

The Wings of Change: How One Man's Artwork Inspired America's Most Influential  
Conservation Organization

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Paper

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*“Nature herself is perishing.... When her fish and game and birds are gone, she will be left alone like an old worn-out field.”*

-John James Audubon, 1833<sup>1</sup>

A lark sings lazily in the fields surrounding the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, and a woodpecker pounds on the sun-bleached shingles of the farmhouse, built in 1762. Over two hundred years ago, an eager Frenchman, barely 18, with a passion for studying birds, arrived at Mill Grove to begin his new life in America. Not even he could predict how this new nation would change him or how much he would change America’s landscape.

John James Audubon was a prominent ornithologist and skilled avian artist whose leadership in both science and art inspired the formation of the National Audubon Society. The Society would not only perpetuate Audubon’s legacy, but it would also assume a crucial leadership role in the conservation field by preserving thousands of acres of wilderness, saving hundreds of species from extinction, and educating innumerable children and adults about birds and environmental preservation.

### **Across the Shining Sea**

Born Jean Rabin in 1785 on Saint Domingue (Haiti), the boy was renamed Jean-Jacques Fougère Audubon when he sailed to France in 1793 to escape in the Haitian Revolution. At age 18, to avoid being drafted into the French army, Audubon was sent to his father’s American farm, Mill Grove, outside of Philadelphia. Audubon was irresponsible – instead of developing Mill Grove’s lead mining potential, Audubon followed his passion for studying birds.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004): 386.

<sup>2</sup> Rhodes 1-8.

As Audubon discovered the enormous variety of birdlife, he began to paint specimens he had shot. Ironically, Audubon killed thousands of birds to fuel his life-size bird paintings. In fact, he once said that it was not a good day until he had bagged at least one hundred birds.<sup>3</sup> However, one must put Audubon's actions into context rather than dismiss him as a heartless killer. Shooting was not only a popular pastime in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, but also a necessary survival skill. Furthermore, for scientists like Audubon, the only way to identify and study birds was to shoot them – binoculars for bird study were not used until after World War II. Audubon's art in particular required dead birds so that he could portray them in more intricate detail than previous works. Multiple ornithologists had already published paintings of birds, including the "Father of American Ornithology," Alexander Wilson. Audubon referred to these paintings as, "all represented *strictly ornithologically*, which means...in stiff unmeaning profiles (see Appendix I)."<sup>4</sup> Audubon wished to break away from these traditions and give birds their inherent magnificence on paper. But he struggled to depict birds in lifelike positions using his self-taught artistic skills – the birds "were dead to all intents and neither wing, leg, or tail could I place according to the intention of my wishes."<sup>5</sup>

One morning Audubon was struck with a solution: "I sent for the miller and made him fetch me a piece of soft board.... I pierced the body of the bird with sharp wires and fixed it on the board.... At last there stood before me the real manikin of a kingfisher!"<sup>6</sup> His method of drawing was easy and straightforward – using sharpened wires, birds were mounted onto soft board into exciting and lifelike positions. By drawing a grid on the board, Audubon was able to

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<sup>3</sup> William Souder. *Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of The Birds of America*. (New York: North Point Press, 2004): 66.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes 11.

<sup>5</sup> Souder 71.

<sup>6</sup> Rhodes 15.

use its parallax to solve proportion and foreshortening issues inherent in transferring three-dimensional subjects into two-dimensional work.

### *The Birds of America*

After marrying Lucy Bakewell, the neighbor's daughter and a schoolteacher, in 1808, Audubon headed west to Kentucky seeking new opportunities to support his family. While working in business, he traveled across the country, completing more than 300 paintings, all life-size, on double elephant paper, measuring more than three feet in length. He dreamed of publishing his paintings in a collection that would rival other ornithological compendiums. The size and spectrum of his bird painting compilation daunted many American printers, who were unwilling to take on such an enormous publishing project with such high financial risk. Ever hopeful, Audubon sailed to England in 1826.<sup>7</sup>

Within months of arriving in Liverpool, Audubon had found an affordable printer in Edinburgh, William Lizars. Lizars would etch a painting's outline onto a copper plate, ink the plate with black ink, and then transfer the ink lines onto a sheet of paper. A team of colorists would then hand color every print using transparent watercolors. The finished product would be called *The Birds of America* and would consist of about 400 plates in four volumes.<sup>8</sup> When writing about his collection, Audubon said, "They will be brought up & finished in such superb style as to eclipse all of the kind in existence."<sup>9</sup> He was confident in his leadership capabilities and believed that his bird paintings would be a huge success. To improve the quality of the publication, Audubon switched to Robert Havell, a more skilled printer in London, and would rely on him for the rest of the publication.

