

## Audubon in Edinburgh and his Scottish Associates

By John Chalmers. National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh. 2002. 157 pages. \$34.95 U.S. \$70.00 Can. Available from Codasat Canada Ltd., #1, 4335 West 10<sup>th</sup> Ave., Vancouver, British Columbia V6R 2H6 Canada.

John Chalmers, an orthopedic surgeon in Edinburgh, has filled a void with his careful documentation of archival letters and files dating back more than a century and a half. Although most members of the general public know the name of Audubon, few historically-minded ornithologists realize that Edinburgh, Scotland, was Audubon's favourite among all the world's cities. Audubon had received little encouragement in America, or in London or Paris, but Edinburgh grew to love him during the 22 months he spent there during his six visits, two of which lasted for six months each. Audubon's fame and his success date from these six visits. Chalmers includes twelve pages of biographical profiles of men who interacted with Audubon.

Audubon, the rough but charming and talented backwoodsman, was unexpectedly well received by eminent people in what was then the world's leading city for science endeavours. Members of the intelligentsia wine and dined him. The august Wernerian Society welcomed him. Thirteen of Audubon's early scientific papers were published by four different Edinburgh scientific journals. William McGillivray, in particular, went out of his way to help him with the scientific aspects of ornithology. The kindness of such savants never ceased to amaze Audubon.

Audubon's *Birds of America* was extremely expensive to produce. The first 10 plates were engraved by W. H. Lizars in Edinburgh, though publication later switched to London. In total, there were 87 parts, which sold at two guineas each, for a total cost of £187, containing 435 plates and text. Chalmers provides a list of the present whereabouts of the 23 sets that were sold in Scotland, as well as a list of exactly fifty places,

including 43 private residences, frequented by Audubon; all but 11 of these buildings are still standing.

Ironically, not one of the 14 complete sets of *Birds of America* sold in Edinburgh has remained there; the cash-strapped University of Edinburgh sold its set at auction in New York in 1992 for \$4.1 million. There is an extant copy in Paisley, coincidentally the hometown from which Alexander Wilson had left in disgrace for America in 1794.

This book combines an informative text, helpful footnotes, and magnificent illustrations, including reproductions of some of Audubon's finest bird paintings. Readers will marvel, as Audubon did, at the extent to which Edinburgh launched his career. Among innumerable pleasures are the spontaneity and charm of Audubon's letters to his wife, back in America.

I detected few errors. Although Chalmers is correct in saying that Alexander Wilson, a transplanted Scot in America, named the Eskimo Curlew in honour of Audubon in 1813, he fails to appreciate that J. R. Forster in 1772 had pre-empted Wilson by naming the species from a specimen collected by Humphrey Marten at Albany, on Hudson Bay, in 1771. Elliot Coues is misspelled Cowes. The index is sadly incomplete, hardly excusable now that indexes can be compiled unerringly and almost automatically by highlighting each name in the text.

This sumptuous, 228-page, beautifully-illustrated, sturdily-bound paperback is necessarily expensive. It would be an elegant gift for anyone interested in Audubon, the primacy of Edinburgh during Scottish enlightenment, or the history of ornithology. One hopes it can be purchased by every major library in North America and Europe.

C. STUART HOUSTON

863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0J8  
Canada

## A History of Devonshire Ornithology

By David G. Jenks. Isabelline Books, 2 Highbury House, 8 Woodlane Crescent, Falmouth TR11 4QS, Cornwall; e-mail: mikann@beakbook.demon.co.uk. FAX 0870 051-6387. 2004. Hardcover. 477 pages. £53 plus postage.

Devon is one of the most beautiful and interesting of the many British counties. David Jenks planned to write its ornithological history as a chapter for *Birds of Devon*, but when that project fell through he completed an entire book on the history alone. And what a book! Full of detail, printed on high quality paper, it is a sumptuous book, but almost too heavy to hold for someone who reads a chapter each night at bedtime.

As the Foreword explains (page xi), thoroughly-researched historical accounts such as this help us "understand the origins and raison d'être of the modern nature conservation movement." The first chapter

deals with the prehistoric record – skeletal remains of birds found in seven different caves or deposits. These caves are mapped, but readers are handicapped by the lack of a map of Devon showing the many other place names mentioned.

North Americans can only envy the additional centuries of scattered historical information available in England. The Isle of Lundy, off the north shore of Devon, features prominently throughout. The first Lundy entry concerns the gannet colony and nesting peregrines found there in 1274 AD.

