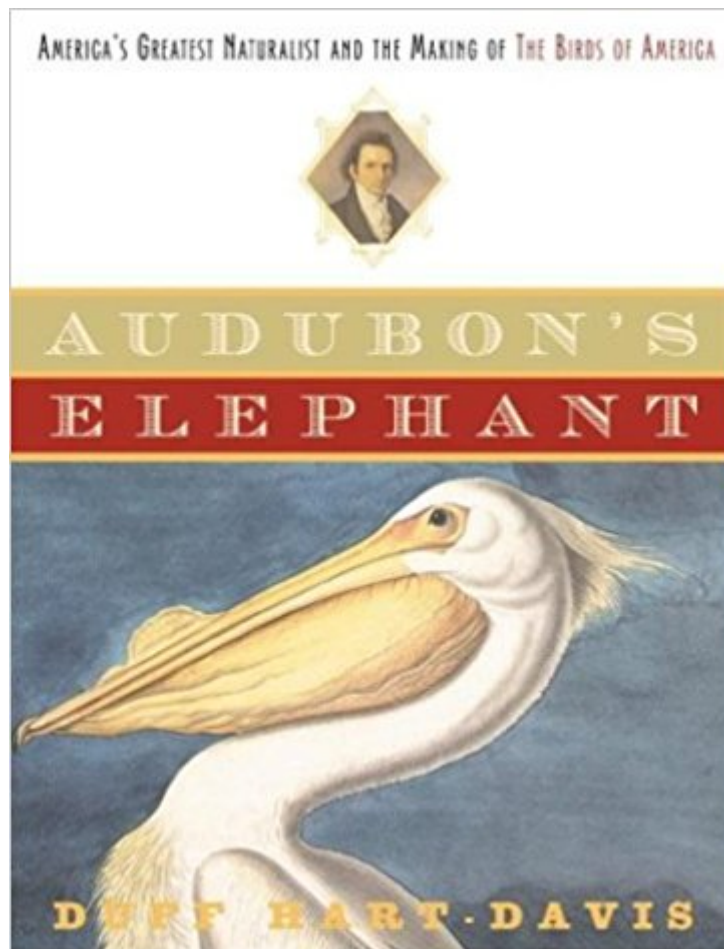




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# Audubon's Elephant: America's Greatest Naturalist And The Making Of The Birds Of America



## Synopsis

A vividly illustrated account of John James Audubon's struggle in England to complete his masterpiece, *The Birds of America*. Audubon's Elephant was the nickname given to John James Audubon's masterpiece, *The Birds of America*—an oversized folio of 435 life-size ornithological prints that remains to this day the most compelling depiction of bird life in the United States. Born in Haiti and raised in France, Audubon spent much of his adult life as a struggling American businessman on the frontier, where his obsession with birds nearly brought him to financial ruin. In 1826, his ambitious project was also in a precarious position—his folio remained unfinished, without an American publisher willing to fund it. Had Audubon not set sail for England, his artistic triumph might easily have turned into failure. Audubon's Elephant tells the story of the naturalist's unlikely success in Britain as a self-exiled artist in search of the money and inspiration necessary to complete his life's work. During twelve years spent traveling in Liverpool, Edinburgh, London, and Paris, Audubon won the interest of wealthy families, fellow artists, and the public with his eccentric brilliance and woodsman's charisma, ultimately securing enough subscriptions to publish *The Birds of America*. Duff Hart-Davis, himself a naturalist, has written a lively, highly engaging biography of Audubon's heady and memorable days as a great American artist abroad.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With precision and detail, Hart-Davis, an English nature writer, tells the story of Audubon's years in England and Europe trying to sell his unwieldy masterpiece. Audubon, at 41 years old a peripatetic woodsman and artist, sailed for England, carrying a 100-pound portfolio of his bird paintings (his "elephant" or double-elephant color folio format). Full of quotations from Audubon's lively, honest diaries and letters, Hart-Davis's book portrays this man of exuberance and determination as he walked 165 miles from Kentucky to Ste. Genevieve, Mo., on the Mississippi River trying to collect funds owed him. Facing bankruptcy in America, Audubon sailed to Europe and slowly but surely met wealthy, connected families like the Rathbones in England and men like William Home Lizars in Edinburgh, who was to become Audubon's first printer. Despite bitter competition from the supporters of another ornithologist (George Ord) and long separations from his wife, Lucy, and their children, Audubon prevailed, meeting Sir Walter Scott and securing subscriptions from King George IV and other members of the royal family. Because the book focuses mainly on the years of Audubon's European travels, one doesn't get a full picture of the man, and readers may question the importance of the minutiae of meals and weather on his journey. However, solid research, fine writing and details of 19th-century society make this a worthwhile book for historians, artists and Audubon enthusiasts alike. What stands out most are the 31 b&w and 41 color illustrations throughout. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The Audubon shelf is full to bursting, but so unusual was the naturalist-artist's adventurous life, and so magnificent is his achievement, room must be made for more. In this handsomely illustrated volume, Hart-Davis, a British chronicler of country life, focuses on Audubon's years in Edinburgh and London (1826-38), during which he oversaw the complex production of his unwieldy masterpiece, *The Birds of America*, a double-elephant folio comprising colored engravings on heavy sheets of paper measuring 39 1/2 by 29 1/2 inches. Writing with undisguised delight in his subject and drawing on Audubon's expressive journals, Hart-Davis provides a lively account of every phase of Audubon's audacious undertaking, from his often maddening campaign for subscriber support for his expensive project to the machinations of his enemies, his arduous journeys and prodigious artistic efforts, his wife's great loyalty and sacrifice, and his struggle to write his *Ornithological Biography*. Hart-Davis profiles such key people as engraver Robert Havell and Audubon's coauthor, William MacGillivray, and succeeds in awakening new appreciation for a truly original man and his paradigm-altering art and ecological insights. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I wish I could say which ran out of steam first (if I may use a cliché)--the book or me. "Audubon's Elephant: America's Greatest Naturalist and the Making of the Birds of America" began as such a promising book, but by mid-point I could read no more than a page or two without my mind blanking out from word fatigue. Yes, I learned quite a bit about Audubon's beginnings, how he came to America to escape Napoleon's armies, how he fell in love with the wildness of America, with its birds in particular. This is a story of one man, who happened to be in all the right places at the right time (and including not-so-right places). His own physique and physical stamina aided him in incredible feats of long distance walking and hunting. His love of the natural world and indomitable curiosity eventually led him into the task that has made him world famous and admired--painting scientifically the birds of America. But it was not America who would appreciate his work of presenting the birds in their actual size on paper--paper large enough to accurately show that size. The Wild Turkey became the standard for the double-elephant folio. The creation of this double-elephant book depicting 433 birds of America is the subject of "Audubon's Elephant." As with most artists, Audubon had his quirks. He didn't make much of a living for his wife and two sons, whom he left in America while he sought subscribers for his one hundred pound book first in Scotland, then in England and France. He kept detailed journals and wrote gushing and reflective letters to his faithful wife, even admitting attractions to other women. I made it halfway through "Audubon's Elephant" before I finally put it down and have begun reading another story of Audubon's arduous efforts to have his book published. This second book, *Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of The Birds of America*, is a Pulitzer Prize Finalist and written in narrative form instead of lacing together bits and pieces. Nonetheless, I accept the fault as mine and not that of the author, Duff Hart-Davis, that I had trouble maintaining interest in his book.

