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**Fox Sparrow, Harrington Harbour,
Quebec, July, 12, 2003.**
PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR,
11.02 × 7.09 IN (28 × 18 CM).

PENNSYLVANIA

THE ENCHANTED COUNTRY

ON A FINE September morning I discover the property of Mill Grove where the young John James Audubon, as he himself wrote in his autobiography, “Myself,” experienced some of the best times of his life.

Mill Grove was ever to me a blessed spot; in my daily walks I thought I perceived the traces left by my father as I looked on the even fences round the fields, or on the regular manner with which avenues of trees, as well as the orchards, had been planted by his hand.²

Under the golden canopy of the first trees a Northern Cardinal suddenly slips away between two shadows: a burst of red as a sign of welcome. The landscape opens, and I notice a meadow on my right. The air is very luminous. Everything

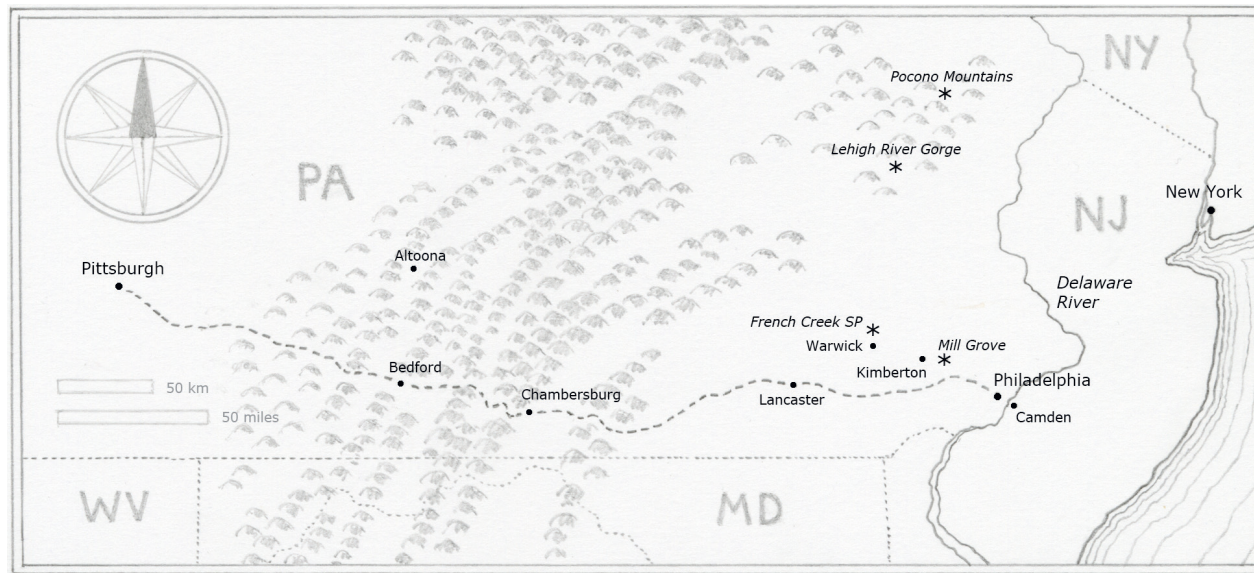
seems at once calm and expectant, like that moment of suspense in the theater when the curtains are raised and the scene first becomes visible. I am there ... at last! No one in sight, just a single car in the parking lot. The main drive takes me along some rows of fruit trees and then a barn before reaching the principal dwelling, still well preserved after two centuries.

