

PREFACE

This book in so many ways marks the completion of a massive publishing project that began more than twenty-three years ago. It was in 1977 that Scott and I and our then partner in the art business Dutch Phillips began to contemplate the creation of a portfolio of elephant folio size color plates of Texas birds to celebrate the opening of our small gallery in Fort Worth's Cultural District. We also wanted to take advantage of the enthusiastic public reception of a number of earlier black and white bird prints that I had done for Fort Worth's Junior League.

To say the least, our original intentions became gradually transformed into a ambitious ten year publishing venture that produced with "Of Birds and Texas" what many consider to be the most magnificent book in the history of Texas publishing. From the beginning, once we had launched ourselves fearlessly onto the unknown and perilous waters of the book business, Scott and I had wanted to produce along with our folio a smaller trade edition for the general public and for our original subscribers. Reading the text of our forty-seven pound elephant folio was awkward even though it was very much intended to be a work of literature.

If we had not meant for our book to be read, we never would have asked author John Graves to collaborate with us. His contribution originally titled "Recollections of a Texas Bird Glimpser" has become for his legions of admirers the closest thing to an autobiography that John has ever produced. Since the debut of our folio in August of 1986 John's "Recollections" has undergone a few changes including a new title "My Life with Birds" and has been re-published twice, in a small fine art edition by Chama Press (1991) and later as the first essay in the University of Texas Press collection of his work titled "A John Graves Reader" (1996).

Scott and I are delighted to be able to include "My Life with Birds" in this book. I have been told on good authority that John, an unrepentant revisor, is even as I write this preface, making more changes. It replaces our original Graves text. There are other changes as well. In addition to this preface there is a new acknowledgements instead of the original and a new essay by me titled "Of Birds and Texas, Audubon and Us". There are also more illustrations in this new book including nearly thirty bird studies or remarques done for some of our early subscribers, and a frontispiece of Green Jays that was painted to commemorate the centennial of the Texas Audubon Society. In spite of the changes, this new edition will retain the title of our original folio because it preserves the spirit of the original "Of Birds and Texas" intact.

The new essay is taken from a memoir I wrote nearly ten years ago to record our publishing adventures - our triumphs

and mishaps and our strange and wonderful encounter with John James Audubon the man to whom we had already dedicated our folio. I am pleased that the art of J.J.A. has finally in the last decade been re-evaluated and that he is getting the credit that has always been his due. Even contemporary art critic Robert Hughes has come to regard Audubon not only as a genius but as one of the greatest 19th century American artists. With my new essay I hope that the reader will experience some of the excitement we felt at our discovery of a long-lost and very important bird painting by J.J.A. that was to play a critical role in our lives personally and in the fate of our project.

I distilled this account, as I have said, from an account I wrote throughout the first seven months of 1993. They really were meant for me alone as I tried to recall the mistakes I had made trying to bring our behemoth bird book into being. What was originally meant to be a short record became a kind of stream of consciousness outpouring of feelings, memories and observations laced with the benefits of hindsight in which I told our entire story as best I could remember.

By coincidence at about this same time I was contacted by Kit Ward a literary agent in Massachusetts who had been doing business with our older brother Peter. She could not believe it when he told her that his brothers had actually published a huge elephant folio about Texas birds in the late nineteen eighties. Rather than explain our book to her I sent her a copy for her review. She was most impressed. She asked me if we were interested in publishing a trade edition of manageable size? I told her, "yes".

In the next few months she tried to interest a number of publishers in the work but met with frustration at every turn. Publishers simply could not grasp the idea that our book was essentially an art book, not a scientific publication or some kind of field guide. All the editors appeared impressed with what we had done, some even overwhelmed. But what to do with such a book? Scott and I even received a most gracious rejection notice personally written by Jacquelin Kennedy Onassis who lamented that Doubleday did not publish large coffee table books. Several other book companies were interested but wanted Scott and me to include many more birds in order to appeal to bird watchers in the field.

Another complication then reared its head. John Graves's text would not be available. I had forgotten that he had called me a couple of years earlier and had asked me if I would mind if he republished his "Recollections" in a small fine art press edition under a new title. I told him to go ahead. Although only 350 copies of the new printing had been done, the publisher would not grant me permission to use the essay again for fear apparently that our new book would compete with his. I appreciated that John was caught in the middle. He graciously offered to write a completely new essay, but by this time my

enthusiasm for a new book had waned considerably, and I simply let matters rest.

