

April 28, 1994

Dear Kit,

I really would not mind if you showed this letter to any publisher who might be interested in our bird book but who might harbor doubts about its national marketability, its appeal to book buyers outside of Texas. Since almost every book can be a business gamble on that level, especially when it has been created by artists who are not well-known nationally, I can understand a certain amount of such caution. But when a project like ours which has received the enthusiastic praise of nationally recognized critics in the fields of art, ornithology and literature, a project which earned over a million dollars, toured four important museums, and has been universally acclaimed as one of the great bird books produced in America in the twentieth century, it certainly ought to merit thoughtful consideration. And a certain degree of enthusiasm as well. Just look at the book, and then take a look at the other books of this genre. If the publisher has any taste at all and any real knowledge in this field, he or she ought to be able to appreciate the obvious merits of our book, especially as a work of art and literature. Of course, the publisher might not believe our reviews. In that case I would gladly supply proof.

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The sticking point seems to be that TEXAS is involved in this. I am not surprised that some New York publishers are so provincial in their own beliefs that every one outside of the City is hopelessly provincial, but even the most parochial commercial mind ought to recognize that Texas has within its borders more than seventeen million people, making it the third most populous state in the union after California and New York. Not a bad market that.

Miguelon Birdwatchers
Our book, however, is not just a Texas book, and it was never meant to be. Do publishers think that we would be so stupid as to limit to purely Texas subject matter an expensive ten year effort which we intended to sell throughout America? Three-fourths of all the birds depicted in Of Birds and Texas are species which are well known inhabitants of the rest of the United States. Texas is widely recognized as the best bird watching area in the northern hemisphere of the new world. The most famous American ornithologist, Roger Tory Peterson, for heaven sakes (who incidentally praised our book as "extraordinary . . . a breathtaking accomplishment") did a full fledged field guide on Texas birds because of our state's importance to bird watchers throughout the United States. He successfully sold that one nationally!

And let's talk about bird watchers for a minute. 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 that wants less strenuous outdoor activity (though the young too are joining in great numbers) and because of a growing public awareness of conservation and wildlife issues. The last book that I have on these clubs is 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 and 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 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 "new" bird book we have in mind.

For the trepidatious publisher this new edition does not have to have Texas in its title. The introductory text will recall our amazing encounter with John James Audubon, a national american icon and the man to whom we dedicated our elephant folio. Our story begins with our chance discovery of his long lost first published original watercolor and relates 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 project. Audubon literally reached out from the grave to make our book possible, and the painting is published in our own book for the first time in its history as it appeared when originally painted. The fact that the long lost painting was originally published as a purposely altered image (to embarrass Audubon) in the supplement to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology and then used as the prototype for Audubon's own published plate in his Birds of America, unites our own Of Birds and Texas in an absolutely unique way to the two greatest nineteenth century books on american birds. No other american bird book can claim that distinction. The story of our 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 projects with such a good critical and financial track record appear on their desks. I wonder too how many publishers would have turned down the publishing of a provincial painter of Pennsylvania 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. Good art is good art, and our book has been widely acknowledged as one of the most beautiful and magnificent examples of this genre produced in this century. I would not be surprised that one day, if a publisher can be persuaded to undertake our project even with serious misgivings and that project happens to succeed - as I indeed think it will - the publisher will be the first to claim credit for having the aesthetic acuity to have recognized our merit on the spot.

(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 Pennsylvania 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.

Grant Gentling