

# Bared Teeth, Plucked Feathers, Broken Eggs: Reading Human-Animal Relationships through Audubon

**Jacob M. Huff**, Department of English, *Indiana University - Bloomington*  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Christoph Irmscher

In this paper, I study John James Audubon's famed drawings of wildlife to uncover his perspective on the evolving relationships between humans and animals during the era of American westward expansion. Using three engravings from *Birds of America*, along with his accompanying essays, I look beyond the animals in the foreground to examine the human settlements often lurking in the background. I discover that Audubon portrays three distinct types of human-animal relationships, which I then compare to the human presence shown in two of his later works, the engravings of *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* and their subsequent essays. This second set of drawings undercuts any attempt to derive an optimistic interpretation of the *Birds* plates, for they reveal an unsustainable relationship between humans and the animals whose habitats they invade. I conclude that while *Birds* and *Quadrupeds* glorify their animal subjects, rightly qualifying as artistic and scientific triumphs, their depiction of human activity carries a much darker weight, suggesting that human presence in nature necessarily causes damage. Ultimately, this idea recasts Audubon as a thinker who transcends his historical location and offers a relevant perspective on the environment occupied by the modern reader.

**KEYWORDS:** Audubon, *Birds of America*, *Quadrupeds of North America*

Since 1827, when John James Audubon began publishing his portrayals of American birds through Robert Havell's firm, Audubon's *Birds of America* has widely been considered a triumph in the fields of both artwork and ornithology. The past two centuries have brought no shortage of praise for the images themselves, as critics laud the incredible, striking detail of the birds' features and the lush, enchanting colors of their feathers. In the whirlwind of attention given to the aesthetics of the birds, observers often overlook the presence of humans in several of Audubon's plates. The subtle human activity in the backgrounds of several images actually provides the viewer with information just as rich as the knowledge gleaned from studying the birds of the foreground. In this essay, I have chosen three representative plates from Audubon's *Birds of America*, supplemented by the essays Audubon wrote for these plates, in order to offer a slightly different view of Audubon's achievement. As I will show, the landscapes behind Audubon's depictions of the Glossy Ibis, the Snowy Heron, and the Long-billed Curlew represent three distinct types of relationships between humans and nature – relationships which are complicated by Audubon's later representations of quadrupeds in *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* (1845-1848). Given the lack of sustained critical scholarship on either *Birds* or *Quadrupeds*, these interpretive moves break new ground in approaching Audubon's work, establishing him as a scientist with much to say about humans' present treatment of the environment.

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Of the three plates selected from Audubon's *Birds of America*, the monochromatic scene that forms the background of the



Figure 1. Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, Glossy Ibis. 1837. Aquatint engraving from *Birds of America*, plate 386. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Bloomington.

1837 Glossy Ibis plate most closely depicts a coexisting relationship between humans and nature (see Figure 1). Robert Havell's greyish landscape, lying just beyond the lushly colored feathers of the ibis, contains four log buildings: "a woodcutter's cabin," his outhouse, and the two buildings of his neighbor (Audubon, 1838, p. 609). The human presence here is undeniable, yet Havell portrays it as subtly thriving alongside nature, rather than at nature's expense. The log cabins, built with patched roofs and uneven timbers, appear to possess the same rugged, wild qualities as the

environment around them, casting the human dwellings as merely small dots in the larger landscape. More significantly, Havell's decision to wash the background in muted colors emphasizes the deep scarlet and emerald found in the ibis's plumage. Upon first glancing at the plate, the viewer's eye rushes to explore the intricate linear patterns that form the bird's neck feathers, as well as the scale-like etchings that cover the ibis' wings and legs. The presence of background human dwellings does not enter into the viewer's field of vision until he or she has spent several minutes taking in the arresting beauty of the creature in the foreground.

