

American Flamingo, 1838

American Flamingo is one of the 435 hand-colored engravings that make up John James Audubon's monumental *Birds of America*, issued in four volumes between 1826 and 1838. The massive publication includes life-size representations of nearly five hundred species of North American birds. Although Audubon was not the first to attempt such a comprehensive catalog, his work departed from conventional scientific illustration, which showed lifeless specimens against a blank background, by presenting the birds as they appeared in the wild. When his pictures were first published, some naturalists objected to Audubon's use of dramatic action and pictorial design, but these are the qualities that set his work apart and make it not only an invaluable record of early American wildlife but an unmatched work of American art.

John James Audubon was born in Haiti and educated in France, where he began to explore the natural environment and develop his talent for drawing and eye for beauty. In the first decade of the nineteenth century he immigrated to the United States to manage a farm his family owned near Philadelphia. He lost it through neglect, distracted by the overwhelming bounty and variety of exotic birds he found in the region. Audubon eventually set himself the heroic task of locating, collecting, and depicting every species of bird native to North America. He moved his family to New Orleans to better explore the environs of the Mississippi



6-A John James Audubon (1785–1851); Robert Havell (1793–1878), engraver, *American Flamingo*, 1838. Hand-colored engraving with aquatint, plate $38\frac{3}{8} \times 25\frac{1}{8}$ in. (97 x 65 cm.); sheet $39\frac{1}{8} \times 26\frac{1}{8}$ in. (101.28 x 68.26 cm.). From *The Birds of America* (plate CCCCXXXI). Gift of Mrs. Walter B. James. Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

River, a major flyway for migratory birds, and eventually wandered farther from home to comb the American frontier for unrecorded species.

Audubon's procedure was to study and sketch a bird in its natural habitat before killing it carefully, using fine shot to minimize damage. His critical innovation was to then thread wire through the specimen, allowing him to fashion a lifelike pose. He worked in watercolor, and had completed some four hundred paintings when he decided to publish them as a folio of prints. Failing to find support in Philadelphia, he sailed for England, where he became lionized as "The American Woodsman." The engraving firm Robert Havell and Son took on the challenge of reproducing Audubon's paintings on copper plates and tinting the resulting black-and-white prints by hand.

To make *Birds of America* useful to both professional and amateur ornithologists, Audubon portrayed his subjects at eye level so that their distinctive markings would be clearly visible. He also painted them as near as possible to their actual size. The images are huge, each about three feet by two feet; nevertheless, to make the larger specimens fit the page, Audubon had to mold them into unusual attitudes. Because the American flamingo can stand up to five feet high, Audubon was obliged to depict that bird bending down, about to dip its beak into the water. His solution has other advantages since it allows us to study not only the unmistakable plumage but other distinguishing traits that might otherwise be hidden from view: long spindly legs that help the flamingo wade into deep water; webbed toes to support it on muddy ground, a serpentine neck to twist the head backwards in the water, and a boomerang-shaped beak to filter water and trap food. Flamingos are uncommonly social creatures, so Audubon included other birds from the flock in the background, standing tall in shallow water; some appear in the more characteristic one-legged pose. The distant view also affords a glimpse of the flamingo's habitat, the marshes and barren mud flats not far from the coast.

Audubon's eye for design lends another dimension to his accurate draftsmanship. The flamingo's silhouette emphasizes the elegant curve of its body, even as the abrupt curve of its neck gives the shocking, momentary impression of a headless bird. The angle of the flamingo's beak echoes the edge of the rock on which it stands, just as the sharp angle of its front leg echoes the long, sinuous line of its neck. Audubon plays up the flamingo's trademark shade of pink by setting the bird against a background that appears, in comparison, drained of color.

Like other American artists who sought to record the unspoiled wilderness, Audubon recognized that much of the wildlife he portrayed was bound to vanish as civilization pushed westward. He himself had first encountered a flock of American flamingos in May 1832, while sailing from the Florida Keys. By the end of the nineteenth century, the birds had retreated to the southernmost point of Florida, and today can be seen in North America only in captivity.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this painting paying attention to the foreground and background, and what is outside of the picture's borders.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M | S

Ask students what they notice first when they look at this print. *It will probably be the large flamingo.*
Have them describe how Audubon emphasized the largest flamingo. *He made it fill the page, centered it in the composition, and placed its bright color against a relatively plain and muted background.*

E | M | S

Where are there patterns on this bird? *Patterns are found on the beak and in the pattern of the folded wings.*

E | M | S

What is in the background of this print? *We find other flamingos, marshes, water.*
What are the birds doing in this image? *They appear to be looking for food.*

E | M | S

Describe how Audubon indicated the large size of the flamingo's natural habitat.
He suggested distance by making water in the background lighter than that in the foreground and painting distant birds smaller and in lighter colors than the closest flamingo.

M | S

Audubon gave the flamingo its character by drawing many kinds of lines. Ask students to identify some of the different kinds of lines in the bird.
The bird has a wavy neck, wings made with smooth curves, and straight and angled legs.

E | M | S

Ask the students what they think the sketches at the top represent. *They are rough drawings of the beak and feet.*
Ask students to speculate about why they have been left in the print. *Perhaps to give additional information — how the beak looks when it is open, how the foot looks from above; to fill the space at the top so it doesn't look bare in comparison to the bottom; or to show that the artist observes as carefully as a scientist.*

INTERPRET

E | M | S

Ask students why they think Audubon painted his subjects life-size rather than just creating smaller pictures of them.
He wanted viewers to understand the actual size of these birds and to see the details in their bodies and wings.

E | M | S

Why do you think that Audubon positioned the flamingo like this with its neck bent down?
He wished to fit this big bird on the page, to create a pleasing composition, and to show how this tall bird was able to eat food in the water.

M | S

Have students explain what makes this print an artwork rather than just a scientific illustration.
Students may mention the life-like pose of the bird, the addition of the background, or the beauty of the composition.

S

Ask students if they think this flamingo looks alive or dead.
Students might think its pose and setting make it seem alive. Explain that photography hadn't been invented yet, and that Audubon had to kill the birds and arrange them in life-like positions so he could take the time necessary to study them in exacting detail.

S

Encourage students to consider why Audubon and other artists were intent on documenting American wildlife at this time in America's history.
As America was being settled and developed, there was a great interest in science and in learning about American plants and animals. Artists often joined expeditions to explore and document the American continent and its life forms.

S

Ask how this print of a flamingo is different from the plastic flamingos that people sometimes place in their yards. Are both types of flamingos art?

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: Jacksonian era
Geography: Florida Keys (Indian Key — natural habitat of the North American flamingo, now extinct.)

Science: classification of species; conservation and protection of species; birds

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *My Style of Drawing Birds*, John James Audubon