Excellent biography of Audubon. Most interesting, well written. I liked it so much I bought a copy for myself & give the original to a friend!

The "back story" of a very notable, classic book. Put to rest some tales about the prints Audubon produced so many years ago.

Let us say the Book Fairy comes and says you can be given one book, any book you want. Here's my advice: take John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*. Of course you want the original edition, the volumes that appeared between 1826 and 1838. Not only is it one of the most beautiful

books ever printed, if you get tired of it, you can sell it. The last one that came up for sale, in 2000, went for \$8.8 million. Just about everyone knows about this book, or has seen reprints from it, and has heard of Audubon (perhaps because of the Society that bears his name) and associates him with birds. He has had several biographies, but *Audubon's Elephant: America's Greatest Naturalist and the Making of the Birds of America* (Henry Holt) by Duff Hart-Davis takes a specific look at the extraordinary book, and how *The Birds of America* could not have been made in America. Audubon's own adopted country had no room for his huge project of a book to show all the birds of America life sized. Naturalists at the time actively discouraged anyone's support of Audubon's efforts, and there were not printers up to the task. So in 1826, Audubon sailed with his big watercolors to England. He became a celebrated American rustic, captivating the town of Edinburgh. He went about carrying his huge portfolio which weighed nearly a hundred pounds, slung over his shoulder. The first printer of the work, having seen it, responded, "My God! I never saw anything like this before." He was right; Audubon's pictures had size, drama, and color no previous bird pictures even hinted at. The pictures caused a sensation, and Audubon was caught in a whirl of dining and socializing that he enjoyed enormously. The enormous work of getting subscribers, printing the pictures, and getting a team of colorists to hand tint each one was more than Audubon had counted on. He wrote, "I am thrown into a vortex of business that I never conceived I could manage." Audubon and conservation have become synonymous, but his process of making his art will appall those many who belong to the Society bearing his name. Audubon probably killed more birds than any man in history, saying, "I call birds few when I shoot less than one hundred per day." He liked painting birds in action, but he posed them that way, killing them and mounting them so he could get the action stilled. A companion complained about Audubon working on his turkey painting, "The damned fellow kept it pinned up there till it rotted and stunk. I hated to lose so much good eating." Audubon kept a golden eagle in a cage to observe it, and having it seen alive sufficiently, tried to suffocate it with charcoal smoke, and when that did not work, pierced it through the heart with a pointed steel needle. As Hart-Davis realizes, Audubon did not lust for blood, but for knowledge. Imparting that knowledge through his art was his great goal, magnificently realized. *Audubon's Elephant* is a much smaller volume than the original it describes, but it is still handsomely produced on fine paper and with fittingly copious illustrations. It is a vibrant account of an artist accomplishing his dream.

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