

Audubon's diary transcripts were doctored to support his false claim of personally discovering Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834)

Author: Halley, Matthew R.

Source: Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club, 142(3) : 329-342

Published By: British Ornithologists' Club

URL: <https://doi.org/10.25226/bboc.v142i3.2022.a6>

The BioOne Digital Library (<https://bioone.org/>) provides worldwide distribution for more than 580 journals and eBooks from BioOne's community of over 150 nonprofit societies, research institutions, and university presses in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences. The BioOne Digital Library encompasses the flagship aggregation BioOne Complete (<https://bioone.org/subscribe>), the BioOne Complete Archive (<https://bioone.org/archive>), and the BioOne eBooks program offerings ESA eBook Collection (<https://bioone.org/esa-ebooks>) and CSIRO Publishing BioSelect Collection (<https://bioone.org/csiro-ebooks>).

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Digital Library, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Digital Library content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non-commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne is an innovative nonprofit that sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Audubon's diary transcripts were doctored to support his false claim of personally discovering Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834)

by Matthew R. Halley

Received 12 January 2022; revised 3 April 2022; published 6 September 2022

<http://zoobank.org/urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:D6B79E89-396A-4450-AAAB-906EF851D312>

SUMMARY.—John James Audubon (1785–1851) claimed to have personally discovered Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834) in his published account of that species. However, his narrative is contradicted by his wife Lucy's transcript of his diary. A second diary transcript, published by his granddaughter Maria, fully complies with Audubon's published account. The unpublished diary of Thomas Lincoln (1812–83), for whom the sparrow was named, relocated after nearly a century, provides support for Lucy's version. The most parsimonious explanation for the evidence presented here is that Audubon (1834) fabricated his story about discovering Lincoln's Sparrow; then Maria doctored her published transcript of his diary to bring the primary record into alignment with his false narrative. This study sheds light on the 'primary source problem' which pervades Audubon scholarship, and highlights the need for a systematic review of his contributions.

'Drawing all day.'—Audubon in Buchanan (1868: 268)

Historians depend on primary sources to establish the timing and context of past events, just as zoologists depend on specimen evidence to establish the existence of new species. In both circumstances, John James Audubon (1785–1851) has been at the centre of controversy. The artistic genius behind *The birds of America* (1827–38) and its five-volume companion text, *Ornithological biography* (1831–39), became an international celebrity in his own lifetime. However, research has now uncovered a disconcerting record of plagiarism, fabricated data, false narratives, dubious claims of specimen evidence, and invented species in Audubon's published works (e.g., Halley 2015, 2016, 2018a–c, 2019, 2020a–b, and references therein). Yet, Audubon's work has been given the benefit of doubt more often than most other scientists, perhaps because the primary record itself was manipulated. Understanding the extent of this 'primary source problem', which has hindered Audubon scholarship, is necessary to evaluate the accuracy of Audubon's published works and his considerable legacy.

Audubon's diaries—the most important primary sources—were first transcribed by his widow, Lucy Audubon (1787–1874), and published in extracts by Buchanan (1868). Lucy also published her own (American) version of the manuscript (Audubon 1869), of which the portions relating to this study were essentially identical. Hereafter, I cite Buchanan's earlier work (Buchanan 1868) when referencing Lucy's transcript. After her death, the diaries passed to her granddaughter, Maria Audubon (1843–1925), daughter of John Woodhouse Audubon (1812–62), Audubon's second son. Maria then published a two-volume work (Audubon 1897) with considerable novel content that she claimed was transcribed verbatim from material excluded by Buchanan (1868).

Maria's transcript was reviewed and annotated by Elliott Coues (1842–99), historian and founder of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), which solidified its reputation

as a credible 'primary' source. Ever since, scholars have looked to Audubon (1897) to corroborate information in her grandfather's published accounts, boosting their historical credibility, and to establish the historical narrative in popular biographies (e.g., Rhodes 2004, Souder 2004, Logan 2016). However, dated entries that appear in both Buchanan (1868) and Audubon (1897) often differ in substance and style, and sometimes provide conflicting accounts of critical events, although both works claimed to provide faithful transcriptions of the original texts. Furthermore, Maria admitted destroying the original diaries in her possession (only one, from 1820–21, is now extant, see Corning 1929), which made it impossible to verify either transcription:

