

Book Reviews

Art on the Wing: British, American, and Canadian Illustrated Bird Books. 1999. By *Joan Winearls*. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, Toronto. Softcover, 80 pages. \$20.

Birders who missed Joan Winearls' excellent exhibition of bird books at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library in Toronto can still obtain copies of Joan's book which was written to accompany the exhibition. The book stands on its own as a scholarly, but easily readable, history of the books that led up to our present bird books.

Art on the Wing traces the development of bird books that were either published in, or contained birds from, the Americas over several centuries. It is fascinating to read the evolution of bird art and printing techniques from their first crude beginnings to the excellence we have come to take for granted today.

The illustrations of the 18th and 19th centuries were stiff and lifeless, as would be expected where the artists depended on mounted specimens or even study skins as their models. Audubon tried to bring life to his work by wiring freshly killed birds into life-like poses. He then traced the outline of the bird on graph paper before filling in the detail of the feathering and soft parts. The bird in the result-

ing painting was of course full size, as was reflected in his huge Double Elephant folio edition of *The Birds of America*. With the advent of good binoculars and photography, some of the artists were able to portray the personality of the bird.

Short biographies of all major Canadian and American artists are woven into the text. I especially enjoyed those of our Canadian artists such as Allan Brooks and Terry Short, who, despite the high quality of their work, have not been given the recognition they deserve.

I found the description of the evolution of printing techniques to be most interesting. The earlier books were limited to black and white illustrations printed from crude wood cuts. Wood gave over to metal plates that were given a coating that could be scraped away to produce a drawing of the bird that could be reproduced many times. The quality of the reproduction was again improved by the advent of stone plates (lithography).

An enormous problem was how to print coloured illustrations. At first, each drawing in each book had to be hand-coloured, adding greatly to the cost of producing the book and limiting their availability to the wealthy. The advent of lithography greatly improved the colouring process. A series of plates, each with its own colour, was

applied in turn to the illustration, thus standardizing the product and eliminating the hand work. Our present fine, inexpensive bird books had to await the invention of photoengraving and computers.

Art on the Wing devotes a chapter to the evolution of the field guide from its beginning with Ernest Thompson Seton and its evolution through the several editions by Roger Tory Peterson to our excellent modern guides.

As would be expected of a book about books, *Art on the Wing* is well designed and printed on good paper. It includes thirty-seven drawings and paintings to illustrate the text, all taken from the exhibition. The colour reproduction is true to the original paintings.

Copies of the book may be obtained by phoning the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at (416) 978-5285.

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Figure 1: Black Tern on nest. Photo by *J.M. Richards*.