

# THE ACADEMY OF NATURAL SCIENCES

of DREXEL UNIVERSITY

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## DAILY MUSEUM RITUAL PAYS HOMAGE TO RARE AUDUBON BOOK

***The Birds of America* takes flight every weekday at 3:15 p.m.**

PHILADELPHIA (October 31, 2011)—A rare book normally available only to scholars now can be viewed by just about anybody, but it will take you well over a year to get through it.

The book—actually a double elephant folio—is [\*The Birds of America\*](#) by John James Audubon, and you can see all 435 pages of it in person at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University. There's one catch. Because it is so old, fragile and valuable, you can only view one page per day, only at 3:15 p.m., and only on weekdays, when the museum's library is open. But Academy officials think it's well worth the price of museum admission, which is all you have to pay to see it.

"There are only about 60 institutions in the nation that have the original edition of *The Birds of America*," said Clare Flemming, the Academy's interim director of the Ewell Sale Stewart Library and Archives. "I don't know of any other place that turns the page for the public every weekday."

At 3:15 p.m. Monday through Friday, a librarian at America's oldest natural history museum props open the second-floor library's black double doors and invites roaming museum visitors inside to a little ritual. This [ritual](#)—which was held weekly until recently when it went to five days a week—calls for a librarian or another staff member to give a short talk about Audubon, the colorful 19th-century painter and naturalist. Then the master of ceremonies unlocks the sturdy glass case where perhaps the most influential book on birds in existence lies open. Conservators' gloves are donned, the glass lid is propped open. Then, using two hands, the librarian gingerly turns over one page to reveal another stunning life-size, lifelike color engraving of a bird set in its natural habitat. Then the lid comes down, and the case is locked again until the next day's ceremony.

"It's an amazing thing to witness almost 200 years after the great, if controversial, artist first began creating these beautiful portraits," said Academy Senior Fellow [Robert M. Peck](#), an Audubon authority.

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Unfortunately, some of the birds Audubon (1785–1851) painted are now extinct. But others that he used as models—suspending wires and threads to hold these dead birds in lifelike poses while he drew them—are in the Academy’s Ornithology Collection. And one of only 76 remaining copper plates used to create the engravings is on display in the library next to the double elephant folio. It is plate 366, the Gyrfalcon. Audubon called it the Icelandic Falcon.

Audubon published *The Birds of America* as a subscription, with five plates at a time released over a period of 11 years, from 1827 to 1838. A subscription cost \$1,000 or \$40,000 in today’s dollars. The Academy, where Audubon eventually became a member, was an original subscriber and eventually bound the 435 plates into five volumes.

Estimates vary, but only about 120 or fewer complete sets of Audubon’s masterwork are known to exist of the original 200 created. Last year a privately owned set was auctioned at Sotheby’s in London and fetched \$11.5 million.

For more information, visit [www.ansp.org/museum/audubon](http://www.ansp.org/museum/audubon). The library is open only to researchers by appointment, except for 3:15 p.m. when the Audubon page-turning takes place.

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*Founded in 1812, the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University is America’s oldest natural history museum and a world leader in biodiversity and environmental research. For nearly 200 years, the Academy has carried out its mission to encourage and cultivate the sciences, exploring the remarkable diversity of our natural world and sharing these discoveries with the public through innovative exhibits, publications, and educational programming.*

*HOURS: Monday–Friday, 10 a.m.–4:30 p.m.; Saturday–Sunday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m. ADMISSION: \$12 adults; \$10 children 3-12, seniors, college students, and military personnel; free for members and children under 3. \$2 fee for Butterflies! PHONE: 215-299-1000*