Texas history."² Texas is heir to some of the most colorful, violent, and romantic history in the American westward movement, but such praise raises the possibility that the state will be equally well known to posterity for its natural history and printing arts.

Of Birds and Texas was the culmination of years of preparation by the eccentric Gentling twins of Fort Worth. Now forty-five years old, they say that they never knew a time when they were not interested in birds. Stuart recalled in a recent interview that he spent some of the happiest moments of his childhood just as Audubon had—hunting birds in the trees near their home to obtain specimens for taxidermy. That hobby led him to express more than passing interest in a reprint edition of Audubon's *The Birds of America* that he discovered in the library of the Fort Worth Children's Museum (now the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History). "From the very first day that we had the Audubon book in our possession," he said, "we began to make copies of his paintings." But they did not work just from book illustrations, for Stuart's improving marksmanship with his BB gun kept them supplied with specimens to stuff and paint.³

The interest in art deepened, leading both brothers to Philadelphia where they studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, picking up the Wyeth family style of dry brush painting as well as the Brandywine River School's swashbuckling approach to life—costumes and all—which Howard Pyle and his students, including N. C. Wyeth, raised to a fine art. Back in Fort Worth, Stuart had an opportunity to apply his maturing technique to bird paintings when the Junior League asked him to do a drawing for a poster to advertise their spring fundraiser. The poster was so successful that the League returned to him year after year. Seven posters later, Stuart finally called a halt to the annual project, but by then he had a big bird project in mind.

²Lee Milazzo, "A Lavish Look at Birds of Texas," *Dallas Morning News*, Mar. 22, 1987 (1st quotation); Lowman, quoted in "Comments from the Art and Book World on 'Of Birds and Texas' by Scott and Stuart Gentling and John Graves," public relations material distributed by the Gentlings, in possession of the author; and A. C. Greene in *Focus on Texas* (Mar., 1987), Center for Texas Studies Newsletter, North Texas State University. Additional reviews include Stanley Archer, "Bird Painting and Tradition: The Gentlings' Achievement," *Bulletin of the Texas Ornithological Society*, XIX (1986), 21–30; Steve Blow, "Flights of Fancy," *Dallas Life Magazine*, *Dallas Morning News*, May 10, 1987; Ansel Strickland, "In the Manner of Audubon: Two Texas Artists Publish a Masterpiece," *Southern Accents* (Jan.-Feb., 1987), 68–75; and Mack Lee, "Of Birds and Texas," *Texas Libraries*, LXVIII (Spring, 1987), 3–7.

³Stuart Gentling to Ron Tyler, 1986, interview (transcript in possession of the author).

The Junior League pictures provide a good example of how the twins work together on paintings, despite their diverse talents. In one instance—the picture of a Green Heron—Scott drew the bird's body but could not finish the feet to his satisfaction. Under deadline pressure, Stuart "drew in the feet and put the bird on a branch and then shaded everything and handed it over to the Junior League." The prints were so successful that when the brothers decided to open a gallery in Fort Worth they produced a set of bird prints to announce the opening. Now the vision of a bird book and what the book might look like was becoming more concrete.¹

Still, Scott protested, "I am not a bird painter." The Gentlings have a good following in the Fort Worth area, and he did not want to forsake what appeared to be a promising career by spending several years painting nothing but birds. Finally, he succumbed to Stuart's pleading and agreed to the project. Stuart originally had intended to take a classic approach and paint the birds against white backgrounds, as Audubon had most of his, but Scott insisted that they include "some backgrounds . . . because that's the only vestige of my style that can be carried over into this work." In fact, Audubon had intended to paint his birds in their natural habitat, but was forced to paint them against the white backgrounds to save time. Scott is also responsible for expanding the size of the portfolio from twenty-five to fifty major paintings.²

In 1977 the brothers laid aside most of their other work—and income, for they have long supported themselves with their art—and began painting birds. They did more research, with one impromptu trip of several weeks covering 2,100 miles. They had to choose the birds to be included with care to represent various species and regions of Texas. Then they had to have something to work from. "I decided early in the project that I didn't want to paint without the actual bird in my hand," Stuart recalled. "But that proved not only illegal but impractical." So they often had to rely on research: "We began to mass a really wonderful collection of bird books [and] we learned a lot about Audubon's technique."³ They drew from mounted birds on loan from museums and from frozen carcasses supplied by friends. In addition, a number of the paintings were made from photographs. The project was well underway when cataracts threatened to end their artistic careers. Months passed as they helped each other through the surgery. Then Scott discovered that his cataracts had produced a yellowish tint that

¹Gentling to R. T.

²Gentling to R. T.

