



A PARLIAMENT OF
OWLS

300 Years of Owl Illustration



The Great Eagle Owl

Francis Willughby and John Ray

Ornithologica

London

engraving

1676

Ray and Willughby's *Ornithologica*, published in London in 1676, was the first systematic treatise on birds accompanied with illustrations. Cambridge-educated naturalists and friends, traveled throughout England and Europe to gather material for a work on birds. They bought unusual specimens in local markets and consulted natural history collections. After the sudden death of the younger Willughby, Ray remained faithful to his memory, publishing the books they had planned together under his name, while Willughby's widow in turn supported Ray's publications.

Ornithologica was 16 months in production during which the drawings were sent to London to be engraved. Promoting the work, Ray claimed it was illustrated "by most elegant figures, nearly resembling the live birds." In truth, he was disappointed in the results sent back from his engravers in London who worked from his drawings and specimens. The images were placed four or more to the quarto page with no scale to indicate the bird's size. The poses appear stiff and some seem to have rigor mortis.



Barn Owl

Eleazar Albin

A Natural History of Birds

London

hand-colored engraving

1731-1738

Artist and author Eleazar Albin produced a three-volume illustrated history of birds in the early 18th century. His field drawings were etched onto small copper plates, then inked and printed on handmade paper. His daughter Elizabeth shared the task of finishing the prints and signed a number of the plates. They set the standard for the "bird and branch" style of illustration.

Albin's lengthy descriptions are charming in their detail listing weight and size, feather structure, stomach contents, nesting habits; and instructions for keeping caged birds. Seeking new specimens, he advertised..." for any Gentleman to send him any curious Birds for drawing and engraving in the second volume: their names to be mentioned as Encouragers of the Work. Send to Eleazar Albin near the Dog and Duck in Tottenham-Court Road."

Some of Albin's illustrations and descriptions were the first of those particular species and serve as "type specimens" or the original from which an official scientific description of the species is made. Linnaeus later based some of his descriptions on them.



Barn Owl

George-Louis Leclerc,
Le Comte de Buffon
Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux
Paris
hand-colored engraving
1749-1788

George-Louis Leclerc, Le Comte de Buffon, a towering intellectual of The Enlightenment, undertook to describe and classify the royal collections of France as well as relate his findings to the larger laws of nature. He is best known for his thirty-six volume, *Historie Naturelle*, containing a systematic compilation of everything then known about the natural world and individual species. The ten-volume section on birds, *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux*, was a landmark in the science of ornithology and helped broaden contemporary interest in natural history. Francois-Nicolas Martinet engraved the plates for this and other works by leading ornithologists of his era. He supervised a team of artists and assistants in this huge task.

The number of new species increased as voyages of exploration brought back vast new specimen collections to the capitals of Europe. Expedition reports in the form of lavish productions with colored illustrations were published using innovations in printmaking that displayed the superiority of French printing and the spirit of the times.



Little Owl

Mark Catesby

*The Natural History of
Carolina, Florida, and the
Bahama Islands*

London

hand-colored engraving

1731-1743

During two extended stays in the American Colonies, the young Englishman, Mark Catesby, made a survey of the plants and animals he encountered while collecting for patrons back home. He became adept at field observation and made careful notations on such things as plumage, diet, and migratory habits of North American birds and portrayed them more naturally than before. He made drawings of the "curiosities" not seen before by English naturalists.

Catesby returned to England in 1726 and spent the next 17 years preparing his notes for publication. Unable to afford a professional engraver, he learned to etch his own plates, ultimately numbering 220, and colored the early issues himself. Remarkably, his original watercolors still exist. They were purchased by King George III from a London bookseller shortly after Catesby's death and belong to the collections in the Print Room at Windsor Castle. Today, birds of the eastern United States number over 500 species. Catesby thought he had described them all with the 109 images that appeared in the first volume of his publication.



Flammulated Owl

Johann Leonhard Frisch
*Vorstellung der Vögel in
Teutschland (Representations of
the Birds of Germany)*

Berlin

hand-colored engraving

1733-1763

Johann Leonhard Frisch was a theologian, naturalist, and philologist. His varied career contributed to the breadth of his knowledge. With his linguistic skills, he produced a German-Latin dictionary, and spoke Slavic languages. He traveled widely, grew silkworms, and developed an interest in natural history. He began work on a publication that was completed after his death by his sons and grandsons. The first great German color-plate book, *Vorstellung der Vögel*, featured European and exotic birds including parrots drawn from the family collection of preserved specimens. The birds were divided into twelve classes with over 300 figures. It was issued in parts at irregular intervals over 30 years. The inscriptions were in German, Latin, and French.

The illustrations seem unsophisticated and even amusing, but there is a unique charm in the expressive and confident drawing. Frisch's sturdy owls are in a class by themselves for the various techniques employed to portray the plumage with dots, dashes, and crisscrosses.



