

From Nana's Back Porch: Famous John James Audubon

Hello, this is Nana, today I am going to tell you some facts that you might not know about John James Audubon. He was one of the first people to paint and describe the birds of America, becoming the country's most famous wildlife artist.

His books, published with 435 life-sized prints, is still the standard for modern day 20th century artists such as Rodger Tory Peterson and David Sibley are measured.

Audubon was born in Domingue, or now known as Haiti, the son of a sea captain, and was raised by his step-mother in France. He fell in love with birds and nature at an early age, and began a lifelong study and drawing local birds.

At the age of 18, he was sent to America to escape being drafted into the military service by Napoleon. He lived on the family estate of Milgrove, which is near Philadelphia, where he hunted, studied, drew birds, and he met his wife Lucy Bakewell.

While at Milgrove, he conducted the first known bird banding experiment in North America, simply by tying strings around the legs of a bird known as the Eastern Phoebe. And he learned that the birds returned to the very same nesting area each year.

He tried to be a dry goods storeowner, and was successful for a while, continuing to draw birds as a hobby. But hard times hit, and he was briefly jailed for bankruptcy. With no other prospects, he started off on his own epic quest to paint and draw America's birds, with nothing but his gun, art supplies, and a young assistant.

Floating down the Mississippi, he lived a rugged hand-to-mouth existence in the Southern Territories while his wife Lucy earned money as a tutor to wealthy plantation families.

In 1826, he sailed to England with his partially finished portfolio. The portfolio was named *The American Woodsman*, and it was an overnight success. His life-sized, highly dramatic bird portraits, along with his wonderful descriptions of the wilderness life hit the right note at the time of Europe's romantic era.

The last print was issued in 1838, by which time Audubon had achieved fame and a modest wealth.

He came back to America several more times in search of birds, and made a final trip in 1843 to study and to draw mammals. This portfolio was largely completed by his two sons.

Audubon died at the age of 65, in 1851. I find it ironic and very sad he is buried in a cemetery at Trinity Church, at 155th street and Broadway, in New York City. Perhaps, in 1851, there were trees and an abundance of birds around the cemetery.

But John James Audubon's story is one of triumph over adversity and hardship. His accomplishment will live long through the ages. He captured the spirit of a young, innocent America, when the wilderness had no limit, and she called to him endlessly.

He was a person of legendary strength, able to sit motionless in a tree for hours in order to observe nature and draw his beloved birds.

He was an avid hunter, as were his friends. But later in life, he had a deep appreciation and concern for conservation, sounding the alarm early against the destruction of birds and their habitats.

He said, "A true conservationist is a man who knows the world is not given to him by his fathers, but borrowed from his children."

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"There are no mistakes in chalk pastel art!" - Nana

Thank you for joining me today. I hope you have a love for birds and nature as I do, famously awakened by John James Audubon.

And always remember: you can draw birds! You can observe them as he did. Why? Because you ARE an artist!

Love, Nana

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