³Gentling to R. T.

had caused him to color the paintings wrongly, and he had to repaint almost twenty pictures.⁷

Stuart admits that Scott is the better artist of the pair, while claiming that he, Stuart, is the outgoing organizer, spokesman, and writer. With Scott turning out the bird portraits in his well-known dry brush technique, Stuart began marshaling their resources. He knew their dream book would be expensive, but just how expensive he did not realize until they were much too far into the project to back out, with both their and their printer's financial solvency hanging in the balance.

Then the Gentlings tackled the problem of an author for the text. "The idea of having John Graves do this book just excited me," Stuart recalled. "I never thought of another person." After looking at a number of the paintings, Graves consented to the task. "I wanted a self-contained work of art," Stuart told him, "with a beginning, a middle, and an end. I don't care if you don't mention a bird in it."⁸ As usual, Graves is equal to the task, with a lambent essay that recalls the Texas of an earlier day, with all its naive regionalism and crudity, and, finally, places birds and their hunters—whether armed with a shotgun or binoculars—in a recognizably contemporary setting.

In 1984 the brothers began to show their bird paintings to enthusiastic audiences. They pre-sold a number of books and opened an escrow account at the bank. Stuart negotiated a loan and talked with possible backers about touring the paintings. Meanwhile, other pieces of the financial puzzle fell into place. The Fort Worth Museum of Science and History had become interested in acquiring the entire collection of paintings after several of their trustees had subscribed to the book. Then, in December, as Stuart browsed through a catalogue that had just arrived from the Philadelphia Print Shop, he spotted a small black and white illustration of a watercolor of two boattail grackles that was attributed to Audubon. The price was only \$18,000, indicating that the dealer was unsure of the attribution, for a genuine Audubon watercolor was worth much more. Stuart remembered that Audubon's first published work was a picture of boattail grackles and immediately called the shop to inquire about it. Does the painting include any pastels, a characteristic of Audubon's work during the mid-1820s? Is there shellac or varnish along the upper outlines of the beaks and eyes, another Audubon trademark? Are there any pencil marks indicating feathers? Audubon frequently fletched the feathers in with pencil when he was under pressure. The answer in all cases was yes, and Stuart felt,

⁷Blow, "Flights of Fancy."

⁸Gentling to R. T.

"It's got to be an Audubon!" He asked the dealer to hold the painting and cautiously sought Scott's agreement before calling back to confirm that they would purchase it.⁹

Finally, they turned their attention to selecting a printer. The Gentlings thought first of Richard-Gabriel Rummonds at the Plain Wrapper Press in Cottdale, Alabama, and Meriden-Stinehour, a combination of a small, quality printer located in Meriden, Connecticut, with a master designer, typesetter, and letterpress printer in Lunenburg, Vermont. Both have been recognized for the quality of their work for decades. But the Gentlings' desire to make this an all-Texas book led them to talk with one of the better-known printers in Dallas before learning of David Holman and the Wind River Press in Austin. Stuart visited with Holman and liked his work. Holman had to acquire a color press for the job, but Stuart remembered a comment that he had made: "If I do it, and it's done in one shop, I can guarantee you it will have increased prestige among people who are interested in collecting fine books"¹⁰ Stuart decided to take the chance.

Design was a cooperative venture that involved the Gentlings, of course, for they had strong feelings about how their book should look; Holman, generally recognized to be one of the most creative book designers in the state; Craig Jensen, the binder; and John Chalmers, the librarian of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Once it was settled, the fifty-three paintings were shipped to Color Separations Incorporated in San Antonio to make the color separations. The text was dispatched to Mackenzie-Harris in San Francisco, one of the few typesetters left in the country still operating Monotype machines, which produce classically elegant type in separate moveable characters that Holman was to use on his thirty-two-inch Heidelberg letterpress.¹¹

The paintings were reproduced on a two-color Heidelberg offset press that Holman acquired. The process was helped along by Scott's and Stuart's realistic notion of what to expect as the prints began to come off the press, for anyone experienced in color printing knows that it is impossible to exactly reproduce a palette as sophisticated as the Gentlings'. "We considered the paintings intermediate steps between our idea and the finished pictures," Stuart said. "We realize that a printer cannot reproduce an image exactly, so we did our pictures in a manner that would enhance what David could do on the press. We

⁹Gentling to R. T.

¹⁰Gentling to R. T.

¹¹Announcement for *Of Birds and Texas*; Gentling to R. T.

would watch as he began printing and made color adjustments. When we saw something we liked, we would say 'stop,' even if it did not match the original painting."¹² The rightness of this procedure is borne out by a comparison between the original paintings and the prints—the *Black-Crowned Night Heron*, for example. The painting has a mottled blue background, while the print is a deep, rich blue, which the brothers like much better.

