

# Soaring with Audubon:

Longmont Museum exhibit captures genius of the famed ornithologist and naturalist

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John James Audubon died more than 150 years ago, but the artist and naturalist has survived the fickleness of taste to remain virtually as well-known and popular as ever.

The reasons are many, starting with the sheer virtuosity of his never-surpassed images of animals, especially those depicted in his landmark four-volume edition, "The Birds of America."

At the same time, his works speak to America's unwavering love of nature and interest in ecology, and they especially appeal to birders, a group whose hobby is enjoying a recent surge in popularity.

A traveling exhibition of Audubon's artworks, including 50 of his prints from "The Birds of America," 10 of his rarely seen watercolors and paintings and a selection of archival objects is on view through Sept. 18 at the Longmont Museum & Cultural Center.

Though too small to be considered a full-fledged retrospective, it is nonetheless a high-quality, well-rounded introduction to the artist, organized by one of the top repositories of his work — the John James Audubon State Park Museum in Henderson, Ky.

For the Longmont Museum, a regional institution that usually presents more modest fare, this is a blockbuster presentation, and it rightly expects to draw visitors from Denver, Boulder and beyond.

Admission is usually free, but for this higher-profile offering, the museum is charging \$7 for the general public and \$5 for students and seniors — entrance fees that do not seem out of line with the show's caliber.

While many people have reproductions of Audubon's images on their walls and modern

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"Black-crowned Nigh Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)," printed by Robert Havell, London, 1835, handcolored copper plate engraving. (Photos provided by Longmont Museum)

versions of "The Birds of America" in their bookcases, such facsimiles do not hold a candle to the original prints, created from 1826 to 1838.

About 180 full sets of the first-edition works were produced, with only 120 or so surviving intact. Most of the rest were broken up so that the 435 plates in each could be resold individually.

Beyond their rarity, what makes these original plates so highly sought after is the exquisite quality of the printing by the main publisher, Robert Havell of London, and the subsequent hand-coloring.

In addition, the images were printed on the largest sheets of paper possible at the time, 39 1/2 by 28 1/2 inches, allowing Audubon to depict the birds life-size — a surprising feat.

On view near Audubon's printed depiction of the snowy owl is the naturalist's own mounted specimen of the bird, allowing visitors to see the equivalent sizes and judge for themselves the accuracy of the artist's renderings.

No single image better showcases the beauty of these copperplate etchings than Audubon's famous 1834



"John James Audubon," lithograph by H.B. Hall after the 1832 painting by John Inman. This was Audubon's favorite portrait of himself. (Photos provided by Longmont Musuem)

depiction of a great blue heron. The impeccably articulated feathers and nuanced blue-gray coloring nicely set off the swooping choreography of the bird's bent neck and body.

The artist had his competitors, as a displayed volume from "American Ornithology" (1808) by one of his predecessors, Alexander Wilson, makes clear. But what sets Audubon's work apart, aside from the technical sophistication of the printing, is the realism and drama of the compositions.

In an 1827 scene worthy of TV's Animal Planet, he depicts a family of mockingbirds bravely defending their nest against a fang-baring rattlesnake, coiled around a branch below.

Less harrowing, but offering just as much action, is another well-composed plate from 1832 showing hungry fledgling robins being fed a worm by one of their parents.

Offering a broader look at Audubon as an artist is a group of his paintings and watercolors, the latter

serving as the basis for the etchings, as notes and directions along the edges illustrate.

The depictions of the leopard marmot and chipmunk, with Audubon's deft handling of the fur and rich detailing of the landscape, make clear that he was one of the great watercolorists of the 19th century.

There is nothing especially groundbreaking about this exhibition — but for fans who can't get enough of Audubon or anyone who has never had a chance to see his work up close, it is well worth the trip.

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"John James Audubon," lithograph by H.B. Hall after the 1832 painting by John Inman. This was Audubon's favorite portrait of himself. (Photos provided by Longmont Musuem)