

PLATES FROM JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA

1 Wild Turkey, male *Meleagris gallopavo* Linnaeus

Originally entitled 'Great American Cock'

(PLATE 1)

'The great size and beauty of the Wild Turkey, its value as delicate and highly prized article of food, and the circumstances of its being the origin of the domestic race now generally disposed over both continents, render it one of the most interesting of the birds indigenous to the United States of America. Thus Audubon himself extols the subject which he chose as the first illustration for the Double Elephant Folio. Others have also held the Turkey in high esteem, and Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying that he would have preferred this bird as the national symbol rather than the eagle, which he felt to be 'a bird of bad moral character'.

Large flocks of Wild Turkeys once occupied extensive wooded areas over most of North America, but even in Audubon's day their numbers were starting to be seriously depleted by hunting and loss of habitat to man. More recently, the re-stocking in the wild with birds bred in captivity has met with qualified success, as they have taken hold in some areas where the species had been extirpated. These turkeys may be distinguished from the domestic birds by their chestnut-colored tails.

Their foods include various seeds, acorns and other nuts, some fruit, as well as insects picked from the ground. As night approaches, the turkeys fly into trees to roost. The male turkey is much larger than the female, has wattles and more iridescent coloring that glints during the mating season display.

Audubon has given us a vivid description of their behaviour in courtship. 'As early as the middle of February', he writes, 'they begin to experience the impulse of propagation. The females separate, and fly from the males. The latter strenuously pursue, and begin to gobble or to utter the notes of exultation...'. At the call of the female, he continues, the males all fly to the spot, and strut pompously about, emitting at the same time a succession of puffs from the lungs, and stopping now and then to listen and look... moving with as much celerity as their ideas of ceremony seem to admit. While thus occupied, the males often encounter each other, in which case desperate battles take place, ending in bloodshed, and often in the loss of many lives, the weaker falling under the repented blows inflicted upon their head by the stronger.'

This famous engraving of a turkey-cock strutting through the cone-brake was based on watercolor probably painted in 1825 at Beech Woods Plantation, West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, where Audubon's wife Lucy was working as a governess. Her employer later recalled how this particularly large bird '... weighed twenty-eight pounds. Audubon pinned it up beside the wall to sketch, and he spent several days lazily sketching it. The damned fellow kept it pinned there until it rotted and stunk—I hated to lose so much good eating.'

The plate was engraved in 1826 by W.H. Lizars in Edinburgh as the 'Great American Cock'. A year later in London, Robert Havell added most of the aquatint tones, and the title was changed to the present one. Audubon concluded: 'Length feet 1 inch, extent of wings 5 feet 8 inches... . Such were the dimensions of the individual depicted in the Plate, which, I need not say, was a fine specimen.'