

## **John Kirk Townsend: Collector of Audubon's Western Birds and Mammals**

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**John Kirk Townsend: Collector of Audubon's Western Birds and Mammals.**—Barbara and Richard Mearns. 2007. Published by the authors, Dumfries, Scotland (order from [www.mearnsbooks.com](http://www.mearnsbooks.com)). x + 389 pp., 300+ color illustrations and photographs, 60+ black-and-white illustrations and photographs, 11 maps, miscellaneous charts, tables, and figures, 18 appendices. ISBN 978-0-9556739-0-0. Hardback, £ 48.—John Kirk Townsend is one of those names familiar to most ornithologists, but other than its being attached to a number of familiar bird and mammal names, or identified as the describer of various species, few today know anything about the man behind the name. This is not altogether surprising, because much of what has been handed down through the years has been Townsend as seen (and sometimes judged) through the eyes of others, including some contemporaries who ultimately achieved greater fame. Born in Philadelphia in 1809, Townsend was present at the creation, so to speak, of American ornithology and was an active player in it as an associate of Thomas Nuttall, John James Audubon and John Bachman, Spencer Fullerton Baird and William Baird (the latter his brother-in-law), John Cassin, and others of similar caliber. Yet Townsend was seemingly soon forgotten after his untimely death in 1851. More than a half-century later, Witmer Stone, like Townsend an affiliate of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, favorably resurrected Townsend's story (Stone 1903, 1916). Almost a century after that, the present authors rediscovered Townsend, summarizing his life in the course of compiling a book of short biographies, in which they devoted more pages to Townsend than to any other historical figure in American ornithology (Mearns and Mearns 1992). Undoubtedly intrigued by Stone's (1916:10) statement that Townsend "was evidently a genius whom force of circumstances prevented from reaching his proper place in ornithological annals," and recognizing a good story, the Mearnses have produced the present in-depth biography. And a compelling story it is, as Townsend seems to have been one of those figures who was involved in many of the significant events of his time, not just biological but political and cultural as well. He was one of those who crossed the continent when the land was young and returned to tell the tale, but he was ultimately marginalized from the developing discipline of natural history.

The book is organized into three principal parts, each with multiple sections. Part 1 is concerned with Townsend's early life in the Philadelphia area; Part 2 with his monumental journey west during the years 1834–1837, when he and Nuttall were invited to accompany a fur- and fish-trading expedition to the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast; and Part 3 with his life after returning to the East. These are preceded by a useful seven-page chronology, which tracks Townsend's life in relation to other events of the time, and followed by 18 appendices, including multiple lists of species and specimens of birds and mammals, plus an extensive bibliography of published and unpublished sources, as well as species and general indexes. The work is beautifully and extensively illustrated; perhaps unique are many photographs of Townsend's actual specimens, many with their red labels signifying a type

specimen, juxtaposed with Audubon's original watercolors and/or the final engraved plates of bird and mammal species based on those very specimens. Townsend's many contributions to Audubon's great works are undeniable.

The first part of the book sets the stage, discussing Townsend's Quaker upbringing, his close-knit family life (which remained important to him), and his early association with the Philadelphia Academy, including his introduction to Nuttall in 1829 and to Audubon shortly thereafter. Here we begin to see the contrasts between Townsend and his older contemporary Audubon, including their differences in temperament, and this thread is followed throughout the book. Also included here is his discovery of what came to be known as Townsend's Bunting (*Emberiza townsendii*), one of those enigmatic entities that, along with the Blue Mountain Warbler (*Sylvia montana*), the Small-headed Flycatcher (*S. microcephala*), and several others, seem forever doomed to the Purgatory of the "forms of doubtful status" (American Ornithologists' Union 1998).

Part 2, the heart of the book, is less a biography than an abridged and annotated version of Townsend's own 1839 *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains, to the Columbia River, and a Visit to the Sandwich Islands, Chili, &c. with a Scientific Appendix*, together with excerpts from his letters to and from home, plus journal entries by Townsend, his companion Nuttall, and others he met along the way. This is a story of traveling the Oregon Trail, attending the fur trappers' rendezvous of 1834 (essentially a drunken brawl, according to Townsend), and life on the Columbia River frontier, at that time being "shared" by Great Britain and the United States. Here also are his two lengthy visits to the Hawaiian Islands (the first, it seems, primarily to escape the dreary winter weather of the northwest coast; some things never change). And, ultimately, the return voyage around South America, with collecting stops in Tahiti and Chile for good measure. Throughout it all, we are treated to a continuing procession of new and wonderful species, including many now considered emblematic of western North America. The Mearns's careful documentation of these discoveries, including the specimens taken, their subsequent use in species descriptions, and their ultimate deposition, constitutes the most important scientific contribution of the book.