Barn Owl

Cornelius Nozeman
Nederlandsche Vogelen
(*Dutch Birds*)
Amsterdam
hand-colored engraving

1770-1829

Three generations of the talented Sepp family were involved in a project that spanned six decades. This monumental account of the birds of Holland contained beautifully rendered portraits of birds drawn and engraved by the artist, Christiaan Sepp.

The work was written and published by amateur ornithologist and clergyman, Cornelius Nozeman, who included descriptions of specimens from his own cabinet of natural history. The work was completed in five volumes containing 250 decorative birds pictured close to life-sized, often with their feathered mates and nest and eggs. After Sepp's death, his son continued the publication. The venture was finally complete in 1829 when the fifth volume was finished by grandson Jan Sepp.



Snowy Owl

Prideaux John Selby

*Illustrations of British
Ornithology*

London

hand-colored engraving

1821-1834

Born into a wealthy aristocratic family, Prideaux John Selby spent his boyhood pursuing his interests in natural history on his family's estate. Educated at Oxford, he matured into the life of a gentleman naturalist with a passion for ornithology. Selby compiled careful notes on the lives of local birds and published a popular atlas of British birds for which he did most of the drawings and copper plate etchings himself. The owls are among his best including this Snowy Owl.

Selby's work is underrated, as he was a conscientious and painstaking artist. His drawings have an austere beauty. Every feather is clearly visible and details of the large flight feathers and the softer plumage stand out in immaculate precision. Tone, shade, and texture were all exploited to the fullest extent and demonstrated the best of which copper etching and engraving were capable. He wanted his birds to be "as large as the paper will allow." *Illustrations of British Ornithology* were issued in parts over thirteen years.



Snow Owl

Alexander Wilson
American Ornithology
Philadelphia
hand-colored engraving
1808-1814

Called the "Father of American Ornithology," Alexander Wilson's reputation has been eclipsed by that of his contemporary, John James Audubon. A Scottish émigré, he had a keen interest in the natural history of his adopted country. Hired as a schoolmaster, he was enchanted with the abundant wildlife surrounding his cottage, and dreamed of "making a great work of art and science...a work of beauty full of paintings and accounts of the birds of America." Wilson understood drawing was an essential tool for the study of birds and sent his early attempts to other naturalists for their opinion and instruction. An entirely self-taught artist and excellent field observer he traveled extensively, mostly on foot, or in a rowboat he named *The Ornithologist*, collecting, describing, and classifying more than 300 bird species.

Wilson published his illustrations as he encountered birds and placed them together without thought to their relationships. Subscribers to the work paid in advance to keep the project afloat. Wilson managed to publish seven volumes in just six years but intense overwork weakened his constitution and he died in 1813 before the final volume was completed.



Barn Owls

John James Audubon

The Birds of America, Havell

edition

London

hand-colored engraving, aquatint

1826-1838

Audubon's artistic abilities exceeded most of those who came before him. He placed his birds in nature with fully developed backgrounds and insisted on painting them life-sized. A self-taught artist, Audubon was a keen field observer and captured all the drama of avian life. His drawings resonated with adventure straight from a wilderness teeming with wildlife. His ambition was to figure all the birds of America in their natural habitat and publish them in a book. Unable to find a print shop that could do the work in Philadelphia, he sailed for England with a portfolio of drawings to find an engraver who would execute such a large project.

The original watercolor of this pair of barn owls was painted in Philadelphia in 1863. It now resides at the Museum of the New-York Historical Society along with all of Audubon's original drawings for the printed work. This engraved plate depicts a nocturnal scene in which the female on the top dangles a limp rodent in front of the male. It is one of 435 images in his monumental *The Birds of America* printed in Robert Havell's studio in London and issued in parts over 12 years.



Tengmalm's Owl

John Gould

The Birds of Europe

London

hand-colored lithograph

1832-1837

John Gould's *The Birds of Europe* was one of the most well-known natural history works of the 19th century and the first to feature plates by the incomparable Edward Lear whose superb draftsmanship is apparent in the lithograph he made of the Tengmalm's Owl for plate 49. His artistic style was both spontaneous and precise.

Gould was the leading publisher of ornithological books in Victorian England possessing both an entrepreneurial personality and a keen interest in birds. Most were imperial folios, depicting birds in their full size. He drew rough sketches which were refined and translated into lithographs, first by his wife, Elizabeth, and then by a succession of talented artists including Lear and Josef Wolf.

Lithography had been recently introduced in England, and Gould saw its commercial advantages by allowing the artist to draw directly onto the printing stone thus avoiding the expense of an engraver. Gould was closely involved with the development of each illustration as his notes and corrections are evident in every stage of plate preparation. The images were printed in black and white and hand-colored by a team of artists.

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