'I burned [them] myself in 1895 ... I had copied from [them] all I ever meant to give to the public, and if you will go back to that bitter year, you will understand why my mother, the other members of the family, and Dr. Coues who read it *all*, thought that in view of the existing circumstances, fire was our only surety that many family details should be put beyond the reach of vandal hands' (Arthur 1937: 243).¹

Thus, biographers have generally assumed that Maria destroyed the diaries because 'there were aspects of Audubon's private musings [she] did not wish to share with the public' (Logan 2016: xv). However, it is equally or more plausible that she did so to cover up her own manipulative edits, intended to bring the primary record into alignment with her grandfather's published accounts, shielding them from scrutiny, and to reframe him as a 'visionary conservationist' (see Arthur 1937, Patterson 2016). This would imply that content in Audubon (1897) is no more reliable than John James Audubon's published works, if not corroborated by independent primary sources.

Here, I examine this 'primary source problem' with respect to the discovery of Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834). The new species, which first appeared on Pl. 193 of *The birds of America* (Fig. 1), was 'discovered' in 1833 during Audubon's voyage to Labrador.² However, on the day the original specimen was supposedly collected (27 June 1833), the two versions of Audubon's diary are in conflict. Specifically, as explained below, the account published by Audubon (1834) is not supported by Buchanan (1868), whereas the transcript published by Audubon (1897) corroborates her grandfather's published account. To my knowledge, these discrepancies have not been identified previously, and the veracity of Audubon's (1834) account of Lincoln's Sparrow has been taken for granted by all former authors (e.g., Speirs & Speirs *in* Bent *et al.* 1968, Logan 2016).

Audubon's published accounts

According to Audubon (1834), while exploring an island off the coast of modern-day Quebec ('Labrador' to Audubon), he noticed an unfamiliar song that he suspected to be the voice of a new species. He then called excitedly to his young companions, including Thomas Lincoln (1812–83), who rushed to his assistance. Lincoln collected the first specimen with

¹ This claim, that 'Dr. Coues...read it *all*', was made after his death. I am unaware of contemporaneous primary sources that elucidate whether Coues examined the original diaries, or merely Maria's transcript, and, if so, whether he had an opportunity or adequate time to carefully compare them for inconsistencies. I suspect not.

² Audubon (1834: 540) acknowledged that, presumably after the Labrador expedition, he 'saw several specimens [of Lincoln's Sparrow] in the collection of the learned William Cooper, Esq. of New York, that had been procured in the vicinity of that city'. Therefore, the species was probably already known to some naturalists as a non-descript, at the time it was 'discovered' by Audubon's party. For the purposes of this study, I assumed (reasonably, I think) that Audubon and his companions were not aware of the existence of the species before their Labrador trip.



Figure 1. 'Lincoln Finch / *Fringilla Lincolnii*' in *The birds of America* (1834, Pl. 193), engraved by Robert Havell Jr., hand-coloured by Havell's team, and distributed in set 'No. 39' during 1 February–14 June 1834 (Stone 1906: 302). Audubon's text account of 'Lincoln's Finch / *Fringilla Lincolnii*' (Audubon '1834': 539) was not published until 'after 1 January 1835' despite its preface being dated '1st December 1834' (Stone 1906: 303). Reproduced courtesy of the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove, Audubon, PA, and Montgomery County Audubon Collection (<https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america>, accessed 26 November 2021).

his shotgun, which Audubon immediately pronounced to be a new species named 'Tom's Finch', in Lincoln's honor, to a round of applause from his companions. Then, Audubon took the specimen back to the boat to draw it, while the 'boys' stayed in the field until the evening. These were the main elements of the story, which Audubon (1834: 539) narrated with his usual literary charm:

'We had been in Labrador nearly three weeks before this Finch was discovered ... But if the view of this favoured spot was pleasing to my eye, how much more to my ear were the sweet notes of this bird as they came thrilling on the sense, surpassing in vigour those of any American Finch with which I am acquainted, and forming a song which seemed a compound of those of the Canary and Wood-lark of Europe. I immediately shouted to my companions, who were not far distant. They came, and we all followed the songster as it flitted from one bush to another to evade our pursuit. No sooner would it alight than it renewed its song; but we found more wildness in this species than in any other inhabiting the same country, and it was with difficulty that we at last procured it. Chance placed my young companion, THOMAS LINCOLN, in a situation where he saw it alight within shot, and with his usual unerring aim, he cut short its career. On seizing it, I found it to be a species which I had not previously seen; and, supposing it to be new, I named it *Tom's Finch*, in honour of our friend Lincoln, who was a great favourite among us. Three cheers were given him, when, proud of the prize, I returned to the vessel to draw it, while my son and his companions continued to search for other specimens.'