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<sup>7</sup> Souder 194.

<sup>8</sup> Rhodes 273.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rhodes, ed., *The Audubon Reader*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006): 175.

After twelve long years, *The Birds of America* was completed on June 16, 1838. The four volumes consisted of 435 plates with 497 species, and Audubon estimated that the entire project cost him \$115,640, or \$2,532,500 in 2014 dollars.<sup>10</sup> He had received no gifts, grants, or legacies, and had instead raised that sum singlehandedly through painting, exhibitions, and subscriptions. Despite the huge costs of the project, Audubon still profited – it was enormously popular, as such a publication had never been successfully completed at so large a scale. Audubon led the realism movement in natural art with his novel painting style – he was the first to capture the birds’ personalities in lifelike renditions that appealed to the public, not just to the scientific community (see Appendix II). Francis Hobart Herrick, a professor of biology, described *The Birds of America* in 1917 as “one of the most remarkable and interesting undertakings in the history of literature and science.”<sup>11</sup> Even in the early 1900s, both scientists and the general public were beginning to recognize Audubon’s legacy in his artistic and scientific leadership. Ornithological artwork had always been meant for the scientific elite, but Audubon transformed ornithology into a fascinating topic that even the average person could understand and appreciate. He thus fulfilled his dream “to complete a collection not only valuable to the scientific class, but pleasing to every person.”<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Audubon’s writings and paintings served as useful sources for future ornithologists, recording bird behaviors and historical distributions of populations. He documented species that would soon disappear from the American landscape, like the Passenger Pigeon, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, and Carolina Parakeet. When describing a flock of Passenger Pigeons he encountered in Kentucky, he wrote, “The birds poured in countless multitudes.... The

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<sup>10</sup> Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, 403.

<sup>11</sup> Duff Hart-Davis, *Audubon’s Elephant: America’s Greatest Naturalist and the Making of The Birds of America*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004): 271.

<sup>12</sup> Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, 11.

air was literally filled with Pigeons; the light of noonday was obscured as by an eclipse; the dung fell in spots not unlike melting flakes of snow.... When the woods are filled with these Pigeons, they are killed in immense numbers, although no apparent diminution ensues.”<sup>13</sup> Audubon’s accounts provide a legacy that enables modern scientists to learn about these extinct birds, and they also capture the careless attitude of Americans in the 1800s when hunters managed to kill millions of birds annually, never considering that destruction on that scale would devastate the environment.

Audubon was one of the few who realized that the careless actions of Americans would negatively affect its landscape: “Neither this little stream, this swamp, this grand sheet of flowing water, nor these mountains will be seen in a century hence as I see them now. Nature will have been robbed of her brilliant charms.”<sup>14</sup> Audubon, however, did nothing to stop the destruction he observed – it would take visionary leaders in the years after his death to give the conservation movement new wings in a society that would allow Audubon’s legacy to continue soaring.

### **A Society to Defend**

Thirty-five years after Audubon’s death in 1851, a former student of Lucy Audubon, George Bird Grinnell, noticed that bird populations were in steep decline. Grinnell was inspired by Audubon’s leadership in bird artistry and in early ornithology, but he believed that Audubon’s essential contributions and beautiful artwork were fading into America’s background, forgotten by the public. Grinnell thought that Audubon’s exciting and novel depiction of bird species had created an image for birds and nature in a time without photography or mass media, and he believed that the paintings could be used as a political motivator to enrapture the public and convince them to actively work to protect the birds. To keep Audubon’s legacy alive and to

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<sup>13</sup>Ben Forkner, ed., *Selected Journals and Other Writings*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996): 554.

<sup>14</sup> Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of an American*, 280.

honor his crucial role in bringing America's natural landscape to life, Grinnell created an Audubon Society devoted to stopping the mass slaughter of birds.<sup>15</sup> The first issue of *The Audubon Magazine* announced, "Within the past few years, the destruction of our birds has increased at a rate which is alarming. This destruction now takes place on such a large scale as to seriously threaten the existence of a number of our most useful species."<sup>16</sup> Audubon's legacy had now been publically preserved in the leadership of Grinnell's Society.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, hats with bird plumes had become irresistibly popular. The plumes came from any bird species imaginable – some hats even featured whole stuffed birds (see Appendices III-V). "That there should be an owl or ostrich left with a single feather apiece hardly seems possible," wrote *Harper's Bazaar* in 1897.<sup>17</sup> The plume trade alone killed thousands of birds per year, and millions more died from hunting for sport and subsistence alike. Grinnell believed that this massacre had to end, before bird populations could not keep up with the ravenous appetites of hunters.