The result is a stunning book that continues more than a century of bookmaking tradition of bird books relating to Texas. *Birds of America* was the first published work to include pictures of birds native to Texas, but none of them, not even the Blue-Winged Teal or the Sandpipers, which he observed in profusion, were drawn from specimens collected here: by the time Audubon made his only Texas trip, *Birds of America* was virtually complete; in addition, almost all the specimens he collected were lost in transit to England.¹³ Only with the publication of an octavo edition of *Birds of America* in the United States in 1840–1844 did Audubon include a bird drawn from a Texas specimen—the *Texan Turtle Dove*, plate 496, which he specifically noted had been provided by an unnamed Texas correspondent.¹⁴

Audubon was not the first to produce a great American bird book; he followed the English naturalist Mark Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (London, 1731–1743 [1729–1747]), by almost a century and Alexander Wilson, *American Ornithology* (Philadelphia, 1804–1814), by more than a decade. Nor was he the first to paint Texas birds. That honor falls to Jean Louis Berlandier, a Swiss scientist in the service of the government of Mexico, who studied and painted birds and other life forms in what was then the Mexican province of Texas in 1828–1829. Audubon found no new species on his 1837 trip to Texas, but he collected numerous specimens and concluded that "the mass of observations that we gathered connected with the ornithology of our country has, I think, never been surpassed."¹⁵

John Cassin, an ornithologist at the Smithsonian Institution in the mid-nineteenth century who was inspired by Audubon's accomplish-

¹²Gentling to R. T.

¹³Samuel Wood Geiser, *Naturalists of the Frontier* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1948), 93.

¹⁴John James Audubon, *The Birds of America, From Drawings Made in the United States and Their Territories* (7 vols.: New York: J. J. Audubon, 1840–1844), VII.

¹⁵Jean Louis Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico During the Years 1826 to 1834*, trans. Sheila M. Ohlendorf, Josette M. Bigelow, and Mary M. Standifer, with Botanical Notes by C. H. Muller and Katherine K. Muller (2 vols.: Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1980). None of his handsome watercolors of birds (or copies made after them) were published until the Texas State Historical Association issued this translated and edited version of his journal. Audubon, quoted in Geiser, *Naturalists of the Frontier*, 81.



Stuart and Scott Gentling with a copy of *Of Birds and Texas*. Photograph by Bob Wharton.

ment just as the Gentlings would be more than a century later, produced the next bird book relating to Texas. With access to the treasure-trove of specimens collected by the various military and scientific expeditions that had criss-crossed the state by the mid-1850s, he set out to document all the birds that Audubon had missed. Included in his *Illustrations of the Birds of California, Texas, Oregon, British and Russian America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1856), for example, is a little bird that Audubon had not seen but that had been mentioned to his son, John Woodhouse Audubon, while he was in Texas pursuing quadrupeds in 1845. There is a bird that "resembles a wild Turkey but is much smaller . . ." noted the editor of the *Houston Telegraph and Texas Register*. "They are never known to fly, but run with astonishing velocity."¹⁶ The bird is, of course, J. Frank Dobie's famous *paisano*, the

¹⁶*Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), Dec. 24, 1845 (quotations). The full title of Cassin's book is *Illustrations of the Birds of California, Texas, Oregon, British and Russian America. Intended to Contain Descriptions and Figures of All North American Birds Not Given by Former American Authors, and a General Synopsis of North American Ornithology*.

roadrunner, or the Ground Cuckoo (*Geococcyx mexicanus*), as Cassin called him.

As Cassin's landmark book was being printed, other artists and lithographers were already at work on the Pacific Railroad Survey reports, as well as William H. Emory's *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey Report* (Washington, D.C., 1857-1859), both of which added additional scientific observations and illustrations to the growing flock of Texas bird pictures. Two of the four Pacific Railroad surveys crossed Texas—John Pope's from El Paso to the Red River, and Andrew W. Whipple's across the Panhandle.¹⁷ Both had scientists and artists along who collected thousands of specimens of plants, animals, and geology. A few of the Texas birds were chosen for illustration in volume ten of the Pacific Railroad Surveys, while the Emory *Report* contains twenty-five handsome, hand-colored lithographs of the birds of the borderlands.

During the intervening century, many persons studied the bird life of Texas and published scientific papers, but it was not until 1973 that another strongly pictorial volume appeared. Roland H. Wauer, who was for several years chief naturalist for the Big Bend National Park and had traversed much of the same territory as Emory and his engineers, authored *Birds of Big Bend National Park and Vicinity* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1973), which was illustrated by Howard Rollin's and Anne Pulich's paintings of birds and Wauer's photographs of their habitats.

What seemed to be the last word on the subject of birds in Texas was published the following year. Harry C. Oberholser's two-volume set of *The Bird Life of Texas*, edited by Edgar Kincaid, Jr. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1974), with thirty-six color plates of illustrations by the well-known naturalist and artist Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927), remains a monument to scholarship and publishing more than a decade after its appearance. But even it is not of quite the same scale and drama as Scott and Stuart Gentling's *Of Birds and Texas*, which appeared in the fall of 1986.