Though many of Audubon's essays mix scientific descriptions of the birds' vivid colors with lively accounts of the writer's adventures and discoveries, his entry for the Glossy Ibis remains uncharacteristically vague. Despite Audubon's praise of the ibis being a "beautiful species" with "superb plumage," the bird's most prominent characteristic in this passage is its elusiveness (Audubon, 1838, p. 608-609). Sighting a glossy ibis in the United States is, as it would turn out, an "exceedingly rare occurrence" – so rare, in fact, that Audubon "unfortunately had no opportunity of verifying" even the most basic of its dietary and migratory habits (Audubon, 1838, p. 608-609). This unfamiliarity inevitably breeds misconceptions about the rare bird, and Audubon repeatedly expresses frustration regarding the inability of previous ornithologists to agree whether the American ibis is a unique species, or the same as another species already known to exist on other continents. Such is the rarity of this bird that Audubon himself is only able to corroborate the facts of this taxonomic disagreement after examining ibis specimens from America, Mexico, and India (Audubon, 1838, p. 611).

Taken together, the visual and written elements of Audubon's representation of the glossy ibis suggest an apparently balanced relationship between humans and nature. This is not to say that pioneers in these types of settlements possessed some deep connection to the world around them. Audubon's emphasis on the difficulty of tracking an ibis points out the ostensible separation between humankind and nature, as well as the illustration of a fence around the cabin, establishes some rudimentary barrier between the 'tame' and the 'wild.' Nonetheless, just as elements from both human and natural worlds overlap without devastating consequences ('wild' foliage can be seen on either side of the fence, and a 'tame' well has been built by the river), so do humans and creatures seemingly exist in the same area without resulting in undue harm to either. In such an environment, the bird in question is still free to thrive, unhindered by encroachment upon its natural territory. From the pale pastels of the flowers, which complement the lush hues of the plumage, to the curve of the ibis's back, which almost perfectly parallels the diagonal line of the ground below it, the persistence of unity between bird and earth indicates that nature has yet to feel the effects of human trespass. Audubon therefore captures the fleeting moment between human arrival in wilderness and the first

symptoms of natural depletion, a brief point of time in which humans and animals existed parallel to each other, occupying the same geographic space but encountering minimal conflict.

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In Audubon's 1835 plate of the Snowy Heron, or White Egret, the human presence does not so quietly accept a secondary role to nature (see Figure 2). In contrast to Havell's monochromatic renderings of the settlements of Florida woodcutters, Audubon's assistant George Lehman here adds the sprawling landscape of a South Carolina plantation. Whereas the long, low cabins represented humans dwelling within (though not with) the natural world, the more "civilized" architecture of plantation houses signifies an attempt to subjugate the land—an example of "labor in the earth to change it into a garden" (Merchant, p. 34). A neatly constructed fence cleanly reinforces the implicit division of the human realm from the natural, and the only passage through this boundary line is the human-made road, a symbol of development stretching out from the plantation house and plunging into the "wild" world beyond the borderline. Even the coloring of the plate echoes this aesthetic difference in relationship. The dark rocks, tangled moss, and tall grass that occupy the bird's world of the foreground contrast with the bright, sun-kissed hues



Figure 2. Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, Snowy Egret. 1835. Aquatint engraving, from *Birds of America*, plate 242. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Bloomington.

of the human estate in the background. Admittedly, this juxtaposition is necessary to emphasize the pure whiteness of the Snowy Heron, which stands out from its surroundings as neither a creature of the untamed swamp nor of the conquered farmland. Nevertheless, the association of civilization with light and wilderness with dark, interpreted in light of Audubon's frequent "distillation of nature into narratives of good versus evil," evokes the idea that human activity has begun to subdue nature's unruliness (Heitman, 2011).

