

John Abbot: Forgotten Ornithologist

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The holy mantra of academia, “publish or perish,” would be suitable moniker for John Abbot, the early American ornithologist. While his reputation in the field of entomology is well established, his prolific work in ornithology is barely acknowledged, having been eclipsed by the celebrated works of Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon. For while the esteem garnered by Wilson and Audubon in ornithological history is well placed, the work of John Abbot bears to be remembered, if for no other reason than to properly document the history of bird discovery on this continent.

Abbot was born in London on June 1, 1751, a son of an attorney. His family possessed a large collection of natural history art. Demonstrating early in his youth an affinity for the natural world, his father encouraged these pursuits by providing young Abbot with drawing lessons and volumes on flora and fauna. Included in the books provided to Abbot for study was Mark Catesby’s *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (Catesby, 1771). Perhaps fueled by this tome, Abbot elected to forego a career in the law and made for the New World, arriving in Virginia in September of 1773. Abbot lived near Jamestown for approximately two years before migrating south to Georgia in early 1776 where he settled near the city of Augusta. Abbot would eventually spend most of his life in Georgia, predominantly near Savannah and in Burke, Scriven, and Bullock Counties.

After fighting in the revolutionary war on the side of the colonies, Abbot was given 575 acres of land suitable for farming as recompense for his service. The subsequent invention of the cotton gin, coupled with the use of slave labor, enabled Abbot to prosper and pursue his first devotion, entomology. His efforts culminated in 1797 with the London publication of *The Natural History of the Rarer Lepidopterous Insects of Georgia* (Smith and Abbot, 1797).

Despite his focus on entomology, Abbot was well familiar to the ornithological community. Both

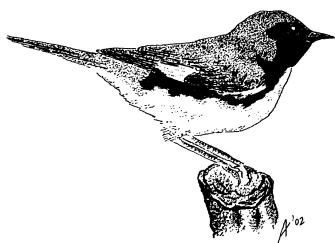
Alexander Wilson and his executor, George Ord, had dealings with Abbot. In an 1809 letter to William Bartram written during his stay in Savannah, Wilson noted, “I have been on several excursions with him [John Abbot]. He is a very good observer and paints well” (Bassett, 1938). During this same visit, upon encountering a new species (Solitary Vireo), Wilson remarked: “It is occasionally found in the State of Georgia, where I saw a drawing of it in the possession of Mr. Abbot, who considered it a very scarce species” (Stresemann, 1953).

However, Abbot wasn’t a mere acquaintance of Wilson. In a correspondence from Wilson to Abbot dated January 23, 1812 we learn that Abbot actively assisted Wilson and Ord in the completion of *American Ornithology*. “I this day received a small box containing...4 Birds viz., the small Crow, female solitary Flycatcher, and the male and female Ground dove all in good order.... Please to send the Chuck wills widow... and the beautiful rare sparrow you mention, also the striped Wren. I do not know the large green-billed Woodpecker, nor any woodpecker as large as the Woodcock, if you know of such be so good as to send me one.... My 5th Volume is nearly ready for publication and I have nearly got though all the Land birds. Any remarkably rare Hawks or Owls will be very welcome particularly the Swallow-tailed. Be as good as to mention the colour of the bill, eyes and legs and any other fugitive parts.... I will send you a list of *all* the Land & Water Birds which I have yet to draw, marking those with a *star* that I think you can furnish me with” (Stone, 1906). In a March, 1814 letter to Ord (who was then in the process of completing *American Ornithology* for Wilson who had died in August of 1813), Abbot wrote: “I received your Letter last week of Dec. last and from the great esteem and respect to the memory of your friend Mr. Wilson, who I was acquainted with during his visit to Georgia, I will give you what little information I am able respecting the birds you mention” (Stone, 1906). Abbot then goes on to describe the habit and behavior of a variety of species including the Purple Gallinule, American Coot, Common Moorhen, and Sora.

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Abbot's contributions to early American ornithology were not, however, merely limited to assisting in the completion of Wilson's opus. Rather, Abbot himself was a prolific painter of the birds he observed in and around Georgia. Unfortunately his ornithological accomplishments have been largely overlooked owing to the fact that Abbot never published this work. Nevertheless, scattered among a number of museums resides the evidence of Abbot's ornithological work, enabling the North American birder to better understand Abbot's place in this continent's ornithological history.