Presumably, when preparing the manuscripts of his published accounts, Audubon consulted his diaries to confirm the details of when and where specific events transpired. Therefore, it is notable that Audubon (1834) was vague about when Lincoln's Sparrow was first discovered by his expedition party; the traditional date (27 June 1833) is sourced only from Maria Audubon's (1897) transcript of his diary and does not appear in his published account. Whereas Audubon (1834) was not vague about the timing of two other (less important) incidents that reportedly occurred on the same day, the '27th [of] June'—collecting specimens of Canada Jay *Perisoreus canadensis* (Linnaeus, 1766) and Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Corthylio calendula* (Linnaeus, 1766)—neither of which involved the discovery of a new species. The details of these accounts are worth scrutinising because they were referenced in Maria Audubon's (1897) transcript, in association with the discovery of *M. lincolnii*. Audubon (1834: 55) first wrote about collecting specimens of the jay: 'I found the young following their parents on the 27th June 1833, at Labrador, where I shot both old and young, while the former was in the act of feeding the latter'. Then, nearly 500 pages later, he included a detailed story about the kinglet, wherein a bird was shot and its body lost in the underbrush, before being found the following day:

'On the 27th June 1833, while some of my party and myself were rambling over the deserts of Labrador, the notes of a warbler came on my ear, and I listened with delight to the harmonious sounds that filled the air around, and which I judged to belong to a species not yet known to me. The next instant I observed a small bird perched on the top of a fir tree, and on approaching it, recognized it as the vocalist that had so suddenly charmed my ear and raised my expectations. We all followed its quick movements, as it flew from tree to tree backwards and forwards without quitting the spot, to which it seemed attached. At last, my son John raised his gun, and, on firing, brought down the bird, which fell among the brushwood, where we in vain searched for it.'

The next day we chanced to pass along the same patch of dwarf wood, in search of the nests of certain species of ducks, of which I intend to speak on another occasion. We were separated from the woods by a deep narrow creek; but the recollection of the loss of the bird, which I was sure had been killed, prompted me to desire my young friends to dash across and again search for it. In an instant six of us were on the opposite shore, and dispersed among the woods. My son was so fortunate as to find the little *Regulus* among the moss near the tree from which it had fallen, and brought it to me greatly disappointed. Not so was I; for I had never heard the full song of the Ruby-crowned Wren, and as I looked at it in my hand, I could not refrain from exclaiming — ‘And so this is the tiny body of the songster from which came the loud notes I heard yesterday!’ (Audubon 1834: 546)

Conflicting transcripts of Audubon’s diary

According to Lucy’s transcript, it seems unlikely that the events described by Audubon (1834) in the above-quoted passages happened on 27 June, because he apparently did not leave the boat on that day (underline mine): ‘The morning dawned above rain and fogs, which so enveloped us below that we could scarcely discern the shore, distant only a hundred yards. Drawing all day.’ (Fig. 2; Buchanan 1868: 268). The context for this simple, easily overlooked comment (‘Drawing all day’) can be found in the personal testimony of William Ingalls (1813–1903), one of Audubon’s young field assistants in Labrador, who took issue with his personal narratives and plainly stated that Audubon rarely left the boat during the expedition:

‘Mr. Audubon being almost all the time aboard at work did not have so good a knowledge of the *moss* of which he speaks, as we boys did, for we were sent out to different distances from the ship to explore, to gather information, to hunt and to bring ourselves and *new species of birds*, home at night’ (Deane 1910)

Much of the journal of these dates in Labrador is taken up with an account of the birds, and nests, and eggs found here, and matters relating to ornithology. But as these notes were used by Mr. Audubon in compiling his “Biographies of the Birds,” we have omitted them here, and used only that part of the records which has a more general interest.

“June 27. The morning dawned above rain and fogs, which so enveloped us below that we could scarcely discern the shore, distant only a hundred yards. Drawing all day.

