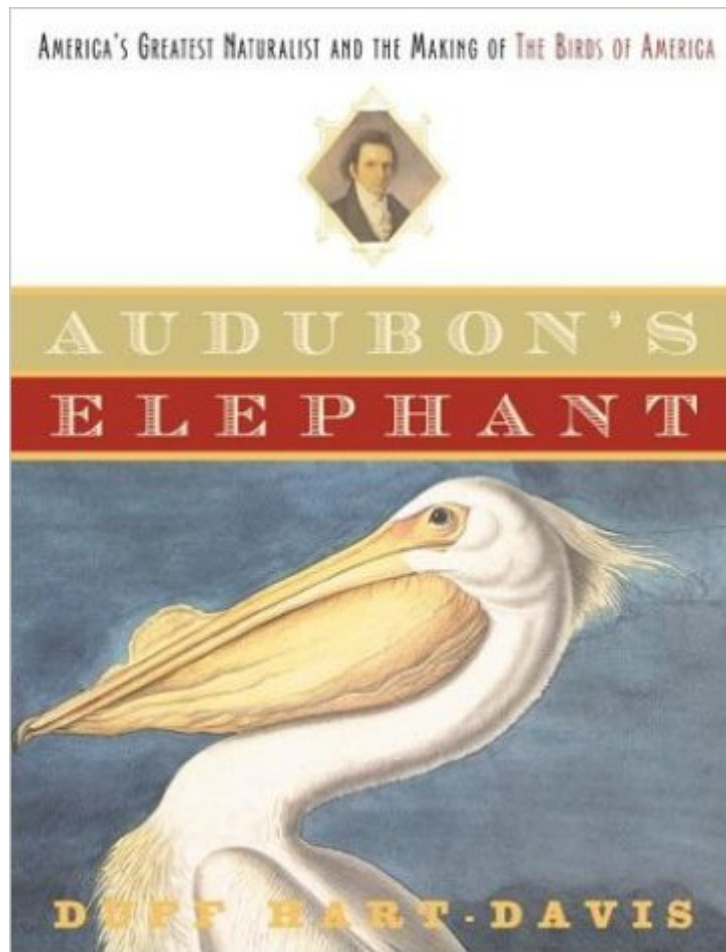


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# Audubon's Elephant: America's Greatest Naturalist And The Making Of The Birds Of America



## 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

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.

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.

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