

★
Part One of The Texas Rivers Series:
On the Canadian River with John Graves & Wyman Meinzer

★
TEXAS
PARKS & WILDLIFE
★

MARCH 1999

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Did like to have
this back -

WALTZ
of the wild turkey
★

Huntsville Lunkers ★ Horse Camping Texas-Style
The Legacy of Roy Bedichek

Gentling twiins

The tanks were dry or puddle-low. Summer was ignoring the calendar. A high, dry desert wind came out of the south, rattling the parched sunflowers and whipping dust up over the wheat fields. A dove flushed from a mesquite and took off over the stubble.

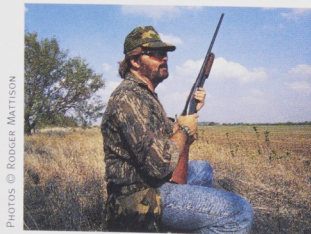
Stuart Gentling—bearded, shaggy-haired, camouflaged—raised his old Remington pump and let loose with a couple of volleys. The dove was dusted, took a precarious dip, but kept going.

It was the closest Gentling got to a dove all afternoon. Granted, the birds were scattered and skittish, but he left a number of holes in the sky.

I told him that maybe the Texas Audubon Society was honoring him for all the birds he'd missed in his life—as kind of a friend of wildlife by default.

He didn't say anything. I don't think he heard me.

Gentling is an avid hunter and, he assured me, a good shot. He'd gotten his limit on opening day, when the birds were plentiful.



Stuart and his twin brother, Scott—the famed Fort Worth bird artists—are being honored in March by the Texas Audubon Society as part of the group's year-long centennial celebration. The society is working with the Gentlings to put out a smaller, more affordable version of their huge elephant folio *Of Birds and Texas*, a book that has become an icon of Texas art since its publication in 1986.

The brothers have designed a logo for the centennial.

WHAT'S THIS? The Audubon Society honoring a hunter?

Scott, left and Stuart Gentling's huge elephant folio *Of Birds and Texas*, published in 1986, has become an icon of Texas art. It contains 40 color plates.

Catriona Glazebrook, executive director of the Texas Audubon Society, doesn't see a problem.

"Many of our members are hunters," she says. "I'd rather see people in the outdoors, gaining an understanding of it and developing a love for it, than for them not to



BY RICH HADDAWAY



MOURNING DOVE

have a clue about nature. It's habitat loss, not hunting, that is the major threat to birds in Texas. In Stuart's case, and in the case of John James Audubon, hunting has led them to a greater appreciation of birds and ultimately enabled them to inspire others about the beauty and value of nature through their art."

"Audubon himself thought nothing of killing a hundred birds a day," Stuart Gentling says. It was the only way Audubon could be sure to see representatives of both sexes and all ages of a species in order to depict them accurately in his paintings.

Stuart defends the killing by citing the problems inherent in the process. Birds won't sit still for portraits. While the artist is looking through his palette for the perfect reddish hue for yonder cardinal, his subject is likely to move on to bigger and better trees.

That doesn't mean that Stuart advocates the wholesale slaughter of song-

birds, but the best way to capture the image of a bird, he says, is through a specimen, not a picture. Granted, he'll go by his own photographs and those of others, and he'll use other artists' work and scientific illustrations as visual references. But if he can get a real bird, he prefers it. He relies on hunter friends and uses connections at the zoo to get birds that have died and he'll even use road kills and casualties from window panes. As an amateur taxidermist, he can stuff the bird, pose it naturally and use it as a model.

Stuart Gentling counts himself as equal parts hunter and conservationist and believes, as most experts do, that most harm to wildlife comes from loss of habitat, not from hunting. Audubon himself believed that, Stuart says, and late in his life was one of the first to sound the alarm about habitat loss.

"Hunters are like canaries in the mine shaft," Stuart says. "They see the disappearance of wild things first hand."

Although the Gentlings are perfectly happy to receive the Audubon Society honor, they insist that birds are only a small part of their oeuvre. Indeed, after a long visit with the pair at their west Fort Worth home/studio/museum, it is clear that their artistic lives have gone in many, varied and productive directions in the dozen years since their massive bird project was completed.

Of Birds and Texas caused hearts to soar and backs to break when it hit the literary scene in 1986. At 23 by 29 inches and weighing in at 46 pounds, it was one of the biggest books ever to be published in Texas.

"You've heard of coffee-table books?" said Scott at the time. "This book is a coffee table."

In the book are 40 color plates of Texas birds and 10 of regional landscapes, plus the Gentlings' commentaries on each painting and an essay, and "Recollections of a Bird Glimpser" by the twins' friend, John Graves, renowned

author of *Goodbye to a River*.

The book's huge pages fit loosely in two boxes within a bigger box, and each edition contains a set of instructions on "the care and reading" of the book — you move each page from one side of the box to the other as you go, reading on one side, looking at the art on the other.

Historian A.C. Greene called it "the most stunning and prodigious book in Texas history."