With the establishment of borders between humans and nature also comes more conflict between humans and animals. Audubon's entry for the Snowy Heron in the *Ornithological Biography*, Vol. III, while not overtly characterized by clashes between humans and the herons, still incorporates language of violence and exploitation into its description of the bird's habits. Audubon carefully notes the behavioral changes elicited by territorial infringement, observing that "in places where these birds are often disturbed, they breed in taller trees," and that they "keep in flocks when *not* disturbed" (Audubon, 1835b, p. 318, emphasis added). If there is any doubt as to the source of such disturbances, Audubon clarifies that humans are the perpetrators by mentioning that "many of the eggs... are carried off by men," and that, "when seized, [the herons] peck at you with great spirit, and are capable of inflicting a severe wound" (Audubon, 1835b, p. 319-320). Granted, the passage as a whole focuses more intently on the Snowy Heron's uncanny social mindset, but Audubon peppers his descriptions with these and other images of violence (such as "flesh... excellent for eating") to indicate a growing enmity between humans and animals.

This increasing degree of infringement is most evident in the Snowy Heron plate in the small figure of the hunter in the lower right-hand corner. Acting as a personification of the human desire to expand further and tame the wilderness, the man walks well beyond the boundaries of the farm and enters the dark spaces of uncultivated land. With both hands on his gun, the man watches the heron, his pure, elegant prize rising from the tangled brush. At the time of *Birds of America's* publication, egret plumes were highly prized as ornamentation for hats, and although Audubon gives no clear explanation of the hunter's intent, his glowing descriptions of "the full beauty of their plumage" suggest that the figure might be attempting to glean egret feathers for profit (Audubon, 1835b, p. 319). Regardless, his intent is likely to kill, and consequently the plate's action captures the beginning of a disturbing trend that would only worsen as time progressed; by the end of the nineteenth century, the demand for snowy egret plumes had risen so much that the species' population hit an all-time low. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, passed in 1918, prohibited plume hunting within the United States and thus "helped [the egrets] to regain their former levels of abundance" (Audubon Society, 2014). Even so, in both Florida and Connecticut, the bird is still considered a threatened species – a testament to the



Figure 3. Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon. Long-billed Curlew. 1834. Aquatint engraving. Plate 231 from *Birds of America*. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Bloomington.

long-term effects resulting from humans' exploitation of the egret.

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In contrast with the agricultural settlement of the Snowy Heron plate, Audubon's (1835a) plate for the Long-billed Curlew (see Figure 3) highlights an urban community in which humans have fully settled the land, confining animals to small, controlled spaces of "wilderness." Rather than peppering the horizon with two or three houses, Lehman this time displays a panorama of the Charleston cityscape, which lies close enough to the foreground for the viewer to distinguish individual buildings, yet far enough into the background that the viewer understands the large number of human dwellings crammed into one city. These buildings constitute a thin stripe in the distance, and thus they do not take up much vertical space on the canvas; however, the true length of the horizontal space occupied by the city is of far greater importance. The engraving's edge on the left and the grass in the foreground on the right both seem to interrupt the skyline and suggest that the heavily populated cityscape extends well beyond the edges of the viewer's window. This implication of horizontal continuity is reinforced by the visual portrayal of the curlews themselves, for the strong lines formed by the beaks and the back, along with the birds' heads turned to both the right and the left, echo the linear form of the city. As a result, the human presence, though visually confined to the background of the engraving, symbolically dominates the natural world of the curlews, which turn their heads in all directions as if to communicate their predicament of being surrounded by trespassing humans.

The essay accompanying this engraving only confirms the notion of the subjugation of nature that accompanies the development of urban communities. While allusions to hunting and cooking birds appear scattered loosely throughout Audubon's description of the Snowy Heron, detailed accounts of violence against birds seems to be