“June 28. The weather shocking, rainy, foggy, dark, and cold. Began drawing a new finch I discovered, and outlined another. At twelve the wind suddenly changed, and caused such a swell and rolling of the vessel, that I had to give up my drawing. After dinner the wind hauled to the south-west, and all was bustle, heaving up anchor, loosing sails, and getting ready for sea. We were soon under weigh, and went out of the harbour in good style; but the sea was high, and we were glad to go to our beds.

Figure 2. Digital scan from p. 268 of Buchanan (1868), which contains Lucy Audubon’s transcript of her husband’s diary entries from 27–28 June 1833, and the important comment ‘Drawing all day.’ Reproduced courtesy of the University of Michigan and Biodiversity Heritage Library.

Maria Audubon's (1897: 382) transcript of the 27 June entry begins with extremely similar (if more elaborate) language as Buchanan (1868), which confirms Lucy and Maria were looking at the same passage in the original diary: 'It rained quite hard when I awoke this morning; the fog was so thick the very shores of our harbor, not distant more than a hundred yards, were enveloped in gloom.' However, in Audubon's (1897: 381–382) version, the weather cleared up in the morning and, rather than 'Drawing all day', Audubon accompanied his young companions into the field, where they 'rambled...till dinner time' and experienced the events described by Audubon (1834) in his published accounts:

'It rained quite hard when I awoke this morning; the fog was so thick the very shores of our harbor, not distant more than a hundred yards, were enveloped in gloom. After breakfast we went ashore; the weather cleared up and the wind blew fresh. We rambled about the brushwoods till dinner time, shot two Canada Jays, one old and one young, the former much darker than those of Maine; the young one was full fledged, but had no white about its head; the whole of the body and head was of a deep, very deep blue. It must have been about three weeks old, and the egg from which it was hatched must have been laid about the 10th of May, when the thermometer was below the freezing-point.

We shot also a Ruby-crowned Wren; no person who has not heard it would believe that the song of this bird is louder, stronger, and far more melodious than that of the Canary bird. It sang for a long time ere it was shot, and perched on the tops of the tallest fir-trees removing from one to another as we approached. So strange, so beautiful was that song that I pronounced the musician, ere it was shot, a new species of Warbler. John shot it; it fell to the ground, and though the six of us looked for it we could not find it, and went elsewhere; in the course of the afternoon we passed by the spot again, and John found it and gave it to me.

We shot a new species of Finch, which I have named *Fringilla lincolni*; it is allied to the Swamp Sparrow in general appearance, but is considerably smaller, and may be known at once from all others thus far described, by the light buff streak which runs from the base of the lower mandible, until it melts into the duller buff of the breast, and by the bright ash-streak over the eye. The note of this bird attracted me at once; it was loud and sonorous; the bird flew low and forward, perching on the firs, very shy, and cunningly eluding our pursuit; we, however, shot three, but lost one. I shall draw it tomorrow.' (Audubon 1897: 381–382)

That the weather cleared up on the morning of 27 June is corroborated by an independent primary source, the diary of Captain Henry Wolsey Bayfield (1795–1885), a British naval officer who was surveying the coast ('Fog & rain, cleared up as the Sun rose'; Anon. 1984: 238), but this does not reconcile the discrepancy between Buchanan's (1868) and Maria Audubon's (1897) descriptions of Audubon's actions that day (i.e., irrespective of whether his companions went to shore after the weather cleared). Notably, on other days when Buchanan (1868) indicated that Audubon was drawing all day, the two diary transcripts are not in conflict, including 4 July ('I remained on board all day drawing', Buchanan 1868: 270; vs. 'I have drawn all day', Audubon 1897) and 7 July ('Drawing all day', Buchanan 1868: 270; vs. 'Drawing all day', Audubon 1897: 391). Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the comment ('Drawing all day') was mis-copied by Lucy from the 26 June or 28 June entries, when he was evidently not drawing all day. On 26 June, '[Audubon and companions] have all been on shore, to be beaten back by the rain and the mosquitoes' (Audubon 1897: 381), and on 28 June Audubon's work was interrupted by a midday storm ('The weather shocking—rainy,

foggy, dark and cold...with heavy rain, and such a swell that I was almost sea-sick, and had to abandon drawing', Audubon 1897: 383; vs. 'The weather shocking, rainy, foggy, dark, and cold...I had to give up my drawing': Fig. 2; Buchanan 1868: 268).