Alan Gehret, the director of the John James Audubon Center, welcomes me and invites me to visit the house. Friendly eyes and, behind the mustache, a smile. I feel an immediate connection between us, in this place so far away from Nantes. Immediately as I step into the hallway the house feels inhabited. The only thing lacking is the crackle of a fire and the ticking of a clock. Engravings, documents, furniture, and period



Blue Jay, John James Audubon Center, Mill Grove, Audubon, Pennsylvania, May 16, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER,
3.94 × 3.54 IN (10 × 9 CM).



stocked with material used by the center's educators: stuffed birds, shells, stacked cardboard boxes, canvasses against the wall. This place looks like the studio of a contemporary painter and naturalist. It reminds me of the description given by William Gifford Bakewell, brother of Lucy, the neighbor's daughter and Audubon's future wife, after the young Frenchman had invited Bakewell to his home:

On entering his room, I was astonished and delighted to find that it was turned into a museum. The walls were festooned with all kinds of birds' eggs, carefully blown out and strung on a thread. The chimney-piece was covered with stuffed squirrels, raccoons, and opossums; and the shelves around were likewise crowded with specimens, among which were fishes, frogs, snakes, lizards, and other reptiles.³

I go out next to explore the banks of the river, an enchanted place that Audubon remembered all his life:

While young I had a plantation that lay on the sloping declivities of a creek, the name of which I have already given, but as it will ever be dear to my recollection you will, I hope, allow me to repeat it—the Perkiomen. I was extremely fond of rambling along its rocky banks, for it would have been difficult to do so either without meeting with a sweet flower spreading open its beauties to the sun or observing the watchful Kingfisher perched on some projecting stone over the clear water of the stream.⁴



Eastern Bluebird, Mill Grove, May 16, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR,
6.30 × 5.90 IN (16 × 15 CM).

objects garnish the first rooms. I am hoping to be able to see some of Audubon's drawings and watercolors, but Alan tells me that the majority of the originals are in New York and at Harvard University.

The second floor offers a reconstruction of Audubon's studio. For a long moment I stand near the window and steep myself in the view he would have appreciated as the seasons passed: the sloping meadow, the woods, and Perkiomen Creek. It was here that one day he had the idea for drawing from dead birds by attaching them with wire to boards in positions that corresponded to his observations of them in nature. This way of proceeding could be shocking today, but without modern optics like binoculars, scopes, and cameras, killing birds was the only way to study birds in Audubon era.

The happiest surprise awaits me a little further when a door ajar, under the roof, reveals a room

The old mill has disappeared and is replaced by a pumping station, but the dam still resembles the one painted by Thomas Birch in the 1820s and displayed at the New York Historical Society. I install myself on a bench at the foot of the hill and attempt a watercolor. No success ... the light changes too quickly at the end of this afternoon.

Leaving these places rich with memories, I head north and spend the next two days discovering the Lehigh River Gorge and the Pocono Mountains. At the end of the summer of 1829, Audubon painted some fine studies there, notably that of the Magnolia Warbler, having observed on several occasions its gracious and lively behavior and heard its short and high-pitched song.

It rains a lot, and the river runs along powerfully. The narrow valley and the humid atmosphere create a scene of wilderness. These valley slopes would have been even more beautiful and impressive while still covered with primeval forest and inhabited by bear, wolf, and elk, before the massive logging operations described by Audubon in this way:

Whilst I was in the Great Pine Swamp, I frequently visited one of the principal places for the launching of logs. To see them tumbling from such a height, touching here and there the rough angle of a projecting rock, bouncing from it with the elasticity of a foot-ball, and at last falling with an awful crash into the river, forms a sight interesting in the highest degree, but impossible for me to describe. Shall I tell you that I have seen masses of these logs heaped above each other to the number of five thousand?

Followed by a premonition:

And in calm nights, the greedy mills told the sad tale that in a century the noble forest around should exist no more.⁵

At dawn the following day I find a road that climbs into the Pocono Mountains. Clouds engulf the valley floor while the blue peaks streaked by mist lie in succession all the way to the horizon.

I return to Mill Grove in May 2006. Jean Bochnowski, the new director of the Audubon Center, has invited me to present the watercolors I have produced since beginning my project, “In the footsteps of Audubon.” The show’s opening celebration coincides with the official kick-off of the restoration of the barn, the future visitors’ center. My exhibition “Chasing Audubon” is opened in the presence of John Flicker, president of the National Audubon Society, local politicians, and American friends. It is the first time an artist has shown his work in this house since Audubon left in 1808, and, as one can imagine, I feel both honored and happy.