Indeed. The printing itself is a work of art, done by hand on a special letterpress in Austin to produce what is appropriately called an elephant folio. The books (in a limited edition of 525) were sold for \$2,500 each, and today — if you can find one — you'll pay twice that.

The watercolors, reminiscent of the style of Audubon, are luxuriously reproduced. Each offset lithograph is set in a special Texas environment: a mourning dove drinking from the rain-filled tracks of a dinosaur on a limestone ledge near Glen Rose; Mexican caracara eagles feasting on a tortoise with Goliad in the background; a pair of house wrens scoping out some cowboy boots as a possible nesting site.

These are much more than typical wildlife illustrations. Neither are they done with scientific exactitude in a style derisively called "feather counting."

Rather, what we have here are portraits of birds, idealized and impassioned.

"I wanted to do artful paintings of birds," says Stuart. "I wanted things that were personal, of magical poses, that came out of my love and memory of Audubon works."

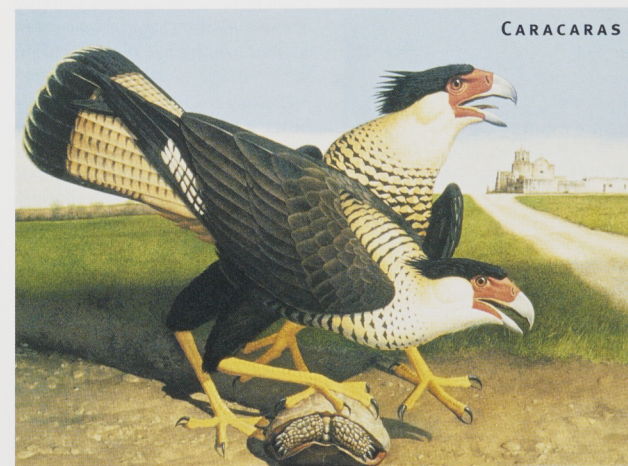
That passion to capture the spirit of birds has been with the Gentlings since childhood. Stuart says he doesn't remember not loving birds.

He took a correspondence course in taxidermy when he was 10 years old. He and Scott would collect specimens with a BB gun in their west Fort Worth neighborhood.

When they were 13 they discovered the work of Audubon in the library of the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History and were captivated immediately. That led to much studying and copying of the works, a trip as teenagers across the eastern United States to retrace the naturalist's steps, and eventually to the idea of doing a Texas version of Audubon's famed *The Birds of America*.

Of Birds and Texas was 10 years in the making and, ironically, the man who had inspired them ended up saving the project.

At a point when they had mortgaged everything they owned to finance the bird book and still were coming up short of funds, Stuart found a picture of boat-



CARACARAS

Audubon Centennial

Texas Audubon Society began in Galveston in 1899. To celebrate, the society is planning the following events. For more information call 512-306-0225.

★ Kickoff celebration and Texas Junior Audubon launching March 4 at Moody Gardens in Galveston with breakfast honoring Audubon dignitaries, a children's story hour and songs. Galveston plans to initiate an annual birding festival in conjunction with the centennial.

★ Gala reception March 5 at Bass Hall in Fort Worth. Tickets are \$100 each. Nearby gallery will be exhibiting Gentling brothers' paintings. A tour of the Gentlings' art will continue across the state. For tickets or to book a showing call the Texas Audubon Society at 512-306-0225.

Exhibits have been scheduled at the Contemporary Art Center in Fort Worth March 1-28; Texas Memorial Museum in Austin in June; Brownsville Museum of Fine Arts Nov. 14-Dec. 15; and the Bush Library in College Station in September 2000.

★ Joint celebration March 6 with "Dallas Blooms" event at Dallas Arboretum.

★ Outdoor breakfast first week in June at Governor's Mansion, plus birding tours and other events.

★ An event in the fall promoting the Sabal Palm Sanctuary in the Rio Grande Valley.

Doves Gentling

Stuart Gentling also believes in the art of cooking. He offers this as his favorite recipe for mourning doves.

Start with 20 plucked and gutted doves.

Fill a bag with flour, quite a bit of crushed tarragon and a little pepper and shake up the birds in the bag, lightly dusting them.

Put them in a frying pan with clarified butter, sauté

TOWHEES



tailed grackles in a catalogue from a Philadelphia print shop. The painting's owner wasn't sure it was an Audubon original, but Stuart, who had studied the painter all his life, knew better. He purchased it for \$18,000, proved its authenticity and sold it soon after at auction for \$253,000 — a record price for an Audubon. It was enough to pay the rest of the Gentlings' publishing expenses.

Interviewing the Gentlings is like being in the middle of a tennis match. The brothers speak in bursts of words, one volley after another. The listener is the net. And sometimes it seems like more than one tennis ball is in play at once. Sometimes the volleys collide.

(That's also how they worked on the bird project — in tandem. Stuart often did the initial sketch of the birds and Scott did most of the painting. "[Scotty

and I] have a rapport that started in the womb," Stuart said once. "We really are the best of friends.")