Logan (2016: 597), who overlooked the major conflict with Buchanan (1868), did note several other minor discrepancies. For example, Maria Audubon's (1897) transcript claims that Audubon and his companions 'rambled about the brushwoods till dinner time', 'shot three [specimens], but lost one', and planned to 'draw [*F. lincolni*] tomorrow'. However, Audubon (1834: 539) claimed that he immediately left the field after the first specimen was collected ('proud of the prize, I returned to the vessel to draw it, while my son and his companions continued to search for other specimens').

Audubon (1834) wrote that the kinglet's body was found 'the next day', whereas in Maria Audubon's (1897) transcript of his diary, he wrote that it was located the same afternoon it was shot. In this case, Logan (2016: 597) '[accepted] the journal account' of Audubon (1897). However, Maria may have edited her transcript in an attempt to reconcile these minor timeline conflicts, to make her grandfather's published account seem more plausible. Perhaps even she could not believe that the tiny kinglet's body was rediscovered the following day, because of inclement weather that occurred on 28 June, according to Bayfield's diary ('fog & rain. At Noon sudden squall...', Anon. 1984: 238) and both versions of Audubon's diary (see above).

Logan (2016: 597, footnote 166) noted that 'both versions of the journal agree that Audubon began drawing the Lincoln's Finch on June 28, the day after it was collected.' However, as explained above, Audubon (1897) is the only source that specifies the date that the first specimens were collected (27 June), whereas Buchanan (1868: 268) stated that Audubon was 'Drawing all day' on 27 June. Furthermore, the two versions of the diary exhibit yet another telling discrepancy in the 28 June entries, which was also overlooked by Logan (2016). On 28 June, Audubon either wrote 'Began drawing a new finch I discovered, and outlined another' (Fig. 2; Buchanan 1868: 268, my italics) or 'I began drawing at daylight, and finished one of my new Finches and outlined another' (Audubon 1897, my italics). These differences are not trivial; the first includes a personal claim of discovery, whereas the second is vague about who discovered the new species. As explained below, this overlooked discrepancy between the 28 June entries provides evidence that Maria's transcript was the version that was altered.

Hypotheses and implications

If we assume that Audubon (1897) was the more faithful transcription, then we must conclude that Lucy (1) replaced Audubon's exciting passage about the discovery of *M. lincolni*, the first new species discovered on the Labrador expedition, with the uneventful phrase 'Drawing all day', in the 27 June entry, and (2) changed 'one of my new finches' to 'a new finch I discovered' in the 28 June entry (Fig. 2; Buchanan 1868: 268). What motive could there have been for Lucy to make these changes? She was aware of the importance of her late husband's new discoveries, to the success of his books, and that including diary entries relevant to those discoveries would make her own book more successful. Yet, she claimed that she 'omitted ... only that part of the [diary] which [did not have] a more general interest' to her readers (Fig. 2; Buchanan 1868: 268). Lucy replacing Audubon's narrative with 'Drawing all day' requires not only an omission, but an addition, to the diary text; and there appears to be no benefit to be gained by changing the text in the 28 June entry.

Alternatively, if Buchanan (1868: 268) was the more faithful transcription, then we must conclude that Audubon actually was 'Drawing all day' on 27 June, when Lincoln collected the first specimens. Then, probably without realising that the species was undescribed,

Lincoln brought the specimens to Audubon in the evening. If so, then (1) Audubon's claim to have 'discovered' Lincoln's Sparrow, in his 28 June entry (Fig. 2; Buchanan 1868: 268), merely meant that he realised that the specimens brought to him were an undescribed species; (2) Audubon (1834) fabricated his published account by claiming that he discovered Lincoln's Sparrow on his own, in the field, before alerting his friends to its existence; and (3) Maria Audubon (1897) doctored her transcript of Audubon's diary to bring it into alignment with his published version, first by adding details to the 27 June entry that placed her grandfather at the scene of the discovery, then by changing his 28 June entry to read 'one of my new finches' (i.e., because otherwise, after altering the 27 June entry, it would appear that he recorded his 'discovery' twice, in back-to-back entries). There is also a clear motive for Maria to have altered the diary transcripts in this way, her self-stated objective to preserve for the historical record 'what [she believed] he was and not what others *thought* he was' (Arthur 1937: 14).