the prevailing theme in Audubon's entry for the Long-billed Curlews. He devotes three of the essay's six pages recounting a hunting trip to Cole Island, where he and his companions began "shooting various birds" before even searching for signs of the curlew (Audubon, 1835a, p. 242). Audubon believes that at least some of these killings can be used to glean new information about birds, since the only reason he knows that curlews have a "propensity... to ramble" is because he has "shot some in Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Mississippi" (Audubon, 1835a, p. 240). Nevertheless, in noting that "their flesh is by no means delicate... for it has usually a fishy taste, and is rarely tender, although many persons consider it good," Audubon admits that these birds just as often fall prey to humans who hunt them for food (Audubon, 1835a, p. 243). Rather than condemning this practice, he offers the reader detailed instructions on the best strategies for hunting curlews, and he observes that they "are in general easily shot, but take a good charge" (Audubon, 1835a, p. 243). His concluding paragraphs, in which he uses a page and a half to describe the physical characteristics of a typical Long-billed Curlew, are the only paragraphs in the entire entry where humans are not mentioned. As it would seem, where humans have completely settled within the physical landscape, they have also nearly lost the ability to conceptualize nature as something distinct or separate from humankind, resulting in almost all interactions between humans and nature being understood in terms of conflict.

Together, the dominant urban landscape and the narrative of violence against the curlews indicate that when large urban communities arise, human infringement upon nature reaches its zenith and forces wildlife into confinement. The same smooth textures Havell uses to paint the orderly, "tame" world of Charleston also characterize the clouds, the sky, the water, and the edge of Cole Island, almost to imply that the reach of humans has overridden all boundaries and now extends even into the last vestiges of the natural world. Hidden behind some unruly foliage, standing atop jagged rocks and gnarled roots, the two curlews in the foreground occupy the only truly 'wild' patch of nature in this image, and the physical location of this last wilderness, an island, reinforces the notion of the birds' imprisonment. Perhaps the most haunting feature of this subjugation is the curlews' silence; even as Audubon and his companions shoot the birds in their own habitat, "not a single note or cry [is] heard" (Audubon, 1835a, p. 242). "Remaining perfectly silent," the birds watch the hunters, breaking only to cry "a few loud whistling notes" when one of their companions is shot (Audubon, 1835a, p. 243). The repeated mention of silence evokes the unnerving idea that the curlews are aware of the irreversible damage being exacted upon their world, but they will not resist. Instead of flying to safety in the barely settled west, where Audubon knows they are capable of surviving, the curlews allow humans to have their way.

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Figure 4. J. T. Bowen after John James Audubon, Mink. 1844. Hand-colored lithograph, plate 33, from *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Bloomington.

To interpret the three selected plates as a chronological documentation of human infringement upon nature would be to commit a serious logical error. Of the three images, the dense Charleston cityscape behind the Long-billed Curlew was actually the first plate engraved (Audubon, 1835a), while the pioneer setting given to the Glossy Ibis was the last (Audubon, 1838). Nevertheless, each image may still be understood by itself as representative of a particular stage in human settlement, as well as of the effects upon the natural environment that accompany each specific relationship. The relationship most recognizable to the modern reader is easily that of the curlew plate, wherein urbanization surrounds animals' natural habitats and confines threatened species to small areas of controlled "wilderness." Indeed, in the United States today, legal establishment of well-regulated nature preserves and parks is necessary for ensuring that the human desire to expand its territory is not fulfilled at any further cost to the animal habitats; thus, the suffocating dynamic evident in the curlew plate seems only a few steps removed from our present relationship to nature. The Snowy Heron plate, which prominently displays an exploitative, profit-driven relationship between humans and animals, might not immediately strike a chord of resonance within the modern Western reader, yet upon further reflection, it serves as a disturbing reminder of the harmful type of relationship that humans have had with animals the past. In doing so, the image functions as a warning of an ugly relationship with animals we never wish to revisit – a warning which still remains relevant within current debates regarding tests on laboratory animals, treatment of animals within the food industry, and many more public issues.