Grinnell's Society failed by 1888 because of lack of popular support and an extremely powerful plume industry, and the Audubon dream seemed to be lost forever, until Mrs. Harriet Hemenway called a meeting in her Massachusetts home in 1896, determined to found a permanent Audubon Society. Hemenway, like Grinnell, was deeply inspired by Audubon's leadership in art and in science, but she wanted to provide lasting leadership in a different field – conservation – through a society that represented Audubon's legacy. Unlike Grinnell's Society, Hemenway's Massachusetts Audubon Society thrived, possibly because Hemenway provided a link into the upper class, feather-wearing female socialites, who were the main supporters of the

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Graham, Jr., *The Audubon Ark: A History of the National Audubon Society*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990): 9.

<sup>16</sup> Graham, Jr. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Price, "Hats Off To Audubon," *Audubon*, Dec. 2004.

plume business. Within a few years, state Audubon societies were springing up across the country, from California to New York. By 1901, eleven states had endorsed the Model Law, legislation drafted by the American Ornithologists' Union that gave strict protection to hundreds of non-game birds.<sup>18</sup> In 1900, the Lacey Act was passed by the federal government, banning the importation of plumes to states that had prohibited the plume sale. However, the Audubon state societies were not united, and the legislation was weak and poorly enforced.

### **Saving and Preserving**

In 1905, the mishmash of Audubon state societies was reorganized into the National Association of Audubon Societies, with William Dutcher as the first president. Audubon's legacy was still so powerful that it inspired the Societies to join together to provide strong leadership. The Association fought for legislation on state and national levels and also spread awareness about the destructive plume trade and hunting industries, publishing thousands of informational pamphlets and organizing Junior Audubon Club programs for schoolchildren. Success finally came in the Migratory Bird Treaty in July 1916. Under the treaty between Canada (Great Britain) and the United States, all migratory birds, as well as their nests and eggs, were strictly protected. The term "migratory bird," on the most basic level, included every native bird species in North America except for game birds and waterfowl, whose hunting was to be severely limited and controlled. Two years later, the United States passed the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which enforced the Treaty's rules.<sup>19</sup>

The Association became the National Audubon Society in 1940. The Society purchased and expanded the magazine *Bird-Lore* (see Appendix VI), renaming it *Audubon Magazine*. The magazine helped to strengthen the Society's message, and projects such as the Christmas Bird

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<sup>18</sup> Graham, Jr., 20-31.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, Jr., 65-97.



Count enabled amateur bird-watchers to get involved in citizen science. When the 1960s arrived, the Audubon Society began to play a larger role in politics as the environmental movement took the country by storm. Before the '60s, the term “environmentalism” was rarely used, and the American populace was, for the most part, ignorant of increasingly severe climate destruction. As *Silent Spring* and conservation organizations like the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Fund gained popular support, the Society became a more active leader in broader ecological issues, helping the environmental movement spread its wings and take flight. The Society lobbied for powerful legislation, such as the Wilderness Act in 1964, which set aside 9.1 million acres of land for wildlife, and the Endangered Species Act in 1973, which ensured funding for endangered species.<sup>20</sup>

David Yarnold, the Society’s current president, writes, “In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the threat to birds was the plume trade.... In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is climate change.”<sup>21</sup> In 2014, the Society released the Audubon Birds and Climate Report, which found that 314 North American bird species are in imminent danger of extinction due to climate change.<sup>22</sup> The groundbreaking report highlights how the Society, other conservation organizations, and the U.S. government must work together to protect the birds of America from extinction. With climate change posing such a severe threat, the Society’s work has become increasingly relevant. Amy Weidensaul, Director of Education with Audubon Pennsylvania says, “We [the Society] continue to be a leader in conservation.... For more than 100 years, we have focused our efforts on on-the-ground conservation work, engaging people in it for the benefit of the greater environment. Increasing people’s awareness of conservation issues and providing them with the tools to act is a critical

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<sup>20</sup> Graham, Jr., 222.

<sup>21</sup> David Yarnold, “It’s Time to Act,” *Audubon*, Sep./Oct. 2014: 22.