It is splendid weather, and the birds are very active. My European ear has trouble identifying the species, but in spite of that I notice the diversity of bird calls and bird songs.

Near the orchard a Blue Jay prospects the meadow, bounding like a small kangaroo. I watch it intently, and now and then I draw some of its postures from memory. As always, the first sketches are rough and unfinished, but after I spend several minutes observing and drawing,



Mill Grove and Perkiomen Creek, November 5, 2005.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR,
10.63 × 6.69 IN (27 × 17 CM).



The orchard, Mill Grove, May 17, 2006.

WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 16.14 IN (26 × 41 CM).

they become more accurate and begin to enliven the page. A woodchuck feeds happily on flowers, holding the stems with its agile fingers. All along the barn nest Barn Swallows, and a wren pair flies back and forth without respite to feed their chicks. Their nest, hidden inside a metal fence post, has me wondering how the chicks can survive encased in the stifling heat!

A little farther, at the edge of a field, I perceive the aerial ballet of a bird that reminds me of the European Flycatcher. It is the Eastern Phoebe, one of Audubon's favorite species while he was living here and which he named "Peewee" because of its simple and easily recognizable song. The bird perches; with quick, agile movements it scans the

sky, chooses its prey. Three, five times a minute it rises, pirouettes, and returns to its point of departure.

It is then that Toni, one of the teachers at the center, brings me a nest that has fallen to the ground and tells me that a pair of Eastern Phoebes sometimes nest under a nearby bridge. Curious, I follow the trail down through the forest toward the river. I have put away my pencils because I want to memorize this place without thinking of drawing. The small cave where the peewees nested no longer exists, but along the riverbank a charming site becomes visible, a kind of small backwater, where the light penetrates through the leaves. Hard not to attempt a watercolor. ...

I imagine the young Audubon, engulfed by the scent of spring, developing a clever hunch, the idea that migrating peewees could be returning year after year to the place of their birth to nest. One day watching for their return, he noticed on one of them the silver thread that he had tied to one of its legs the previous year, when the chick was still in its nest.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the surrounding countryside was still heavily wooded, rich in game, and Audubon crossed it often on foot or on horseback, accompanied by his dog, Zephyr, and his gun on his shoulder. I suppose the landscape here resembled the west of France. The local Quaker families practiced a kind of agriculture that was generally respectful of nature. In the spirit of their approach, I wish



Groundhog, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Chickadee, Eastern Phoebe, and American Robin, John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, May 16, 2007.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.81 × 16.14 in (30 × 41 cm).



**Edie Griffith, Seven Stars Farm,
Kimberton, March 9, 2007.**

GRAPHITE ON PAPER,
7.87 × 7.87 IN (20 × 20 CM).

to meet current farmers who engage in organic agriculture, to get to know their daily work and their projects. I am told that not too far from Mill Grove, in Kimberton, David and Edie Griffith keep Jersey cattle and produce excellent organic yogurt. Like many Americans, they know about the work of Audubon and agree to let me visit as long as I want. I spend the following morning in their stables, then go to paint the orchard and the brook beyond it. At the end of the afternoon, I am back in the barn for milking time, and I sketch Edie working.

David explains that during the 1990s American agricultural policies supported smaller farms but that nowadays there is overwhelming support for intensive farming of corn and soybeans for the production of ethanol. In his opinion the politicians in charge aim at making the country energy independent, whatever the cost. The farming systems of the West and Midwest are more than ever focused on intensive production based on genetic crop manipulation, whereas farming in the eastern states is more diversified as the production is intended for urban dwellers who are more and more concerned about the quality of what they consume. My hosts remain highly motivated in spite of difficulties, such as the prohibition of using their own seed crop. The emergence of a new generation of farmers who are more aware of the environment nourishes their optimism.