The temptation, then, might be to idealize the relationship portrayed by the Glossy Ibis plate as one of perfect coexistence between humans and nature, yet by itself the plate does not provide a perspective on frontier life comprehensive

enough to merit such blanket praise. On the whole, the images found in *Birds of America*, by the very nature of depicting animals that spend much of their time in the air above the human realm, cannot constitute an authoritative, complete perspective on the interactions between humans and animals. The consequences of humans' presence within agricultural and urban environments may be large enough to still manifest themselves even when viewed from the distance of the Snowy Egret or the Long-Billed Curlew, but for a nuanced understanding of human presence in "untamed" land, we must turn to the animals whose natural environment was the very ground trod by humans heading west. Audubon gives us these animals' viewpoints with a stunning degree of detail in his last project: *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, a collaboration with his son, John Woodhouse Audubon, the naturalist Reverend John Bachman from Charleston, SC, and the lithographer J.T. Bowen from Philadelphia. Compiled both from frequent expeditions through his "eastern haunts" of Kentucky forests and from a months-long journey westward to fulfill "a long-held dream... and explore the distant wilderness," these lithographs effectively capture the underbelly of the human-nature dynamic at work in the most "unsettled" areas of American land (Boehme, 2000, p. 35). More precisely, the images of the Mink, the Little Harvest Mouse, and the American Red Fox reveal information vital to interpreting humans' true relationship to their frontier cohabitants.

Though many images in the *Quadrupeds* collection depict a human presence in the animal world, the human-nature relationship displayed in the Mink lithograph (see Figure 4) bears the strongest resemblance to that of the Glossy Ibis plate. The obvious foundation for such a connection lies in the type of human dwelling common to both images: a small cabin, coarsely constructed from the materials of the land, rising from the natural landscape as if it were part of the land itself. Nonetheless, the similarity between the two scenes extends to their composition as well. For both the Ibis and the Mink, a body of water separates the animal presence in the foreground from the human presence in the background, and the strong diagonal created by the subject's body (and, in the particular case of the Mink, the log on which one animal stands) leads the viewer's eye directly to the cabin. Here, even more so than in the Ibis plate, the human domicile blends almost seamlessly into the natural world. The brown wood of the cabin walls perfectly matches the color of both the Minks' perches and the rocks bordering the river, while the light green vegetation on its roof complements the leaves in the trees and moss on the river's stones. The manner in which dense foliage envelops the cabin even evokes the way Audubon (especially in *Birds of America*) often surrounds his animals with thick undergrowth to designate them unquestionably as members of the non-human realm.

By positioning the human residence as he would one of his animal subjects, Audubon might seem to confirm that a healthy, non-contentious relationship exists between humans and animals within a frontier environment.

However, just as the Mink lithograph exaggerates the aspects of the Ibis plate that point to human-animal coexistence, it also amplifies the major problems that prevent either image from being neatly categorized as indicative of such a balanced relationship. Most significantly, the inclusion of two minks (as compared to one ibis) emphasizes the disparity between the prominence given to the animals in the foreground and the relegation of humans to the background. This unequal compositional weight works against the notion of "balance" existing between humans and nature, since Audubon asks the viewer to study the animal as the image's "most vital point" and perhaps consider the presence of humans only as an afterthought (Boehme, 2000, p. 40). Upon doing so, the viewer discovers another difficulty in classifying the Mink image on equal standing with humans: the mink closest to our vantage point is undoubtedly baring its teeth in a display of hostility toward the intrusion of observers. If the absence of a fence around the cabin suggests that this specific area remains in its earliest stages of settlement, the mink's snarl could just as easily be directed at the human newcomers in the background as it is toward us the observers. Either way, the aggression on display here complicates the so-called "peaceful" or "balanced" relationship of the frontier.

This paradox – the undercutting by subtle visual cues of what would otherwise appear a balanced relationship – turns out to be one not uncommon among *Quadrupeds'* other images of frontier America. Audubon, Bachman, &



Figure 5. J. T. Bowen, after John James Audubon, Little Harvest Mouse. Hand-colored lithograph, plate 65 from *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Bloomington.