In 1994 Scott and I ultimately turned our attention to designing the entire painted decorations for Fort Worth's proposed performance hall being planned by Edward Bass and architect David Schwarz. While this project occupied us off and on for more than five years, we still managed to find the time to lay the groundwork for our next book "The One Reed Year" about the Aztec Capital city of Tenochtitlan. Now and then I would be afflicted with pangs of guilt about not doing the trade edition I promised to our original subscribers, but the odds seemed completely against it ever happening.

Sometime early in 1998 I got a call from Catriona Glazebrook the new director of the Texas Audubon Society headquartered in Austin. She was about to go to press with the Society's first statewide newsletter and she happened to remember an exhibition of our bird paintings which she had seen at the Heard Museum in McKinney, Texas. They were showing the entire collection of our original paintings from "Of Birds and Texas" on loan from the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. She asked me whether I would mind if they reproduced some of our birds on the front pages of their forthcoming newsletters. I sent her some slides, and as months passed basically forgot about her call until one afternoon I received a fat manilla envelope containing several copies of the first Texas Audubon newsletter. They were really quite handsome. I immediately called Catriona to offer my compliments and in the course of our conversation she told me that her board of directors had been very impressed with our work. So much so in fact that they wondered if Scott and I would mind if they honored us as the official artists for their 1999 centennial. By the strangest coincidence they were going to start the celebrations with a big bash in Fort Worth at the new opera house now called the Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Performance Hall.

Although I did not think of it immediately, it began to dawn on me that such official recognition by the Texas Audubon Society might just present a new opportunity to publish the trade edition of our folio, perhaps to commemorate their 100th anniversary. The timing seemed perfect. I decided to send a copy of our folio to Austin for the board's perusal. At the same time Scott and I offered to paint a folio-sized picture of a "Texas only" bird that would be reproduced for sale to Audubon Society members and the general public. We eventually chose the Green Jays, a group of three harrassing a Barn Owl. By sheer luck the Fort Worth Zoo, of which I am proud to have served as a board member for the last twelve years, had several pairs of Green Jays captured from Lee and Ramona Bass's ranch for breeding purposes. The Owl too had resided at the zoo for the past eight years. When finally completed and printed just before the March 1999 celebration at the Bass Performance Hall,

our Green Jays was the first folio size bird painting Scott and I had done since our folio debuted in 1986.

With the Audubon centennial and a trade edition in mind I thought about my memoir of a few years before. After I re-read it, I thought that, if I could revise it and reduce its length by half, it might make an interesting essay for the new book. The Audubon board and Catriona were encouraging, especially after I sent them a mock-up of the new book with additions of my essay and the thirty colored bird studies. They were uncertain, however, just how to finance such an undertaking. Several ideas were considered, but ultimately it was Catriona's decision to contact the University of Texas Press that paved the way for this publication. She arranged a mid-summer meeting in Austin for our Fort Worth agent Ralph Carr and me to talk to the editors of UT Press. All went well, very well indeed. But even though I had the general feeling that the book had been approved by the editors, it still had to be vetted through the UT Press publications committee. On November 11th I received word that the book had been approved by acclamation. At last it had found a home, and a very good one at that. The University of Texas Press was well-known for the beauty of their many bird book publications, and also it was they who had published the "A John Graves Reader". When "My Life with Birds" appeared as the first essay in the "Reader" it ended the control over the work held by that small press in Dallas. It looked at last as if I was going to be able to keep my original promise of many years ago to publish our folio intact in a trade edition.

Thus the new book would have my essay, the centennial painting of the Green Jays, and thirty watercolor remarques. These remarques had been painted for those early subscribers who had allowed us to use their money to finance the first stages of our publishing project instead of escrowing it. Many of these paintings took weeks each to do. Scott painted all but one - the Rose-breasted Grosbeak - and they are in his most personal bird painting style which spontaneously evolved in the course of our folio work intended as a stylistic homage to the art of John James Audubon.