In 1896, Walter Faxon described a set of 181 Abbot bird drawings in the possession of the Boston Society of Natural History. Faxon estimated that the original series of colored plates totaled 200, of which 19 had been lost. "The names of the birds appear in most cases at the bottom of each plate, written in pencil the nomenclature being chiefly that of Wilson. One of the plates alone bears the inscription in ink, 'J. Abbot delin. ad vivum, 1810,' but the character of the drawings themselves as well as the considerable amount of Abbot's well known autograph on the backs of the plates leaves no doubt as to their origin" (Faxon, 1896). On the reverse of each plate were notes relating to the dimensions of the bird, notes on colors, and arrival dates of migrants. Faxon deduced that the original series of plates depicted a total of about 160 different bird species. Abbot's skill as an ornithologist is noted by the fact that "sexual and seasonal phases of plumage, so diverse as to be mistaken for specific differences by earlier ornithologists, were understood by Abbot. Thus, on Plate 112 the male Black-throated Blue Warbler is joined with his sober-suited mate, although Wilson and many of his followers put them asunder" (Faxon, 1896).



Black-throated Blue Warbler
© Adrian Binns

The next collection of Abbot's work was "discovered" by Samuel Rhoads in December of 1916 in the De Renne Georgia Library near Savannah. This collection is now housed at the University of Georgia and consists of 122 paintings, depicting 92 different species. In comparing this collection to that described by Faxon, Rhoads notes that 27 of the paintings represent species not depicted in the Boston Society collection. At the time Rhoads examined the collection, the paintings had been bound into a single volume, which bore the inscription "Birds of Georgia" and the date 1797. Based on the type of paper used, Rhoads surmised that this collection pre-dated that described by Faxon. [It was later argued that, based on the "artist's labeling which consists very largely of the vernacular and technical names of Wilson" (McAtee, 1950), this collection was made after several volumes of *American Ornithology*, 1808-1814, had been published.] Concurring in Faxon's assessment of Abbot's ornithological skill, Rhoads writes that "Abbot's great ability with the brush, as an off-hand colorist and at the same time a faithful recorder of seasonal and racial plumages in birds, is on a par with his work on moths and butterflies and their larvae. Considering the difficulty of depicting, in natural pose and proportion, the mounted bird specimens which evidently were his models, as compared with copying from flat mounts of the *Lepidoptera*, it is surprising how well his portfolios were executed in one of the 'Lost Towns of Georgia' at a period when the crude illustrations of ornithological literature had advanced little beyond those of the age of Linnaeus" (Rhoads, 1918).

Two decades after Rhoads' discovery, a third set of Abbot bird drawings was discovered under the ownership of the British Museum and scattered between that museum, the Manchester Library, and the Zoological Museum at Tring (Hertfordshire). The drawings in this collection number 295, some of which bear the date 1804. Unlike the Boston Society and De Renne collections, the history of this group of paintings is relatively well established, for Abbot had an association in England with an agent, John Francillon, through whom he sent his drawings and specimens. In a letter dated October 3, 1792 from Francillon to John Leigh Phillips of Manchester (a wealthy merchant and patron of struggling naturalists), we learn that 100 drawings of birds produced by Abbot were sent to him with the entreaty "Mr. Abbot is the

