

SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS ABOUT AUDUBON'S ARTWORK

BY GEORGE M. SUTTON

When, sixty years ago, I wrote Louis Agassiz Fuertes about my eagerness to draw birds well, I made a disparaging comment or two about Audubon. I do not recall my exact words. I was trying to say not that Audubon was hopelessly bad, but that Fuertes was extremely good, and I meant what I said. Today I feel that comparing the two men is pointless, if not in poor taste. Audubon was a towering genius. So, too, was Fuertes.

It is easy to find shortcomings in Audubon. His Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), Yellow-billed (or White-tailed) Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*), and Greater Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*), all plantigrade species, are standing on their toes. His Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), though beautifully drawn, is pure fantasy: the great bird, headed upward with mouth open, wings partly spread, and foot clutching prey, dangles midair; it isn't even falling; there is no evidence of air pressure from any direction on its feathers. One of Audubon's Varied Thrushes (*Ixoreus naevius*) is so scrambled that its right leg, which should be on the far side of its body, appears to be on the near side. Grotesqueries of this sort validate to some extent W. B. Alexander's query, published in *Endeavor* some years ago, whether Audubon's representation of attitudes that "birds could not maintain long enough to be visible to the human eye" was not a "form of caricature" rather than "legitimate art."

Birds do assume strange attitudes now and then. A performing male Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*), with wings flopping and legs dangling, is *funny*. No other word describes him quite so well, and Audubon was no caricaturist when he delineated the bird as he did. Displaying bustards, birds-of-paradise, storks, and boobies become ludicrous, almost monstrous. Even a cock Northern



UPLAND SANDPIPERS

Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), strutting with body plumage lifted and tail spread wide, is something of a troll, obliging the thoughtful observer to wonder what the creature will turn into next.

These two photographs of one of the New World's finest shorebirds, the Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), prove (to my way of thinking) that Audubon could have been much wilder than he was in his depictions and still have been quite within the bounds of accuracy. The pictures were taken on 1 August 1974 at close range near a dirt road along the shoreline of Lake Hefner in central Oklahoma by John S. Shackford of Oklahoma City. What bird artist of today would dare to draw *Bartramia longicauda* in any of the three quaint "attitudes" shown here?

818 WEST BROOKS, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069 (DECEASED).

GENERAL NOTES

First Texas Panhandle record for Garganey. — While studying birds along the Canadian River approximately 3 miles below Lake Meredith's Sanford Dam in Hutchinson County, Texas, about 1530 on 22 November 1985, I noticed a strange duck among a group of Buffleheads (*Bucephala albeola*) loitering about on a small pond. The crown of its grayish head appeared to be somewhat flattened, and a conspicuous white stripe tapered posteriorly from just above the bill rearward along the upper sides of the head to the nape. Before 1645, I saw it twice more, once on a cattail-choked pond near the dam and later on the stilling basin below it. The openness of the stilling basin permitted me to view the duck for several moments through my 64 × Questar telescope. There could be no mistaking the identification; it was an adult male Garganey (*Anas querquedula*).

By the time I reached other observers in Amarillo by telephone, it was nearly dark. The next morning, however, several of us searched unsuccessfully for the Garganey. Ironically, this happened to be the first day of duck season and the very rare anatid was not subsequently seen.

The possibility that this duck had escaped from captivity cannot be ruled out, of course, but several North American sightings of this Old World species have been made in recent years (American Ornithologists' Union, 1983, Checklist of North American birds, 6th ed., p. 78). The first Texas record was on 11 April 1985 when Andrew O'Neil discovered an adult male at a small pond near Riviera in Kleberg County, far south Texas; it remained until 17 May (see photo on p. 323 of Amer. Birds, Vol. 39, 1985). There are two records for Oklahoma, both west central, the first on 2 May 1979 in Roger Mills County (Ross, R., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 15:7), the second for Custer County on 15 May 1981 (Klett, E., 1982, Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc. 15:9-10). Both of these birds were drakes. Similarly, the first Kansas sightings were made in recent years. A single male visited Harvey County on 29 March 1981, and another that was well photographed in Sumner County remained from 21 April until 1 May 1982 (Thompson, M.C., W. Champeny, and J. Newton, 1983, Kansas Ornithol. Soc. Bull. 34:29-30). The present account represents the first record for the vast Panhandle of Texas and was reported in Amer. Birds 40:135, 1986. — Fern Cain, 406 W. Grand, Borger, Texas 79007, 28 July 1986.