Leaving Kimberton I head to Warwick, where I have a rendezvous with James Thorpe

of The Nature Conservancy. Not far from French Creek State Park I sketch him while he scythes a marsh, removing invasive European reeds. The goal of this effort is to facilitate the movement of Bog Turtles by restoring an ecological corridor imperative for their survival in the region. This small species lives in rare and fragile acidic wetlands such as bogs and needs very specific ecological conditions to complete its life cycle: thick moss and deep layers of mud, which provide protection from predators, and short clumps of vegetation that let in plenty of sunlight for incubating eggs and basking, to name but two. If any of these conditions change, the Bog Turtle population can decline and may disappear.

James tells me about his first job in a university laboratory and his choice to leave it to concentrate on fieldwork, and we discover that the subjects of our ecology studies were similar.

Among my essential stops in Pennsylvania was Philadelphia and its famous Academy of Natural Sciences, founded by the entomologist Thomas Say in 1812. I had seen the city a few years before from Camden, New Jersey, on the banks of the Delaware. On that occasion the skyline dissolved in the lemony light of a fine September evening.

I let myself be enveloped by the night and the smells of the river. Then, for a long time, I studied the dark mass of Philadelphia, a city buzzing with life and whose economic activity and intellectual dynamism had contributed so

much to the history of the United States in the nineteenth century.

Although Audubon rarely traveled to this city during his years at Mill Grove, he must have visited the museum created by Charles Willson Peale. This museum was situated on the top floors of the building that would later be named Independence Hall because it was there during the summer of 1787 that the Constitution of the United States was established.

Peale was a renowned portrait painter but also a naturalist and paleontologist. His bird collection was exceptional for the day. Many of his birds had been mounted in natural positions and arranged in front of painted landscapes depicting their natural habitat. While Audubon stayed with the Bakewells at Fatland Ford during the autumn of 1811, he rode on horseback to Philadelphia. At Peale's museum he encountered Alexander Wilson, his artistic rival, whom he had met the year before on the banks of the Ohio. Wilson was then drawing a Bald Eagle holding a fish in its talons. Ten years later Audubon would use the same mounted specimen as a model for his own plate dedicated to the species.

Audubon returned once more to Philadelphia during the spring of 1824, seeking approval of his work from the best naturalists of his time and also searching, in vain, for an engraver interested in publishing his watercolors.

Perhaps daunted by John James Audubon's disappointments at the Academy of Natural Sciences, I feared it might be difficult to approach



this great institution. By chance, in the spring of 2006, an artist friend of mine, Sherrie York, arranged an introduction to Robert McCracken Peck. Robert is a well-known naturalist, author of several publications and the academy's curator of collections.

During our visit Robert gives us a few hours of unimaginable joy. In a specially adapted room, he opens the cabinets where dozens of drawings and paintings by the greatest American naturalist artists are arranged: Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Francis Lee Jaques, and others. Next, we pass through the research laboratories, visit the public galleries and then the educational rooms, and finally arrive at the immense library. All around us are portraits of great American scientists. Some of them very quickly recognized Audubon's talent and offered him their loyal support while others chose the side of his rival, Alexander Wilson. Audubon's detractors were led by George Ord, vice president of the academy, and these

Carolina Parakeet. Specimen collected by J. J. Audubon, Philadelphia, March 7, 2007. Collection Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR,
2.75 × 12.40 IN (7 × 31.5 CM).



**Dame's Rocket, Mill Grove,
May 17, 2006.**

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR,
9.84 × 5.51 IN (25 × 14 CM).

opponents successfully thwarted his inclusion in their circle. This hurt Audubon considerably, so much had he hoped for official recognition from the institution that concentrated all scientific and naturalist knowledge in America at the time.

Leaving the library Robert leads us next into a room where a modest cabinet holds a small treasure. In each drawer are arranged the birds collected and prepared by John James Audubon himself ... and I have the privilege of painting some of them.