There is a sordid side to most of the accounts before 1900. So-called scientific interests were served by shooting a bird, then almost the only way to identify it. Physicians and country vicars alone seemed to have "the leisure, the academic training and the opportunity



to become well-informed naturalists" (page 135). More often than not it was the local minister of the Church of England who was guilty of massive slaughter of almost anything that flew. Jenks tells of the zealous collector who, while walking without a gun, saw an unfamiliar bird, knocked on the door of the nearest cottage, borrowed a gun from the stranger, and shot what proved to be a beautiful Night Heron in full breeding plumage.

Then there was the mercenary side of bird-killing. Village markets throughout Britain were replete with waders, marsh birds, even song birds, all of them to be purchased for the table. They fetched a surprisingly high price.

Quite apart from culinary sales, both birdskins and eggs were also available. Those interested in the distribution of bird species were apt to go to their local market and purchase the rare birds available for sale. In 1878 a Gyr Falcon skin sold for 50 shillings and a Golden Eagle egg for 25 shillings; a Passenger Pigeon skin cost only 6 shillings. As evidence of the extent of this trade, the relatively small town of Barnstaple supported two full-time bird-stuffers.

We can learn from some of the mistakes made in Devon. Many specimen records were made worthless by inadequate preservation, missing date and locality labels, and some were unknowingly brought by ship from offshore.

Throughout the book there is evidence of friction between those who collected birds' eggs and study skins and those who used the new field glasses to observe birds in the wild. The latter slowly and gradually came into the ascendancy after 1900.

We meet many interesting men, but I will mention only two. Colonel George Montagu, who wrote his landmark *Ornithological Dictionary* in 1802, was Devon's first important ornithologist; he sorted out the differences between the Montagu Harrier and the Hen Harrier, thus having his surname applied to the former. The first imperfect beginnings of a book to be devoted entirely to Devonshire birds was written by Andrew Tucker in 1809; only two of the proposed 24 parts appeared in print. Surprisingly, it was not until 1916 that Catharine Hodgins became the first Devon woman to contribute bird observations for publication.

Lists of spring migration dates compiled from 1840 to 1845 indicate that birds now arrive much earlier, evidence of climatic change. Some notable sightings include a flock of eight Great Bustards in 1870, never to be repeated. The Eurasian Collared-Dove first appeared in Devon, on Lundy in May 1961, only six years after the first pair had appeared in Norfolk; thus the spread across Europe preceded its recent spread across North America.

Equally interesting are occasional accounts of unusual happenings. In the winter of 1928-29, Water Rails in desperation entered into houses to take bread off tables. A peregrine found dead near its eyrie on Lundy in 1963 proved by retrospective analysis, once Derek Ratcliffe discovered the causative role of DDT and other organochlorine compounds, to be "the most chemically-contaminated individual ever discovered." (page 334).

I found the final chapter, on bird-ringing, of particular interest. David Lack, then a schoolmaster at Partington in Devon, prior to his distinguished career as a professor at Oxford University, ringed 119 adults and 121 nestling Robins on one leg and applied two coloured celluloid rings to the other leg. Many robins remained from year to year, the oldest persisting through all four years of his study. Not one was recorded outside his study area of twenty acres. His famous book, *The Life of the Robin*, told what he learned about individual robin territories and behaviour.

Ringling changed forever when the first shipment of 100 mist nets arrived from Japan in early 1956. A formal ringling station, using these nets, opened at Slapton in 1960. Jenks, a ringer himself, concludes by saying (page 390) that "ninety years of ringling in Devon has provided us with more knowledge of the county's birds than all other ornithological pursuits put together."

In summary, this book constitutes a fine and lasting contribution to the history of ornithology. Learning about past excesses can give us perspective and perhaps help us to prevent similar but different errors in future. Its widest readership will undoubtedly be in Great Britain.

C. STUART HOUSTON

863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0J8, Canada

## Mapper of Mountains: M. P. Bridgland in the Canadian Rockies, 1902-1930

By I. S. MacLaren, with Eric Higgs and Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux. University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, Alberta. 2005. 295 pages. \$39.95 Can. Cloth.

This book, well written, artistically presented, and superbly illustrated, explains the history of photographic mapping in the Canadian Rockies. Complicated technical processes are clearly explained. As one would expect from Ian MacLaren, the text is enlivened by the poetry of Robert W. Service, Bliss Carman

and, surprisingly, the famous Scots prose author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Serious readers will appreciate the detailed information in the copious footnotes.

The subject, Morrison Parsons Bridgland (1878-1948), sometimes called Morris, but more often known as M. P., was exceedingly modest. There are no known photographs of him alone. Born on a farm on the northern outskirts of Toronto, M. P. studied engineering at the University of Toronto, and then was hired





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