Stuart is the spokesman for the team. He's voluble, charming, a raconteur, as opposed to his brother, who is much more task-focused. Although Stuart spends lots of time drumming up business, cooking, hunting and hobnobbing with the cultural elite of Fort Worth, he doesn't neglect his art. His specialties are still lifes and landscapes.

They're fraternal twins, both lifelong bachelors. Stuart is darker, bearded, athletic; Scott is shy, serious, with a monk's pallor. Scott rises at five every morning and works all day in his bedroom, on his bed, in shorts and T-shirt, as the television plays unattended in the background.

They were born in Rochester, Minn., in 1942, to a physician father who

moved the family, including two other siblings, to Fort Worth when the boys were five. The twins soon established themselves as a pair of Renaissance boys.

The boys hunted birds and learned to stuff them, raised ornamental pheasants in their back yard, built a replica of a French guillotine that could cut a two-by-four in half, and constructed a rocket that, in a miscalculation involving a can of gunpowder, left them with second-degree burns.

Today the Gentlings' house is the story of their lives, and what it reveals is one magnificent obsession after another, in layers.

For instance, the coat closet by the front door is stuffed with authentic 18th-century clothing — military uniforms and royal court regalia.

There's no furniture in the front room. The twins got rid of the furniture ("It was a bunch of junk," says Stuart), when they made a deal to trade a portrait of a prominent interior designer for some new stuff. That was three years ago. The portrait is finished and it's time for the trade, but now Stuart has decided he likes the room without furniture.

Across the room, on a stand, is a stuffed Attwater's prairie chicken. Stuart is working on a sketch of the rare bird, and his pad is nearby. When the picture of the bird is finished, it will be donated to the Fossil Rim Wildlife Center in Glen Rose, which will turn it into a poster. The proceeds will be used to help restock the birds in the wild.

Looking down on the stuffed brown bird is a newly acquired *objet d'art*, a life mask of George Washington by the 18th century French sculptor Houdon that Stuart recently purchased through a Sotheby's phone-in auction. He's been working to restore the mask to its original condition, and believes he's made a shrewd investment.

Nearby is Scott's incredibly detailed scale model of the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán, the capital city of Aztec Mexico. That's the most pressing of the Gentling's current obsessions, "rebuilding" — with paintings, scale models and

genuine artifacts — the great civilization that existed at the time of Cortez's invasion. It will be part of their next book, *The One Reed Year*.

Aztec artifacts are everywhere in the house, as are African masks, models of wooden ships, and art from India and China, Nepal and Japan. Unframed paintings lean against walls, a dozen deep. Scott is back in his bedroom, working on a portrait of a socialite's daughter. A white cat is curled up nearby.

In the next room is a single zebra finch, mateless because of the aforementioned cat. A *Melrose Place* rerun is on the television in Scott's room; Stuart is playing a videotape of *Hamlet* in his room. In a corner of Stuart's room is a flintlock Kentucky rifle, part of a still life he's working on for Fort Worth's sesquicentennial.

Picture a museum between shows. The old exhibit has not been packed away, but the new one has just been uncrated. Add three more exhibits, cram it into a 2,000-square-foot house and put the artists themselves in charge. That's the Gentling household.

Although the Gentlings try to distance themselves from their bird art to show their range and varied interests, birds still play a part in their artistic lives.

They've been an integral part of the art in Fort Worth's \$70 million Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Performance Hall, which opened in May 1998 to international acclaim as a work of art in itself.

The design for the great dome of the concert chamber ceiling is the work of the Gentlings. Floating in an expanse of Mediterranean blue sky are two golden eagles. A motif of wings sets off the ceiling. Scott painted the portraits of the namesake Besses that hang in Bass Hall. Gentling murals (in progress) show images of Texas natural history, and Stuart is working with financier Ed Bass on a mural for the lobby ceiling, this one featuring Texas birds.

Dutch Phillips, a Fort Worth art dealer and the Gentlings' longtime friend (the twins are represented by Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe), believes that just as Audubon has been overlooked

as a great American painter, the Gentlings have yet to be recognized for their great contribution to art and archeology.

He believes that not only will the bird book be recognized as an icon of Texas culture the way the works of J. Frank Dobie, Walter Prescott Webb and Roy Bedichek are, but that Scott Gentling is one of the three best portraitists in America today. And then there's the massive Aztec project.

In an age of specialists, the Gentlings stand out. "I just don't know of any American artists who have that kind of breadth," Phillips says. ✱

RICH HADDAWAY is the travel columnist for Fort Worth, Texas magazine. He currently is writing a guidebook to American cities.

them till they're brown and put them in a big pot.

Use any packaged gravy — chicken, beef, pork — he prefers pork or beef. Mix up four packages and pour over doves. Add chopped onions, crushed tarragon, a little bit of basil and lots of garlic powder, parsley and chopped celery. Put one piece of bacon on top and simmer for 45 minutes.

Add a can of sliced mushrooms and cook another 10 or 15 minutes. Season with one-third cup of sherry or to taste.

When doves are about to fall apart, they're done. Put mixture over a combination of white and wild rice. Serve with asparagus or broccoli and a pickled peach.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