Early in spring of the following year I return to Pennsylvania, now in the grip of a cold snap and with snow on the ground. At Mill Grove the shadows of trees delicately delineate the frozen surface of the Perkiomen River. Observing the thin layer of river ice, I think of an evening when Audubon, returned from a day's shooting, narrowly escaped death while skating with some friends on the river. The shocking event he recorded thus:

Unconsciously I happened to draw so very near a large air-hole that to check my headway became quite impossible, and down it I went, and soon felt the power of a most chilling bath. ... I must have glided with the stream some thirty or forty yards, when, as God would have it, up I popped at another air-hole, and here I did, in some way or another, manage to crawl out.⁶

This time at the Academy of Natural Sciences I meet the taxidermist, Nate Rice, working on some specimens that have come in that morning, notably a colorful woodpecker that he is showing

to a young trainee. I am here for a high point of this journey: thanks to Robert Peck, one of the great figures of American research, Ruth Patrick, a world expert on river ecology and diatoms, has agreed to meet with me. In the 1930s Ruth shed light on the effect of pollution on these microscopic algae, an observation that secured her place as one of the founders of the concept of biological indicators. She will reach the age of one hundred in a few months but still comes to work at the academy every week.

Ruth Patrick welcomes me in her office and, with her soft, even voice, recounts her childhood years. She speaks in a touching way of her father, a lawyer, who was a science and nature enthusiast and had acquired a microscope early on. She recalls that day when she was allowed to sit in his lap, after having insistently tried to clamber up, and her unchecked wonder at the microscope's revelation of the beauty of the tiniest life forms.

If Pennsylvania had for a long time held a place dear to Audubon as a result of his happy times in Mill Grove, his first crossings of the Appalachians to reach the Ohio River brought back less pleasant memories. When he went for the first time to Louisville, Kentucky, at the end of summer 1807 with his young French associate, Ferdinand Rozier, in order to investigate opening a business there, the trip passed without any problems until Lancaster. But the condition of the road worsened, and they had to add two more horses to the team. A little after Chambersburg, the landscape became hillier and the trip became

very difficult. They found themselves on a path so obstructed by stumps and rocks that the two men decided to cross the remaining passes on foot. A few months later, in April 1808, the coach taking the young Audubon couple to Kentucky, where they had decided to live, tipped over not far from the Tuscarora summit. The panicked horses continued to pull the coach, now tipped on its side, while Lucy, pregnant, was still inside.

Driving west to Pittsburgh, I think of the young couple confident in their future, ready to overcome the difficulties of an adventurous and less comfortable life. Following Route 30, I stop near Bedford to draw the old covered bridge of Claycomb before continuing my journey. The successive ridges here are so characteristic of the Appalachian mountain chain. The fickle weather sometimes shifts within minutes from glaring sunshine to a coal-gray sky. On this little road dampened by rain, between the summits covered with mist, the Alleghenies seems rugged and wild, almost deserted, so rare are lighted windows after dark. The next day I move a little farther north near Altoona to see the remains of the Allegheny Portage Railroad, an astonishing train track built at the beginning of the 1830s to link two important canals across the pass. Considered as a technological marvel at the time, for twenty years this project played a key role in the development of the interior of the United States.

I walk in the rain in a silent forest just before the last pass. I sketch a few trees, touch a few rocks, fragments of one of the oldest mountains



Allegheny Mountains, between Bedford and Ligonier, November 8, 2005.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR,
2.75 × 9.45 IN (7 × 24 CM).

in the world. The end of the trip is near. I know that in less than two hours I am going to reach the outskirts of Pittsburgh, but I want to smell once more the fresh scents of moss and dead leaves.

1. The spelling errors that appear in this book in some of Audubon's quotes are consistent with Audubon's original texts.
2. Audubon and Coues, *Myself in Audubon and His Journals*.
3. Herrick, *Audubon the Naturalist*.
4. Audubon, *The Pewee Flycatcher in Ornithological Biography*, vol. 2, 1834.
5. Audubon and Coues, *The Great Pine Swamp in Audubon and His Journals*.
6. Audubon and Coues, *Myself in Audubon and His Journals*.



**Farm between Oaks and Phoenixville,
Pennsylvania, September 6, 2003.**

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.42 × 16.14 IN (29 × 41 CM).