Of Birds and Texas is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the model of cooperation and commitment to excellence that it offers on the part of Texas artists, authors, and printer. The Gentlings, Graves, and Holman combined to produce a book of

¹⁷ In an effort to find the best route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, the federal government authorized four surveys, in an attempt to, as William H. Goetzmann explained, solve a political problem by scientific means. One expedition operated between the 47th and 49th parallels, a second between the 38th and 39th parallels. Two of the expeditions

which the statistics alone are astonishing. The color reproductions include forty bird portraits and ten landscapes printed in four-colors on a 22 × 28 inch folio sheet, as well as a portrait of Audubon by Scott Gentling, the first page of an Audubon manuscript commentary on the red-shouldered hawk, and a reproduction of the boat-tail grackles watercolor that the Gentlings purchased from the Philadelphia print dealer. The painting had been authenticated, in the meantime, by officials at the New-York Historical Society, repository of more Audubon works than any other institution, as an original Audubon watercolor of great crow-blackbirds, also known as boat-tailed grackles, done in 1824. The Gentlings were able to use it as collateral for the loan that permitted them to finish the project. Five hundred numbered copies and twenty-five artists' copies of the forty-six-pound book were printed on PH neutral (acid-free) paper. Bookbinder and conservator Craig Jensen of Austin prepared the linen-covered container. An additional 250 copies of each plate were printed for separate sale. Edmund Pillsbury, director of Fort Worth's Kimbell Art Museum, spoke for many when he recognized the effort as "a triumph of beautiful design, fine printing, and original scholarship."¹⁸

But as beautiful as the book is, if one does not read it—and many purchasers have complained of difficulty because of its size—one will miss a treat equal to the paintings and one that makes them come alive through the Gentlings' fresh and informative comments. One immediately senses the brothers' confidence and enormous curiosity. Harry Tennison's foreword describes their bright and creative intellect. His stories, drawn from his lifelong association with them, make their remarkable accomplishments believable and convince even the most doubtful critic that a pair of naïve but optimistic Audubon-admirers in Fort Worth could create this splendid work.

The Gentlings' own text is informed, readable, and fresh, providing elaboration and background on each of the paintings as well as the story of how they came to appreciate Audubon and to produce such a monumental work. The story of the acquisition of Audubon's *Great Crow Blackbird*, the first painting that he published, is a significant contribution to Audubon studies in itself and provides further encouragement for the obvious comparison of Audubon's *Birds of America* with the

crossed Texas: one, which traveled from Fort Smith via Albuquerque and Zuni to California, along the 35th parallel, and another along the 32nd parallel that included an El Paso to the Red River leg. See Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803–1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 275 and map on 276.

¹⁸Quote in publicity material provided by the Gentlings.

Gentlings' *Of Birds and Texas*.³⁹ It is apparent that this book has at its core the symbiotic relationship between men and birds. And John Graves's personal essay further emphasizes this point, placing the Gentlings' fascination with birds, and the resulting paintings, within the mysterious human-animal relationship that he has so successfully pondered on other occasions.

This book, in sum, is worth the purchase price, even if only for the fifty large color reproductions of the Gentlings' paintings. But in fact it contains much more than that. It is the mature work of four of Texas's most talented and creative artists, a mammoth accomplishment of intensity and depth, of dedication and single-mindedness, that could only have been carried out by such renaissance men.

Texas State Historical Association

RON TYLER

³⁹ The Gentlings auctioned the Audubon watercolor at Sotheby's in New York on May 28, 1987, for \$275,000. See John James Audubon, *A Pair of Boat-tailed Grackles*, in *Important American Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture* (auction catalogue, New York: Sotheby's, 1987), Lot 38; Mary Vespa, "Twins Scott and Stuart Gentling Sell Off a High-Priced Audubon and Give Wing to Their Own Bird Book," *People Weekly*, XXVII (June 13, 1987), 117; Donna Patc, "The Gentlings Evoking Audubon," *Ultron*, VI (Aug., 1987), 12.

Opposite page: Drawing study for *Crested Caracara* (detail) by Scott Gentling, 1986. Pencil on paper, 20 × 26 inches. This drawing, which was a study for the painting that became plate XXXVII in *Of Birds and Texas*, features the Crested Caracara, a member of the falcon family. It is this bird, standing on a cactus with a serpent in its beak, that is a symbol of both ancient and modern Mexico. In the finished painting one of the birds is attempting to break through the shell of a Texas tortoise. In the background of the drawing is the Spanish mission at Goliad, Texas, site of the execution of Colonel James W. Fannin and over 300 of his fellow Texans on the orders of Mexican General Santa Anna during the Texas Revolution. This symbol-laden painting was made in 1986 in honor of the Texas sesquicentennial, which celebrated 150 years of Texan independence.

