

Dear Kit,

I just have a gut feeling that when you begin to offer our bird book project to publishers, especially those in the east, they will think it is too regional a work and restricted in subject matter to appeal to a wider national audience. This is because most publishers are not familiar with the fact that throughout this country and abroad there is a large and active public that is deeply interested in ornithology and related studies. And they happen to buy a great number of bird books, most of which are not produced by big publishing houses.

Scott and I have never considered ourselves to be wildlife artists, though we have painted birds off and on since childhood when we were introduced to this field of art through our early love of ornithology and our great admiration for the work of John James Audubon. Our Of Birds and Texas is the first of several books which we planned to do in the course of our art careers, and we chose to do a bird book first precisely because of the immense audience for this kind of publication. We wanted to do not just any bird book but a great elephant folio somewhat in the manner of Audubon to catch the notice of the book world and establish our reputation for doing unique publications of the highest possible quality. Our next book then would, we hoped, be easier to produce. We believed also that the sheer size of the book and its beauty would garner the kind of publicity that our budget could not afford, and to a certain extent we succeeded.

Of Birds and Texas is an art book first, a bird book second. It is a work of literature as well. It has been reviewed with unanimous praise by nationally recognized critics in the fields of art, ornithology, literature and book design. It is a project that earned well over a million dollars, toured four important museums and has been universally acclaimed as one of the great American bird books produced in the twentieth century. I certainly think that it should merit thoughtful consideration by a publisher - and a certain measure of enthusiasm as well.

I do realize that, especially with the word TEXAS in its title, some will continue to think that our book is simply too regional to sell to other book dealers throughout the country. I can only say that from the beginning of our enterprise we were aware of this fact, and that we were not so foolish as to spend eight years and a great deal of money creating a book that we could not sell throughout the rest of America. For this reason fully three-fourths of all the birds depicted in Of Birds and Texas are well-known inhabitants of the rest of the United States. But even if we wanted to limit our market to Texas only, we would have had a good market to work with.

I am certain that many large publishers outside of Texas have no idea that our state has within its borders some seventeen million people, making it the third most populous state in the union after California and New York. Not a bad market that. With its strategic location at the center of the continent,

Texas is widely recognized as the best bird watching country in the United States. More than 550 species of birds either live in Texas, occasionally cross over our borders from the tropics, or migrate across our state from other parts of the US in the Spring and Fall. More birds inhabit Texas by far than any other state in the Union. We are in fact simply the best bird watching area in the new world's northern hemisphere. That is why America's most famous ornithologist and bird artist, Roger Tory Peterson, produced a full-fledged field guide on Texas birds precisely because of our state's importance to bird watchers throughout the United State and other countries as well. More than a million out of state visitors come to Texas annually to observe our bird life which is a major boon for our economy. And these people also buy bird books. Incidentally, Roger Tory Peterson praised our book, calling it "extraordinary" and a "breathhtaking accomplishment."

Lets continue to talk about bird watchers for a moment. The United States has a huge number of bird watching clubs and ornithological societies, and the number has been growing almost geometrically in the last decade, because of an aging population (though the young too are joining in great numbers) and because of a growing public awareness of conservation and wildlife issues. The latest book that I have on these clubs is a A Guide to North American Bird Clubs by Jon E. Rickert, published by Avian Publications, P.O. Box 310, Elizabethtown, Kentucky 42701. 1978. Although it is sixteen years old, this reference lists more than 835 clubs, and this was before the big boom in birding clubs reported a couple of years ago in Time Magazine, Newsweek and the CBS Sunday Morning News. These people avidly collect books on birds from every part of the globe, not just their own corner of the country. Book sellers, by the way, tell me over and over again that bird books and books on pre-colombian art are their best sellers in the big book and special interest field. There are also several birding book clubs throughout the US that would make a good market for the bird book we have in mind.

For the prospective publisher who remains worried about it, we do not have to use Texas in the new book's title. The book we propose will deal in much greater detail with our amazing encounter with John James Audubon, a national american icon and the man to whom we dedicated our original folio. Our new text will deal with our growing up, our exposure to Audubon's birds at the age of thirteen and how that interest led us eventually into careers as artists. The highlight of the introductory narrative centers around our chance discovery and purchase of Audubon's long lost first published original watercolor of boat-tailed grackles and how we proved its authenticity. Later when our own publishing venture faced certain ruin, the sale of the Audubon saved us and helped us to successfully complete our book. John James Audubon in a symbolic way reached out from the grave to make our book possible. His painting was published in our folio for the first time in its history as it appeared when originally painted. This lost grackle painting was originally published as a

purposely altered image (to embarrass Audubon) in Bonaparte's four-volume addition to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology, the first great book on American birds published in this country. Years later Audubon retaliated by using the Wilson plate as basis for his tour de force rendition of the grackles that appeared in his Birds of America. It was his treatment and the handling of our grackle painting by the science publishers of Philadelphia that made him forsake this country and seek his fortunes abroad. He finally affiliated himself with printer Robert Havell Jr. of London who did all but ten plates of Audubon's great double elephant folio. Audubon's Birds of America has been unanimously hailed as one of the most beautiful and important works in the history of publishing. By publishing Audubon's grackles in our own book for the first time in its original, unaltered state, our Of Birds and Texas has become united in an absolutely unique and spiritual way to the two greatest nineteenth century books on American birds, Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology and Birds of America by John James Audubon. No other American bird book can claim that distinction. The story of our chance discovery, its sale before a national television audience (somebody at CNN thought it worthy of national interest) at Sotheby's in New York and how it truly saved our project is a riveting, almost surrealistic tale that, I think, anyone - birder or otherwise - would like to read.

I do not know what more needs to be said to encourage publishers that this work merits publication and promotion. I really wonder how many other books in this field with such a good critical and financial track record cross their desks. It is not easy to sell a book for \$2,500, no matter how good it is, but we sold out the edition of 525 copies with the exception of fifty copies we have retained for investment purposes. That we are not well-known artist personalities a publisher can immediately bank upon is, I suppose, a cause for concern. We were not well-known in Texas either, but that did not hinder book sales in our state, nor did it hinder the sales of nearly 25% of the edition to collectors living in the rest of the United States and abroad. We made these sales based solely on magazine and newspaper coverage. Absolutely no money was available for commercial advertising of any kind.

I really do wonder how many big publishers would have turned down the picture book of a provincial painter of Pennsylvannia and Maine named Andrew Wyeth simply because of fears that people in the rest of the United States - not to mention Europe and Japan - would not be able to relate to his work. I believe that most good art will find an audience. It certainly happened with our folio inspite of our lack of funds for promotion. I often ask myself how long it would have taken to sell the edition out if we had had the money to properly promote it, especially since Of Birds and Texas has been widely acknowledged as one of the most beautiful and magnificent examples of this genre produced in this century.

Sincerely,

Howard Gentling