<sup>22</sup> Yarnold 20.

component of our work.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the Society’s advocacy and public awareness projects are just as essential as its immediate preservation actions. Today, more than 450 local Society chapters and 41 education centers dot America’s landscape, teaching youth in urban environments about a sustainable future.<sup>24</sup> Thanks to the Audubon Society, John James Audubon’s legacy can remain alive as a constant reminder of the variety of American birds and what conservation measures need to be taken to preserve this diversity for future generations.

### **Everlasting Leadership**

John James Audubon’s leadership in ornithology and art continues to live on in his two legacies: *The Birds of America*, his enormous artistic masterpiece, and the National Audubon Society. While most individuals’ active leadership ends with their death, Audubon’s personal leadership has inspired and influenced the Society’s organizational leadership in environmental preservation. Because of worsening global warming and habitat destruction, the Society’s vital leadership work in preserving Audubon’s birds of America and educating future generations about environmental degradation has become more important than ever. Audubon’s *Birds of America* remains the Society’s most powerful tool in enthralling, encouraging, and inspiring the public to celebrate Audubon’s legacy by becoming leaders themselves to combat climate change.

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<sup>23</sup> Amy Weidensaul, personal interview, 5 Feb. 2015.

<sup>24</sup> National Audubon Society, “History of Audubon and Science-based Bird Conservation.” The National Audubon Society, 2014.

## Appendix I



Pinnated Grouse, Blue-green Warbler, and Nashville Warbler painted by Alexander Wilson, the “Father of American Ornithology.” Note the rigid positions, the accepted method of painting birds by conventional ornithology. Photo courtesy of The Philadelphia Print Shop.

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Great-footed Hawk EATON PARSONS, Cinc. Mo., 11 March, 2 Green winged Teal and Goldenrod

Figure 4. Orogenic belt in Africa.

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### Appendix III



The Snowy Egret, painted by John James Audubon, was one of the most popular birds for the plume trade, known for its long white plumes, called aigrettes. Photo courtesy of the National Audubon Society.

#### Appendix IV



This article from *The Day Book* shows one of the most fashionable hats from the plume trade, featuring the aigrettes of the Snowy Egret (see Appendix III). Photo courtesy of Chronicling America.