Although our original folio was dedicated to Audubon on a spiritual level, Scott and I had also wanted to recognize for personal reasons one of our earliest and most beloved patrons, the late Shirley Lupton Holmes. Now, with this new edition, we are given the opportunity to recognize three good friends, tireless workers all, who are daily contributing to the betterment of Texas's rich wildlife heritage. They are Katherine Armstrong Idsall, Caroline (Cina) Alexander Forgason, and Ramona Seeligson Bass. Although Scott and I have come to know all of them through the enthusiastic offices of our dear friend Whitney Hyder More - also an ardent patron and worker for the Fort Worth Zoo - she is not included in this dedication as we have something special saved for her.

Katherine, a painter of considerable skill and strength, comes from a distinguished south Texas ranching family that has served our state and country well over the years. She is a mother of two, is married to businessman Warren Idsall who shares her passion for politics and conservation issues and wisely lets her do her own thing. As a current commissioner for Texas Parks and Wildlife she is a savvy lady whom I see less and less these days because she is always on the road inspecting our vast parks system. She plans to visit every one of them by the end of this year. She is a hunter, a very good shot, and like Cina and Ramona, she sees hunters as an important part of a healthy wildlife program for Texas. It was she and Whitney who introduced me to Laura Bush at a quiet lunch here in Fort Worth followed by a visit to our studio. A former librarian, Laura is passionate about books. Her excitement on seeing our folio prompted me to donate one of our few remaining copies to the Governors' Mansion library as well as a set of fifty color plates to one of George Bush's offices. When Mrs. Bush later took me over to the office to see how her designer Ken Blassingame had framed and hung them I was overwhelmed. I had never seen all of our bird plates displayed together literally from floor to ceiling as they were in the small office foyer.

Strangely, I really don't remember exactly when I met Caroline Forgason - Cina to her friends. I think it was at Whitney's mother's fabulous Mexican house in San Miguel Allende. I do remember that we hit it off immediately and sat and talked well into the early morning hours discussing just about everything from art to zoology. Like Scott and me she is no ornithologist but has a good working knowledge of birds and wide experience gained from world travels, her service on the board of the Texas Nature Conservancy and a lifetime as heir to a conservationist - ranching tradition established long before it was fashionable on her family place, the mythical King Ranch. She has an almost girlish enthusiasm for the out of doors and wild things that is infectuous. It makes me at times forget that she has a keen knowledge of conservation issues, a clear vision and a toughness that can match Katherine's. Her husband Mark is a perfect match for her as a hands-on, day-to-day rancher with years of experience with land management issues. He is just as passionate as Cina about saving our wildlife, but it is somewhat tempered by his steadiness and easy manner.

And then there is Ramona Bass the last on my list of dedicatees but who in so many ways ought to be the first, since I have known her the longest. A woman of inexhaustible energy and definite ideas about how things should be done. Although she is an executive board member of our zoo, she has labored like a field hand with great success to bring the Fort Worth Zoo into the twenty-first century, making it one of the finest animal collections and educational resources in the country.

I have known her husband Lee since we were both kids. He is currently Chairman of the Texas Parks and Wildlife board. His father Perry is Chairman Emeritus. Ramona and Lee, in fact all the Besses, were some of the first patrons of our folio project, providing moral as well as financial assistance by purchasing early subscriptions when our project was little more than a dream.

Ramona is currently the guiding genius behind the Fort Worth Zoo's remarkable 40 million dollar "Texas Wild" exhibit. When it is completed in 2001, it will provide a much needed resource for educating not only kids but grownups about conservation issues that begin at our back door. It will probably be a controversial exhibit because it will openly deal with issues of hunting and the management of domestic livestock while pursuing conservation goals. She and Lee spend most weekends at their ranch in South Texas, but just about every weekday will find her in her trailer office near the Texas Wild construction site working with zoo personnel, architects, landscapers and financial contributors who are making Texas Wild a reality.

Like Katherine and Cina she is a knowledgeable bird person. Her conservation causes are international in scope, one of the most important of which is a ten year captive breeding program for Africa's Black Rhino. "We're the three terrible South Texas ladies!" she declared when I told her about our new bird book dedication. They have been good friends forever, so it seems more than fitting to honor them together for their dedication toward saving and improving our rich ornithological heritage. Try as I might, I can't think of Katherine, Cina and Ramona as the three "terrible South Texas ladies." But they are simply too dynamic to be called the three graces either so I guess that "terrible ladies" will have to do. Scott and I are truly fortunate to know them and to be able to officially thank them for their friendship and support.

Stuart Gentling