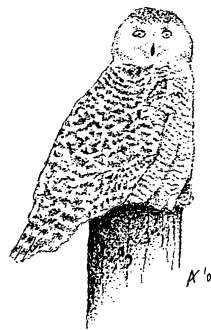
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person who collects insects so well, and (folio 75 verso) you are in possession of many of his collecting. He says he can complete about 100 more Drawings of other Birds, if the person who buys the present 100, chuses to give him the order to go on with them, and at the same price” (Allen, 1942). It is also interesting to note from this letter that Abbot’s drawings had been examined and received favorable review from the eminent English ornithologist, John Latham. In another Francillon letter dated approximately six weeks later, we learn that Phillips himself did not purchase the paintings for himself but rather arranged for their purchase by a Mr. Radcliffe. The next noteworthy exchange from Francillon to Phillips is contained in a November 1, 1805 letter and involves Francillon’s reply to dissatisfaction raised by the second set bird paintings produced by Abbot: “...I am sorry that they are not approved of. I believe the Birds are as well drawn and colored to nature as those that have been sent to you before; the Plants, Stumps and Moss are not given as fine drawings, but only something for the bird to stand or perch upon.... I should have liked them plain colored bare twigs, or stumps without leaves, of a brown color and very simple, which I think would have shown the Bird better and saved Him much trouble, but as he had begun the drawings on this plan of color’d Plants, Stumps & Moss, He must now go on with it so, those who see them should only examine the Birds, and look upon the rest merely to carry or support the Bird” (Allen, 1942). This criticism is particularly interesting as it would be only a quarter century later that England would enthusiastically embrace the use of plants, insects, and reptiles in Audubon’s *Birds of America*. Another interesting line in this letter bears consideration: “As there cannot now be a great number wanting to complete the Birds of that Country, I think it a great pity to discontinue this work, but this I must submit to your and the Gentlemens better Judgment” (Allen, 1942). Was Abbot considering completing a comprehensive work on North American birds before Wilson? Apparently Francillon’s letter was persuasive because, in January 1806, he writes to Phillips thanking him for negotiating the purchase of the paintings and advising him that he will instruct Abbot to continue to produce additional drawings. The last batch of 44 drawings eventually was sent by Francillon to Phillips under letter dated December 26, 1809.

The last collection of Abbot bird drawings that my research has been able to uncover resides in the

Smithsonian Institution Archives. This collection contains 130 watercolor drawings. “Presumably these drawings are of birds of Georgia. It is not known if these drawings duplicate any of the known sets, nor is it known how they came to be in the possession of the Smithsonian Institution” (Deiss, 2003).

One additional bird collection of Abbot’s bears comment. In 1812, Friedrich Wilhelm Sieber returned to Germany after an 11-year absence. In his possession were 130 bird specimens, representing 93 species, bearing labels of “Georgia” and “Carolina.” These specimens he turned over to the then-fledgling Zoological Museum of Berlin University. However, Sieber did not indicate the identity of the collector. After examining the historical works referenced above, Erwin Stresemann came to the conclusion that the “combination of evidence renders it safe to assume that it was John Abbot who collected these 93 species of birds from Georgia and Carolina” (Stresemann, 1953). Unfortunately, on February 3, 1945, the museum was bombed by the allies during World War II, destroying much, but not all, of Abbot’s specimens. Notable of the dozen or so survivors was that of a male Passenger Pigeon.



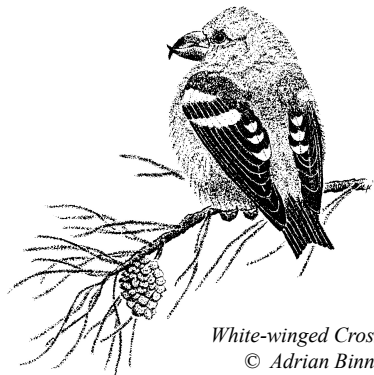
Snowy Owl
© Adrian Binns

Because Abbot’s work went unpublished, credit for discovery rightly due him, flowed instead to others of greater fame who followed. Plate 68 of the Boston Society collection depicts “a good representation of a Swainson’s Warbler, drawn at least a quarter of a century before this species was described and named by Audubon” (Faxon, 1896). Likewise, on Plate 97 is drawn a Le Conte’s Sparrow, a bird “known to Abbot and drawn by him about forty years before it was described by Audubon” (Faxon, 1896). On Plate 161, Abbot drew a Scarlet Ibis. “Most of the records of the Scarlet Ibis as a bird of the United States rest upon

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rather questionable evidence. Wilson supposed that it was found in the extreme southern part of Carolina, and in Georgia and Florida. The best Audubon could do was to get a glimpse of three flying over the tops of trees near Bayou Sare, La., in July 1821... The presence of the Scarlet Ibis among Abbot's drawings of the birds of Georgia establishes, to my mind, a better record for the United States than some of those above mentioned. It is highly improbable that he received a specimen from Central or South America and still more unlikely that he would have interpolated a foreign bird in this series of drawings. For we know from the whole tenor of his work in Georgia that it was his purpose to illustrate the local fauna" (Faxon, 1896). Other rare birds for the southern state of Georgia depicted by Abbot include the Snowy Owl and the White-winged Crossbill.

For the correctness of our ornithological history alone, it bears to remember John Abbot, the ornithologist. His failure to publish should not diminish his accomplishments nor alter his place in the annals of American ornithology.



White-winged Crossbill
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