

Art of Flight

An Oshkosh museum displays masterpieces by John James Audubon.

In John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, the 19th-century author and naturalist published 435 life-size hand-colored pages of North American birds. He sought not just to catalog known species of birds, but to capture their distinctive details: the flat, heart-shaped face of the barn owl, the pink-and-black beak of the shearwater, the open-mouthed hunting pose of the fish hawk.

Many of the richly detailed plates will be on display at the "John James Audubon: Birds of America" exhibit at Paine Art Center and Gardens in Oshkosh starting May 7. They didn't have to look far for the right person to organize

the exhibit: Milwaukee curator David Wagner wrote a book, *American Wildlife Art*, with a chapter focused on Audubon's work. Wagner called on his decades of experience with wildlife art to make a selection of prints that would represent the breadth and depth of *Birds of America*.

Visitors will get an up-close view of birds of many species in different poses—a hummingbird with its head buried in a flower, two passenger pigeons locking beaks, an American robin feeding her young. It can feel like a bird watching hike through the forest, just lacking the bird song and mosquitoes. thepaine.org



Q&A

With Curator David Wagner

Q. How did you get involved with the Audubon exhibit?

A. During the first 10 years of my museum career, I helped establish an exhibition, "Birds in Art," at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau.

What unlikely things did you learn?

A teller of tall tales, Audubon was fond, for example, of reinventing his genealogy. He claimed to have been born in France, as well as on the banks of the Mississippi River.

What influence did Audubon's book have on you as you worked on the exhibit?

To know and understand the artist and his art, I read and studied Audubon's *Ornithological Biography*, and his letters and journal. In addition, I read and studied the books that have been written by others about Audubon over the years, of which there are many!

Mallard Duck, 1833, John James Audubon.



JOHN JAMES AUDUBON, MALLARD DUCK FROM THE BIRDS OF AMERICA, HAVELL EDITION, LONDON, 1834, HAND-COLORED ENGRAVING WITH ETCHING AND AQUATINT