Scattered throughout the scientific discoveries, however, are some great tales. Here is Townsend, out on a solo collecting excursion, being chased across the Idaho landscape by an enraged grizzly bear. And here he is on the Willamette River, when he spots a California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) on the opposite shore; he fires to collect it, but only wounds the great bird, so he quickly strips down, swims the river, and chases after it "in a state of absolute nudity," trying to club it into submission, all to the amusement of onlooking native villagers. He lost all his reptile specimens when one of his more rustic companions drank all the alcohol from the jars, leaving the specimens to rot; that rogue later died, but from gunshot, not purloined spirits. We learn, more than once, that portaging boats and gear (and specimens) around rapids was as onerous a chore in the 1830s as it is for river runners today. Overall, we are given a largely unvarnished picture of the young Townsend. His penchant for robbing native burials (especially for skulls) would certainly be frowned upon today (as well as being decidedly illegal), and some of his observations, such as deeming Mormons "a sect of fanatics," doubtless fail the political

correctness test of our time. Throughout the text, sidebars and inserts tell of more strange and interesting stories, including how two of his bird specimens came to be entangled in murder mysteries many decades later.

Part 3 documents Townsend's life after he returned to the East. After being away for almost four years, it must have been a shock to so quickly become caught up in the swirl of politics and jealousies that seemed to characterize the natural-history scene of the time. Central to that scene was Audubon, desperately trying to finish his *Birds of America* when Townsend showed up, "inconveniently" bringing more new species that Audubon needed to include, if only he could get his hands on the specimens. Townsend's halting efforts to publish his material are continually complicated by the need to support himself, first in Philadelphia, then at the fledgling National Institute in Washington, D.C., where lack of Congressional support ultimately doomed his position, and later back in Philadelphia, where he eventually turned to the medical profession to support his new wife and child. This was not necessarily an unhappy time for him, as he was devoted to his extended family and remained engaged in natural-history pursuits, but there must have been frustration in never achieving professional "success." Looking forward to a journey to Africa, he fell suddenly ill and died, aged 41, in February 1851, possibly as a result of arsenic exposure in his various curatorial posts. Whether it was the authors' intent or not, I came away from this story with a sense that had I been around in those days, I would have been suitably impressed with Audubon, as he surely was an undeniable force of nature, driven obsessively by a grand vision, but I am not sure I would have liked the man. The picture that emerges of Townsend, however, is of a warm and friendly, curious and intelligent, uncomplicated, family-centered individual, one whom it would have been a pleasure to know.

I found very little to quibble with in the book. Although the sheer volume of information at times seems overwhelming, and makes a straight-through reading somewhat difficult, it also makes for fascinating browsing. My familiarity with some of the arguments, pro or con, regarding type localities and priorities for some species and names, is not sufficient to comment on all the authors' many conclusions. They do make a convincing case for placing the type locality for Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) in eastern Washington, but this may not be the last word on the subject. The maps are useful for keeping track of time and geography, though I was occasionally confused as to just where some things were occurring; of course, Townsend was sometimes confused as to just where he was, too. I was surprised by the apparent lack of tension among the British and Americans at Fort Vancouver, given that the two nations were then on a collision course over the Oregon issue, with American expansionists increasingly eager for war.

Some of the authors' conclusions regarding the early ranges of certain bird species, based on Townsend's writings, will likely be met with skepticism by students of bird distribution. Placing the Lesser Prairie-Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) in east-central Missouri, far beyond its known historical range, entirely on the basis of Townsend's impression of the shade of orange of the air sacs (page 46), is hard to accept. Townsend's brief mention of a "black duck" with young (page 94) seems thin evidence for designating *Anas rubripes* an Idaho breeding species (page 98); an easterner, Townsend was almost certainly misidentifying female

Mallards (*A. platyrhynchos*). I believe that Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*) eggs were brought to Gray's Lake, Idaho, not because the species was believed to have nested there in Townsend's time and so was being "reintroduced" to its historical range (page 98) but instead to be experimentally cross-fostered with a closely studied population of Sandhill Cranes (*G. canadensis*).

This book would be a desirable addition to university, museum, and other libraries, and of interest to students of all aspects of early American ornithology and mammalogy. Although the price may be a bit steep for some individuals, the wide historical, geographical, and biological scope of the work should ensure wide interest. On a more local level, it may help ornithology students in Washington and Oregon determine on which side of the Columbia River many important voucher specimens were obtained. Finally, I suspect it should be of interest to those who may have forgotten what it was like to be 24 years old, on a fine spring morning in the foothills of the Rockies, surrounded by what today would be termed a "fallout"—trees and bushes filled with colorful, never-before-seen warblers, tanagers, grosbeaks, and buntings.—SARTOR O. WILLIAMS III, *Division of Birds, Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131, USA. E-mail: sunbittern@earthlink.net.*

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