

Eighteenth-Century Naturalists of Hudson Bay

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Source: The Auk, 121(4) : 1301

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038\(2004\)121\[1301:ENOHB\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038(2004)121[1301:ENOHB]2.0.CO;2)

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The Auk 121(4):1301, 2004

Eighteenth-Century Naturalists of Hudson Bay.—Stuart Houston, Tim Ball, and Mary Houston. 2003. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, Canada. xviii + 332 pp., 8 color plates, 49 text figures. ISBN 0-7735-2285-9. Cloth, \$49.95.—This book explores several topics that the authors discovered by delving into the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The topics are as diverse as lynx cycles; climatology; Charleston, South Carolina in the eighteenth century; trade in swan skins and quills; but, more importantly, the eighteenth-century naturalists of the Hudson Bay. The book deals with a little known but extremely important development in the history of North American ornithology. As the authors point out, the Hudson Bay region of Canada in the 18th century was host to a group of remarkable naturalists who collected many of the type specimens of previously unknown North American bird species, not only from the Arctic coast, but throughout the Canadian west where their trade took them. Often with little scientific training, those men, employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, spent several years of their lives working in trading posts of northern Canada as fur traders and factors. The company encouraged scientific exploration, and specimens were sent back to Europe where they were described by leading biologists, including Linnaeus and Gmelin. Thomas Pennant, author of the 18th-century classics *British Zoology* and *Arctic Zoology*, was a scientist who collaborated with and encouraged those men.

The authors do well in highlighting the achievements of the Hudson Bay naturalists and

giving us a flavor of life, not only of the desolate Hudson Bay, but also of the scientific world at the time when the North American avifauna was being discovered. The importance of people like Andrew Graham, Thomas Hutchins, and others cannot be overestimated. When I was working on Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) at La Perouse Bay, I had many occasions to read the records of the Hudson's Bay Company and the journals of those men and to admire their powers of observation and originality. Often, as ornithologists, we satisfy ourselves with the relatively recent publications, whereas older work is shunted aside. Graham and Hutchins were the first, to my knowledge, to record the differing phase ratios of Lesser Snow Geese (*C. c. caerulescens*) in different parts of their range more than 200 years ago, an observation that was not repeated until the late 19th century.

The book represents an example of what amateur ornithologists can contribute to the field. Through their wide range of interests, Stuart and Mary Houston have combined knowledge of birds, the Arctic, medicine, and Canadian history to increase our knowledge of a fascinating period of history. For the most part, the book is a fascinating read. However, the diversity of topics makes it difficult at times to see the connectedness of the book. I found it difficult to see the relevance of the climatology chapter to the rest of the volume. That chapter starts with the dubious statement that weather is cyclical and goes on to emphasize the long-term nature of Hudson's Bay Company weather records, without actually saying anything very interesting about the records themselves. Despite that minor criticism, however, this is certainly an important book for those interested in the early development of North American ornithology.—FRED COOKE, *Larkins Cottage, 6 Lynn Road, Castle Rising, Norfolk PE31 6AB, United Kingdom. E-mail: f.cooke@uea.ac.uk*