Purple Martins, Phoenixville, near Kimberton, May 27, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.81 × 16.14 in (30 × 41 cm).

The birds interspersed their singing with a curious rattle made by rapidly clicking their bills together.



Under the roof, John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, June 2, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 10.24 IN (26 × 26 CM).

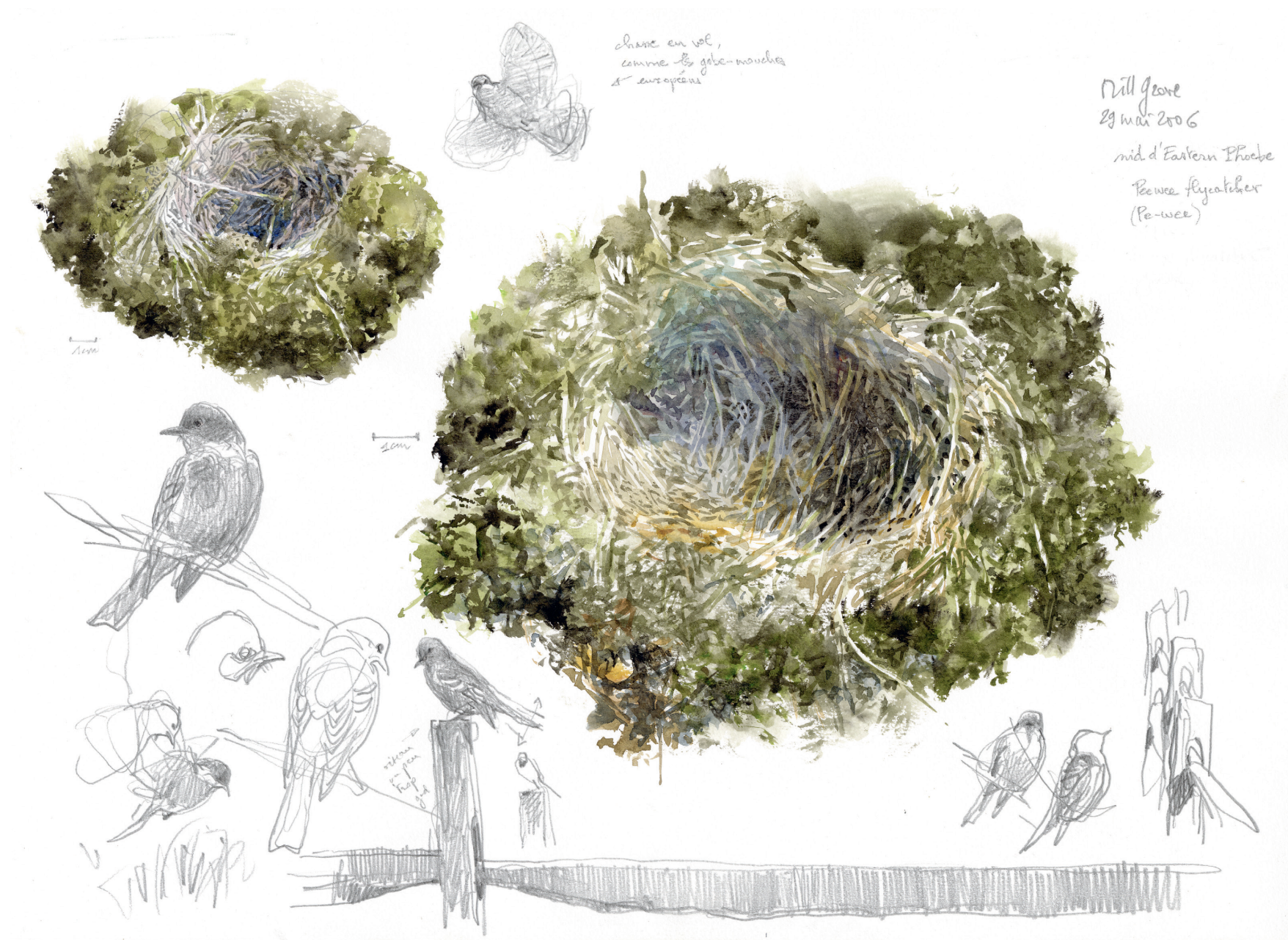


John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, September 26, 2003.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 10.63 × 16.14 IN (27 × 41 CM).

