

BIRD NOTES

Alexander Wilson

born July 6, 1766 Paisley, Scotland
died August 23, 1813 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Alexander Wilson arrived in America at the age of 28, broke, without a job, and with no formal training in science or art. Along the way to Philadelphia, he shot the first bird he saw, a red-headed woodpecker. He was impressed with its beauty. Perhaps it was the chance encounter with this woodpecker, along with his good fortune in picking his friends, that stimulated a seemingly impossible task for his life's work, the creation of a 9-volume work titled American Ornithology. Wilson wrote,

*"I am most earnestly bent on pursuing my plan of making
A Collection of all the Birds of this part of N. America.
Now I don't want you to throw cold water as Shakespeare
Says on this notion, Quixotic as it may appear. I have
been so long accustomed to the building of Airy Castles
and brain Windmills that it has become one of my
comforts of life a sort of rough Bone that amuses me
when sated with the dull drudgery of Life."*

After the repercussions of his scandalous affair with a married woman died down, he took a job as a school teacher outside of Philadelphia, a short walk from the estate of William Bartram who was known at the time as the world's greatest botanist. Bartram's book, Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, contained much information on the bird life of the region which Wilson found quite helpful. Under Bartram's tutelage, Wilson learned much about painting, the art of scientific writing, and the confusing classification of birds (genus, species, etc.). The Charles Peale Museum in Philadelphia was a source of many bird skins for

study. He studied the fine art of engraving and coloring copper plates from Alexander Lawson. Not only did he have to learn all the skills necessary to produce such a set of books, he had to learn the sum of the ornithological knowledge of his time, as well as discovering, collecting, describing and painting new species of birds, while continuing to work as a teacher. His health was never robust, and he frequently suffered illness and bouts of depression. Despite all this, he worked tirelessly on his life's work, the multi-volume American Ornithology.



Wilson traveled widely, learning all he could about the birds he would later write about and paint. He was “*a solitary exploring pilgrim who plodded on foot or on horseback through horrid swamps and sluggish creeks.*” His pockets were crammed with bird skins, and on his shoulder was perched a wounded Carolina Parakeet who ate from Wilson’s mouth and even responded to its name. He had better luck with the Parakeet than with an Ivory-billed Woodpecker he wounded in North Carolina. Upon checking into an inn, he told the innkeeper that a struggling bundle in his arms was a crying baby. Wilson quickly went to his room, then left to get some food. He returned to find that the bird has demolished the bed, a table, and much of one wall.

He began producing the plates for his American Ornithology in 1806, completing the first volume in 1808. With some of his finished plates in his possession, he began the difficult and time-

consuming task of selling subscriptions for his multi-volume opus. His publisher required a certain number of subscriptions to be sold before he would continue publication of future editions. Each subscription was \$125 per set. One of the first subscribers was President Thomas Jefferson. Wilson’s travels to find subscribers took him from New England to Georgia. He crossed Pennsylvania on foot and took a boat from Pittsburgh down the Ohio River to New Orleans. Along the way Wilson had a chance encounter with John Audubon at his store in Louisville. Their relationship was not well documented and is beyond the scope of this article. The trips were difficult for the frequently ill Wilson, but they were successful in securing the necessary subscriptions to continue publication. Volume 2 was published in 1810. In rapid order volumes 3 and 4 in 1811, in 1812 volumes 5 and 6, and in 1813 volume 7 were issued. That same year volume 8 was almost ready for publication, but on August 23rd, Alexander Wilson died at the age of 47, unable to recover from a bout of dysentery. Wilson’s friend, George Ord, finished the 8th volume in 1814, followed a few months later by the 9th and final volume.

Considering that Wilson began his quixotic quest in 1803 and described 268 species out of the 350 species possible east of the Mississippi, 26 of which were not previously described, his American Ornithology was an amazing accomplishment.

A few final thoughts about trying to compare Audubon's and Wilson's achievements. Wilson was 19 years older than Audubon and started his study of birds and artistic training much later in life. Others have made the following statement which seems to be reasonable:

"It has been said that Audubon, was a great artist with a talent for ornithology, but that Wilson was a great ornithologist with artistic talent."

In support of this statement are the following words of Alexander Wilson, the Father of American Ornithology.

"It is only by personal intimacy, that we can truly ascertain the character of either (men or birds), more particularly that of the feathered race; noting their particular haunts, modes of constructing their nests, manner of flight, seasons of migration, favorite food, and numberless other minutiae, which can only be obtained by frequent excursions in the woods and fields, along lakes, shores, and rivers, and requires a degree of patience and perseverance, which nothing but an enthusiastic fondness for the pursuit can inspire."

Questions and/or comments—Email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com .