

Hand-colored lithographs illustrate the work of John Cassin, one of America's great 19th-century ornithologists.

Cassin, John. *Illustrations of the birds of California, Texas, Oregon, British and Russian America*. Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1865. 10 5/8 inches (270 mm), viii, 298 pp. 50 hand-colored plates.

John Cassin (1813–69) was the greatest American closet-ornithologist of his day. Although not without experience as a field naturalist, he was a bookish scientist and no explorer. Most of his time and efforts were devoted to the curating and description of the unrivaled collection of bird specimens, both American and foreign, at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, then the largest in the world. For many years he had a *de facto* taxonomic monopoly over the ornithological collections and library, enabling him to describe and name nearly 200 new species. Cassin was one of the very few 19th-century American scientists to be as much at home with the birds of the Old World as the New.

Until the rise of the Smithsonian Institution in the late 19th century, complemented by Agassiz's Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, Philadelphia remained the center of research and publishing in American natural history. Cassin was superbly placed to take a leading role in writing and producing many of the illustrated quarto reports without which no government scientific expedition was complete. Much or all of the ornithological description in the reports from Wilkes's United States Exploring Expedition, Perry's expedition to Japan, and the Pacific Railroad Survey was Cassin's work. His marriage to the widow of John T. Bowen (1801–56) placed him in charge of a lithographic and engraving firm of which he had previously been merely a customer: it was the chief source of hand-colored plates for American scientific works of the time.

The many discoveries made during the exploration of the American West convinced Cassin that a supplement to previous ornithologies was required. John James Audubon having produced that most extensive and authoritative account, Cassin originally proposed to join forces with his sons Victor and John Woodhouse Audubon. The family was of course familiar with the firm of J.T. Bowen, which had produced not

only a seven-volume octavo edition (1840–44) of the father’s elephant folio *Birds of America*, but the original edition of its companion folio, *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (1845–48) and its own octavo reprint. Cassin’s plan was for a three-volume supplement, uniform with the octavo *Birds*, but the project foundered when he insisted on correcting the nomenclatural vagaries of the elder Audubon, then recently deceased, and on including his name on the title-page.

Cassin therefore published *Illustrations of the Birds of California, Texas, Oregon, British and Russian America* on his own account in ten fascicules between 1853 and 1855. The preface is dated November 1855—copyright was also entered for that year—but the title-page (as so often with November or December publications) was advanced in date, to 1856. There were reprints or reissues in 1862 and (as here) 1865. (Materials, apparently, were on hand for two more volumes, but the book sold poorly and Cassin never found the time to prepare them). The 50 hand-colored lithographs were printed by the firm of J.T. Bowen, lithographed by William E. Hitchcock (1823-80), sometimes from original drawings by George Gorgas White (died 1898). There is little to distinguish Cassin’s *Illustrations* in format or style from the Audubon family productions.

The *Illustrations* concludes (**Spread 254**) with a bizarre apologia for the closet-naturalist as one of the cornerstones of civilization:

Trust not too implicitly in the delights of the wilds, nor of solitude. They are temporary, and only to be as a teacher,—we must return ever to social life as the ark of safety, bringing, we may hope, the olive-branch of peace with knowledge ... Betake thyself not to the wilderness, or for a period only, and never longer than forty days—never!—if there is any help for it.

Thoreau’s *Walden, or Life in the Woods* had been published in Boston just the year before. Was this paragraph (like a similar defense of the closet-naturalist at **Spread 242**) a riposte? Thoreau had in fact been in Philadelphia a few months after the publication of *Walden*, delivering his lecture “Walking, or the Wild” on November 21, 1854. (His diary for that date records that he visited the Academy of Natural Sciences: “Its collection of birds said to be the largest in the world.”)

The front pastedown (**Spread 2**) bears the bookplate of Henry B. Arey, Secretary

of Girard College in Philadelphia. Appropriately, for an educator, it depicts the Lamp of Learning being filled with the Oil of Intellect; a book serves as a coaster.