COURTESY OF THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF NANTES.

Only the left part of the building was there when Audubon lived here.



Eastern Phoebe, study of a nest, John James
Audubon Center at Mill Grove, May 29, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.42 × 15.35 IN (29 × 39 CM).



**Eastern Phoebe and House Wren, John James
Audubon Center at Mill Grove, May 28, 2006.**

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.42 × 16.14 IN (29 × 41 CM).



Barn Swallows and Baltimore Oriole, John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, May 28, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.02 × 15.75 in (28 × 40 cm).

Observe the passing Swallow, how swiftly she glides around us, how frequently she comes and goes, how graceful her flight, how pleasant her musical twitterings, how happy she seems to be! ... There a female sits on her eggs, and is receiving a store of insects from the mouth of her mate. Having fed her, he solaces her with a soft chattering voice, and away he goes in search if more food.

— Audubon, *The Chimney Swallow in Ornithological Biography*, vol. 2.



Study of a female of Northern Cardinal, John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, May 31, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 9.05 × 11.81 IN (23 × 30 CM).

Toni, one of the teachers of the center, brought me this bird that she found dead at the edge of a path.



Along the wooded bank of the Perkiomen River, Hairy Woodpecker, Gray Catbird, and Hermit Thrush, John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, May 16, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 15.75 IN (26 × 40 CM).



Edie Griffith milking her Jersey cows, Seven Stars Farm, Kimberton, May 28, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.42 × 15.75 IN (29 × 40 CM).



Purple Martins, Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbird, and Song Sparrow, Seven Stars Farm, Kimberton, March 27, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 16.14 IN (26 × 41 CM).



**Philadelphia seen from Camden, New Jersey,
September 24, 2003, in the evening.**

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.02 × 16.14 IN (28 × 41 CM).



ACADEMY OF NAT. SCIENCES
PHILADELPHIA 6.03.2007

Study of Western Meadowlark and Eastern Meadowlark made at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, March 6, 2007. Collection of the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 7.87 × 11.81 IN (28 × 30 CM).

These birds were collected by John James Audubon during his expedition along the Missouri River in 1843.



Jim Thorpe mowing a species of reed originating from Europe that upsets the ecological balance of a very large number of marshes across the country, near Warwick, May 31, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.42 × 15.75 IN (29 × 40 CM).

After leaving Jim, I joined Sean Quinn, a young volunteer who was pulling Asiatic Tearthumb shoots along Pine Creek, an invasive plant from Asia, which is nicknamed "mile a minute."



Wooded hills in the French Creek State Park, May 30, 2006.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 15.75 IN (26 × 40 CM).



Eastern Chipmunk, Lehigh River Gorge State Park, September 27, 2003.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.81 × 16.14 IN (30 × 41 CM).



The Lehigh River, near Rockport, September 27, 2003.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 11.02 × 13.38 IN (28 × 34 CM).



Covered bridge along Route 30, Bedford, November 7, 2005.

PENCIL AND WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 10.24 IN (26 × 26 CM).



The Appalachians near Altoona, November 7, 2005, in the evening.

WATERCOLOR, 10.24 × 15.35 IN (26 × 39 CM).



**Bald Eagle holding its prey, a Canada Goose,
Little Prairie, Mississippi River, November 1820.**

John James Audubon

PASTEL, BLACK CHALK, WATERCOLOR, GRAPHITE
PENCIL, BLACK INK AND GOUACHE ON PAPER,
37.5 × 25.6 IN (95 × 65 CM).

(REF 1863.18.40)

COLLECTION OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.
DIGITAL IMAGE CREATED BY OPPENHEIMER EDITIONS.

In another watercolor, created eight years later in London and which was engraved in *Birds of America*, Audubon replaced the Canada Goose with a catfish.

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