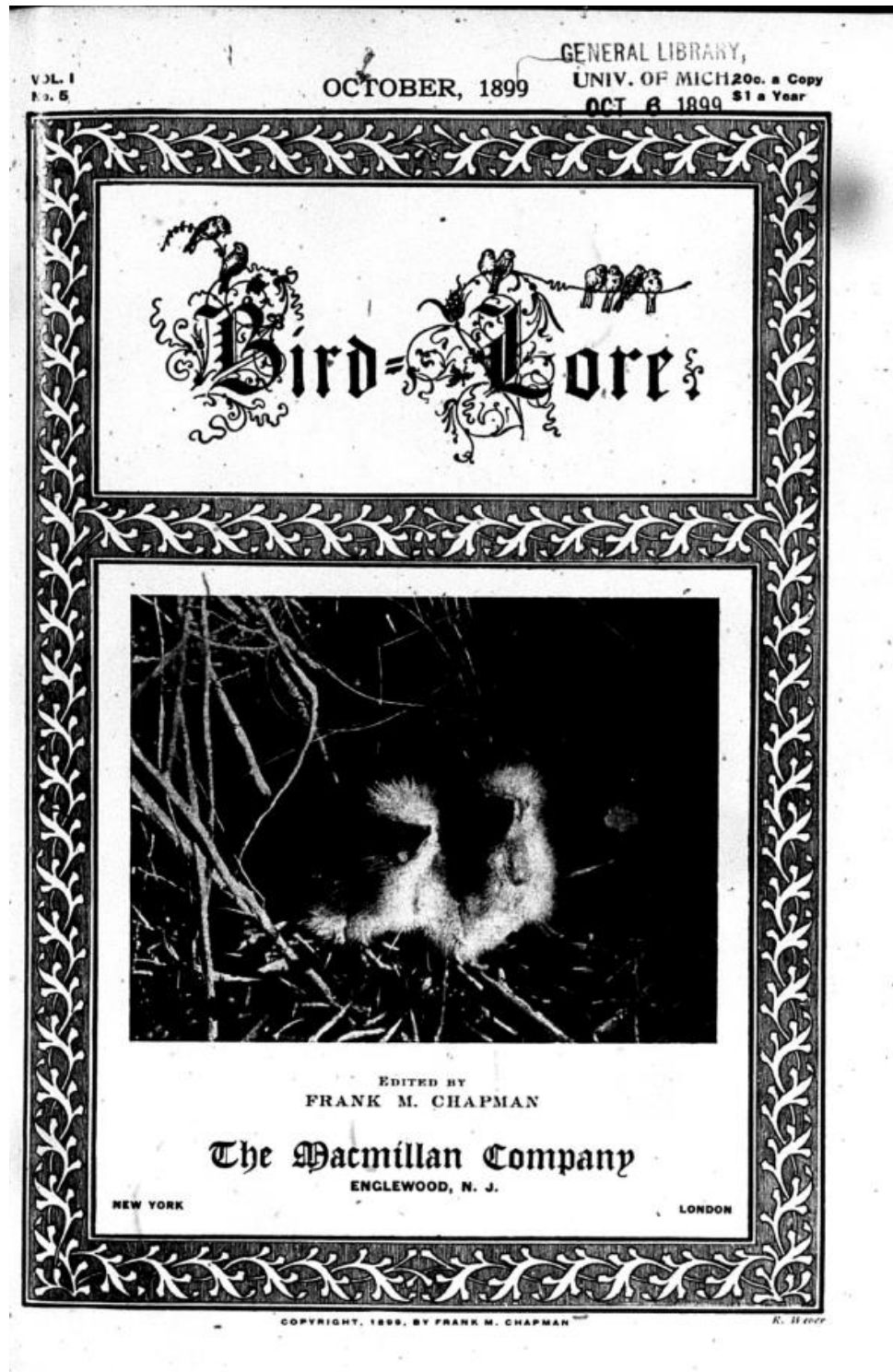
## Appendix V



This article from *The Day Book* shows another hat with plumes from the plume trade, but this hat was discovered even after protective legislation. Photo courtesy of Chronicling America.



## Appendix VI



This is a cover of one of the early editions of *Bird-lore*, the magazine that helped publicize the Audubon Society during its earliest years. Photo courtesy of the Enoch Pratt Free Library.



## **Annotated Bibliography**

### **Primary Sources**

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This newspaper article lists all of the legislative work in South Carolina done by the Audubon Society before the date of publication and how the government and individuals responded to it.

“Aigrettes Are Outlawed, But, Even So, They Are Seen On Summer Hats.” *The Day Book*. 14 July 1914: 12.

This newspaper article and photo documents illegal plumes on hats and their prevalence even after legislation had been passed prohibiting the plume trade. It helped me comprehend the scale of the plume trade and how ineffective legislation could be during that time period.

Audubon, John J. *50 Audubon Birds of America*. Ed. Roger Tory Peterson. New York: Crown Publishers, 1978. Print.

This book contains images of some of the plates in *The Birds of America*. It helped me to study Audubon’s artistic style.

\_\_\_\_. *Audubon and his Journals*. Ed. Maria R. Audubon. New York: Dover Publications, 1986. Print.

This is a collection of some of Audubon’s original journals, which helped me understand his personality and learn about his journeys.

\_\_\_\_. *Audubon Reader: The Best Writings of John James Audubon*. Ed. Scott Russell Sanders. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. Print.

This book contains some of Audubon's original writings, which helped me to learn more about his personality and opinions.

\_\_\_\_. *Favorite Audubon Birds of America*. Ed. Roger Tory Peterson. New York: Crown Publishers, 1985. Print.

This book contains images of some of the plates in *The Birds of America*. It helped me study Audubon's artistic style.

\_\_\_\_. *Great-footed Hawk*. 1827. John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, Audubon. *The National Audubon Society*. Web. 4 Feb. 2015.

This is one of Audubon's original paintings in *The Birds of America*, which I used in the appendix of my essay to showcase his artistic ability.

\_\_\_\_. *Selected Journals and Other Writings*. Ed. Ben Forkner. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.

This book contains some of Audubon's "ornithological biographies," which helped me learn more about the American environment during Audubon's time and how that influenced his artwork and his lifestyle.

\_\_\_\_. *Snowy Heron, or White Egret*. 1831. John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, Audubon. *The National Audubon Society*. Web. 4 Feb. 2015.

This is one of Audubon's original paintings in *The Birds of America*, which I used in the appendix of my essay to showcase his artistic ability.

\_\_\_\_. *The Audubon reader*. Ed. Richard Rhodes. New York: Knopf, 2006. Print.