Bowen's (1845) lithograph of the Little Harvest Mouse, for example, might also seem to imply that human presence in the frontier can exist peacefully alongside the animal world (see Figure 5). After all, the two mice shown nibbling at the left-behind cob of corn are indirectly benefiting from the human activity of cultivating crops. Despite the scene's superficial harmony, though, the image's overall tone is anything but light or optimistic. Bleak grey, brown, and dark green colors overshadow the intimate composition, contrasting sharply with the bright, lush tones of broader landscapes, such as the Mink image. Critic Edmund Wilson has pointed out that some of bland coloring might simply be a result of the tendency of quadrupeds "not to meet the artist halfway by providing so much gay color" as their avian counterparts did, but the drabness of the Mouse lithograph is drawn more heavily from the humans' harvest than from the animals themselves (Wilson, 1962, p. 485). The corn cob, a supposed source of sustenance and strength for both humans and mice, appears as a dark yellow marked by shadow, while the severed stalks and trampled husks evoke the idea of life periodically being cut off by the human hand. Even up close, Audubon's portrayal of humans' relationship to nature still presents problems for anyone wishing to classify the frontier dynamic as perfectly sustainable or balanced.

With the remaining representations of humans scattered among *Quadrupeds of America*, Audubon goes beyond muted displays of tension between humans and nature, revealing explicit harm being exacted upon animals as a result of human presence in the western frontier. Most depictions of violence against animals within *Birds of America* remain confined to the accompanying text rather than represented in the plates, but the lithographs of *Quadrupeds* display no such segmentation. From Audubon's own likeness (drawn perhaps by John Woodhouse) shooting a Black-tailed Deer to a hunter's trap snaring a Canada Otter, many other illustrations of the frontier draw attention to "the violence and the drama of the hunted animal" (Boehme, 2000, p. 39). The American Red Fox lithograph (see Figure 6) quite effectively captures one such moment of predatory human action. Its legs extended as if still propelling the animal quickly through the underbrush, the fox seems to be registering for the first time that it has been trapped; the bright orange of its fur matches the fiery anger burning in its yellow eyes, as its head contorts backward in an attempt to discover the source of its pain. Observing the fierce line formed from the fox's tense ears to its wide, gaping jaw lined with sharp incisors, the viewer can almost hear the beast's ferocious growl, a sound which might have echoed throughout the quiet serenity of the valley and eventually reached the houses dotted in the distance. Audubon and Bachman's description of the fox's natural habitat ("the fur countries to the North... [and] the Russian settlements on the west of our continent") both confirms the fox's desirability for trappers and exposes a dangerous, growing sentiment (Audubon, 1835a, p. 271). Though far from being settled to the extent of the North (with its dense urban landscapes) or



Figure 6. J. T. Bowen after John James Audubon, *Vulpes Fulves*. American Red Fox. 1846. Hand-colored lithograph, Plate 87 from *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Bloomington.

the South (with its rural plantations), America's remaining unexplored land was already being conceptualized only in terms of what humans could derive from the environment. Such a relationship could hardly be considered 'balanced.'

The insights provided by the lithographs of *Viviparous Quadrupeds of America* thus effectively thwart any temptation to romanticize the frontier relationship between humans and nature, as represented by the Glossy Ibis plate. An idealized interpretation ignores the historical context of pioneer America, in which even the most harmless of settlements gradually grew to exploit the natural world. Whatever peaceful separation between humans and animals may appear in the Ibis plate is not only a consequence of the distance by which the Ibis is separated from the world of humans, but is also merely representative of a transient moment, a brief scene of quietude before the aggressive symptoms of human encroachment on wild spaces begin to surface. As Audubon's plates demonstrate, humans—whether congregating in frontier farms, agricultural plantations, or urban landscapes—cannot live among the wilderness for very long without exacting harm upon the environment. Reverend Bachman perfectly captures the inevitability of such conflict with an image quoted in Audubon's Long-billed Curlew essay: "it is almost impossible for a man to walk between [the birds and their nests], without injuring the eggs" (Audubon, 1835a, p. 241). This chilling metaphor, implying that the mere presence of humans is enough to cause damage to the environment, redefines the tales told in Audubon's plates, casting humanity as a force of darkness haunting the otherwise magnificent displays of both *Birds* and *Quadrupeds of America* with murky undertones of bared teeth, plucked feathers, and broken eggs.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

All correspondence should be sent to huffjm@indiana.edu.

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