

BOOK REVIEWS

The Birds that Audubon Missed: Desire and Discovery in the American Wilderness, by Kenn Kaufman. 2024. Avid Reader Press. 387 pp. Many drawings by both Audubon and the author. Hardcover, \$32.50. ISBN 978-1-6680-90759-4.

I was prepared to NOT like this book. So much so that I first downloaded a free Kindle sample. I am most certainly not a fan of Audubon or his art. I find the setting of his paintings often overly dramatic or just plain wrong (Mountain Plovers shown in the mountains...). The grossly contorted poses of the birds are bothersome, even though I understand they are intended to show all the key features for identification. Art aside, the man's difficult relationship with the truth and overwhelming ambition led him to commit several acts of gross scientific fraud.

My concern was that this book would be yet another fawning tribute to Audubon's genius. That notion was dispelled in the very first pages where Kaufman relates Audubon's story of how he discovered the Lincoln's Sparrow in Labrador by its song and immediately knew he had found a new bird. Great story, however, Kaufman cites some excellent detective work by Matthew Halley revealing that Audubon was on board the ship drawing the day Thomas Lincoln collected the bird, and Audubon didn't even look at it for a few days...only suspecting that it was something new once he held the specimen.

However, this book is neither an indictment of Audubon, nor a tribute. Kaufman provides a balanced and finely nuanced mixture of examples of the man's flaws and his talents. The basic premise of the book is based on Kaufman's attempts to paint, in the Audubon style, several birds that Audubon and other naturalists of the time missed, or saw but failed to recognize as different. Birds that were certainly present and relatively common at the times and places Audubon frequented. But that premise is merely the framework that Kaufman uses to produce an excellent history of the naturalists who first described and categorized the birds of North America. At a time when we may see the names of some of these pioneers of American ornithology removed from many common bird names (Wilson, Bonaparte, and so on), this book is a timely tribute to those naturalists who deserve to be recognized for their contributions.

Kaufman explains the importance of the taxonomic system created by Linnaeus in the 1700s and how, when finally broadly adopted, it ended years of chaos and confusion about names of organisms and the relationships between them. He deftly deals with the notion of priority and how a genus such as *Dendroica*, one that included a large proportion of our warblers, can suddenly disappear through a single taxonomic decision.

We get to learn about nearly everyone who made important contributions to the creation of American ornithology from Mark Catesby's foundational work in the southeast in the early 1700s to Spencer Baird, who organized and inspired a remarkable group of ornithologists and collectors to create the preeminent specimen collection of the 19th century. The museum created by George Willison Peale gets the credit it deserves as a place that provided Alexander Wilson (the true "father of American ornithology") a source of inspiration and discovery that was fundamental to all his accomplishments. We get to see the key role that Wilson and his legacy played in Audubon's career. Although they met only briefly and Wilson had been dead many years before Audubon's key publications, Audubon was obsessed with outdoing Wilson...an obsession that led to some of his most egregious acts of scientific fabrication and intellectual theft. Charles Bonaparte, whom most birders know only through the handsome gull that bears his name (or his relationship to that more famous Bonaparte), finally gets acknowledged for his careful and meticulous

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attention to detail, a trait that allowed him to correct several misidentifications made by both Wilson and Audubon.

The historical narrative is interrupted several times with chapters called, “Interlude: Channeling the Illustrator.” In these, Kaufman describes his attempts to mimic the style of Audubon’s art as he tries to create a painting of each of the species that Audubon missed. I suspect that anyone who has ever tried drawing birds will find these of interest, and some of the more technical points may be fascinating to serious artists. For me, his insights allowed me to better appreciate Audubon’s skill at composition, the challenges presented by his intent to paint each bird at life size, and his feather-perfect reproduction of the details of the specimens from which he worked. Indeed, the feather mistakes obvious in his painting of an enormous eagle that certainly existed nowhere but in Audubon’s imagination help to confirm his most outrageous fabrication.

Kaufman is careful to point out that all the “discoveries” made by these naturalists were of birds that had been well-known to America’s indigenous people for thousands of years. He also does not shy away from Audubon’s owning of enslaved people. He tells us how, after traveling down to New Orleans with two of his “servants,” taking them hundreds of miles from their families, he then had no compunction about selling them when he needed money for the return trip.

There are black-and-white reproductions of many examples of Audubon’s and Kaufman’s art throughout the text and a section at the end with full-color versions of the author’s paintings of the ten “missed” birds, all in the Audubon style. Having only seen Kaufman’s line drawings in his book *Advanced Birding*, I was very impressed with these paintings.

All in all, this is a lively and well-written book that I think anyone with an interest in birds, whether a student of ornithological history or a beginning birder, will find a rewarding read.

Edward R. Pandolfino

Small Mountain Owls, by Scott Rashid. 2009. Schiffer Publishing. 160 pp. 166 illustrations. Hardcover, \$39.99. ISBN 978-0764332821. This review is based on the original 2009 edition. A revised and expanded edition was published in 2022.

Some ornithology books are one-offs. How would one review Dawson’s *Birds of California*, or Pyle’s *Identification Guide to North American Birds*? Such works fall into the category of “here’s everything I know” and are as much a reflection of the author as the material. There’s also the phenomenon of a researcher’s “permanent place”—Alexander Skutch in Costa Rica, Glen Woolfenden in central Florida—your mental list of these pairings is probably as long as mine, since a researcher’s geographical setting frequently becomes inextricably linked to his or her output. Scott Rashid, who majored in art in college but who has spent his entire career in ornithology, is one such place-expert. His place is the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, and *Small Mountain Owls* is the culmination of four decades of banding, photographing, rehabilitating, and searching for the nests of owls around Rocky Mountain National Park.

Bursting with his paintings and photographs, *Small Mountain Owls* devotes 175 pages to four species Rashid knows best (and which you’ve probably seen least)—the Northern Pygmy Owl, the Flammulated Owl, the Saw-Whet Owl, and the Boreal Owl. I can’t imagine seeing all of these species regularly, much less studying dozens of their nests, as he has. The chapters are tailored to the species, in that section headings differ depending on what’s known about each one. Their titles hint at

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the level of detail Rashid has poured into this work, and are reminiscent of the observation-rich descriptions of ornithology books from a century ago: “Catching a Fledgling Off Guard,” “Interaction Between Neighbors,” “The Male Provides for the Family,” “Trapping Boreal Owls.” This is a non-standard book, but with ample published literature cited throughout, mixed in with Rashid’s hard-won personal observations from nights afieid.

One might ask for an editor to tidy things up in terms of organization, such as standardizing sections across species accounts, but to me, that would rob the book of heart (*Birds of the World* it’s not!). I would urge anyone studying nesting birds or breeding ecology to give this a read, if only to enjoy the stories and artwork of a master field biologist.

When I visited Scott this past summer, I asked for advice finding nests of another small owl that was occupying my own thoughts lately—the Western Screech Owl. “Find the right tree. Then just keep visiting until an owl shows up.” Oh, right. I was doing it in reverse. I bought the book.

Daniel S. Cooper

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