This is a collection of some of Audubon's writings, which helped me to gain his perspective on his drawings and other events in his life.

“Biggest Thing About This New ‘Paris Creation’ Is Its Price Tag.” *The Day Book*. 6 June 1914:

3.

This is a short article featuring an image of a hat with feathers from the plume trade, which I used in the appendix of my paper.

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This article explains how the Audubon Society has been advocating for farmers to save birds for insect control, which would in turn benefit the farmers. This helped me understand the different ways that the Society promotes the protection of birds to all members of society.

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This is a publication that documents the Audubon Society’s work to prevent the plume trade from decimating bird populations. I studied multiple parts of multiple magazines within this date range, and at the time of publication, authors were not listed for articles.

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This article gave me a first-hand account of the Audubon Society’s early work with children in Junior Audubon Societies to teach the next generations about how to save birds.

National Audubon Society. *Audubon Strategic Plan 2012-2015: A Roadmap for Hemispheric Conservation*. New York: National Audubon Society, 2012. Print.

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Weaver, R.W. “Audubon.” *The Star of the North*. 27 March 1851: 2.

This is a short obituary written after Audubon’s death, which gave me a feeling for how others portrayed Audubon and what they thought about his personality.

Wilcox, Ella Wheeler. “Protecting the Birds,” editorial. *The Omaha Daily Bee*. 13 Oct. 1913: 10.

This editorial gave me a perspective into how the Audubon Society used newspapers to promulgate their advocacy messages.

Wilson, Alexander. *Pinnated Grouse/Blue-green Warbler/Nashville Warbler*. 1808. *The Philadelphia Print Shop*. Web. 3 Feb. 2015.

This is one of Alexander Wilson’s paintings of American birds, which I used in the appendix of my paper to compare his work to that of Audubon.

Yarnold, David. “It’s Time to Act.” *Audubon*. Sep./Oct. 2014: 22. Print.

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Graham, Frank, Jr. *The Audubon Ark: A History of the National Audubon Society*. New York:

Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. Print.

This book gave me a thorough understanding of the history of the National Audubon Society and its involvement in advocacy and major legislation since its formation.

Hart-Davis, Duff. *Audubon's Elephant: America's Greatest Naturalist and the Making of The*

*Birds of America*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004. Print.

This book gave me a better understanding of Audubon's personality and his experiences in Great Britain while he was attempting to publish *The Birds of America*.

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Audubon Society, 2014. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

This website has electronic files of all of Audubon's plates in *The Birds of America*, which helped me to better understand his artistic style and allowed me to use images in the appendix of my essay.

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This website was able to give me a perspective on what the Society thought of John James Audubon.

Powell, Nancy. Personal interview. 25 Jan. 2015.

Ms. Powell works at the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, Audubon's first home in America, which is now managed by the National Audubon Society. She gave me a unique perspective on Audubon's ethics and personality, which I was not able to find in any of my other sources.

Price, Jennifer. "Hats Off to Audubon." *Audubon*. Nov./Dec. 2004. Web. *Audubon Magazine Archives*. The National Audubon Society, 2004. 2 Jan. 2015.

This magazine article gives many statistics on the plume trade, which helped me understand the scale and size of the slaughter of birds and the ways that Audubon responded.

Rhodes, Richard. *John James Audubon: the Making of an American*. New York: Knopf, 2004. Print.

This historical monograph is one of two that helped me learn about Audubon's life story. This book in particular uses multiple primary sources and quotes that helped me understand Audubon's personality and opinions on events in his life.

Souder, William, Duff Hart-Davis, Mary Obmascik, and Jeff Wells. Interview with Lynn Neary.

“The Legacy of John James Audubon.” *Talk of the Nation*. National Public Radio. 5 July 2004.

I listened to this interview to get the opinion of multiple professionals and experts on Audubon and to understand how their positions differed.

Souder, William. Personal interview. 30 Dec. 2014.

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Souder, William. *Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of The Birds of America*. New York: North Point Press, 2004. Print.

This historical monograph is one of two that helped me learn about Audubon’s life story. This book also included valuable information about Alexander Wilson and his artistic style, which I could then compare to Audubon’s.

Weidensaul, Amy. Personal interview. 5 Feb. 2015.

Ms. Weidensaul currently works at the state office of the National Audubon Society in Pennsylvania, and by interviewing her, I was better able to understand the Society’s work today and its modern advocacy to carry on Audubon’s legacy.