Tom Lincoln's diary

Lincoln was 21 years old when he joined the Labrador expedition, after which he lived for another half-century as a minor celebrity—the companion of Audubon and namesake of Lincoln's Sparrow (Fig. 3). How many times was he asked to recount the story of its discovery? Did he tell the same story as Audubon (1834: 539) or his own version? This seems to have been a stressful topic for Lincoln, who, according to his son, Dr Arthur Lincoln, 'was extremely modest about his own attainments and ... had destroyed many of his sketches and had cut from the book the pages of his [Labrador expedition] journal, intending to burn it, but, fortunately, [presumably due to family intervention] part of it was saved' (Townsend 1924). Lincoln's half-hearted attempt to destroy the pages containing his expedition diary suggests he may have been aware that they contained passages that cast doubt on Audubon's (1834) published account.

Charles W. Townsend (1859–1934), historian and ornithologist, visited the Lincoln family home at Arthur Lincoln's invitation, where he examined the diary and transcribed a few brief excerpts, which he later published (Townsend 1924). Thereafter, the diary remained in the Lincoln family's possession until the mid-20th century, when it was evidently taken to California by a family member and sold on the private market. It has been missing ever since. Logan (2016), who relied primarily on Audubon (1834) and Audubon (1897) to reconstruct the Labrador expedition, feared that '[Lincoln's] journal remains unpublished and may be lost.'

In August 2021, I relocated Lincoln's expedition diary (i.e., the 'cut' pages, which include entries between 6 June and 25 August 1833) and a collection of unpublished letters in a locked cabinet of rare books at the Delaware Museum of Natural History (DMNH, now Delaware Museum of Nature & Science). There is no searchable database of the library's holdings, and only a few staff members (now including myself) have access to the cabinet's keys, which

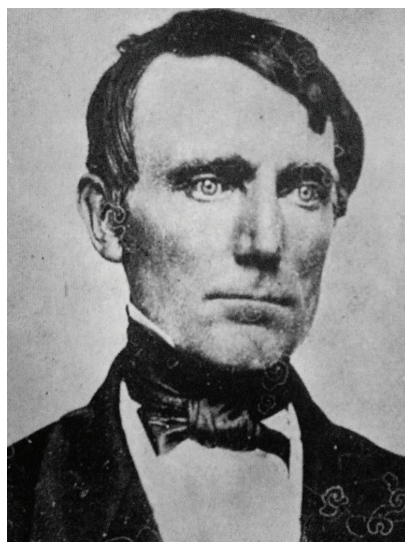


Figure 3. Photographic portrait of Thomas Lincoln (1812–83), namesake of Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834), thought to have been taken when Lincoln was in his late 30s. Courtesy of Denny's River Historical Society.

explains why this important collection has escaped the notice of Audubon scholars for so long. According to a notice dated 5 January 1979, which accompanies the collection, it was donated to the DMNH in 1978 by Warren E. Howell, proprietor of John Howell-Books in San Francisco, CA. The diary is lengthy (>5,000 words) with many detailed notes about the birds and plants that Lincoln encountered in the field. It is therefore noteworthy that the diary contains no mention of the story of the discovery of Lincoln's Sparrow, as told by Audubon (1834) and Audubon (1897). For the sake of brevity, here I focus only on passages relevant to this study. A complete, annotated transcript of Lincoln's diary and letters will be published separately (Halley in prep.).

In Lincoln's diary, there is a noticeable hiatus for 20–30 June, during which time Lincoln made no entries. This includes the day he supposedly collected the first specimen of *M. lincolni* (27 June), according to Maria Audubon (1897). Furthermore, when Lincoln finally updated his diary, on 1 July, he explained that the hiatus was because of poor weather and a lack of interesting events to report:

'1^o July. Till the day before yesterday we lay among the 22^o Esquimaux Islands unable to get out of the harbour. There were but few birds breeding there and [those] so shy that it was almost impossible to get at them. On the nineteenth [of June] "His British Majesty's Surveying schooner, the Gulnaire" came into the harbour. ~~She was bound~~ She was commanded by Captain Bayfield. R. N. He was engaged in surveying the coast and making charts of it from Quebec to the Straits of Bellisle. On the 29^o of June we left with a fair wind to go along the coast to the eastward...' (Fig. 4)

According to Bayfield's diary (Anon. 1984: 236), the Gulnaire arrived on the 22nd—not the 19th—which demonstrates how quickly Lincoln's recollection of the timeline was distorted, after just a few days (this passage was written on 1 July). Notwithstanding,

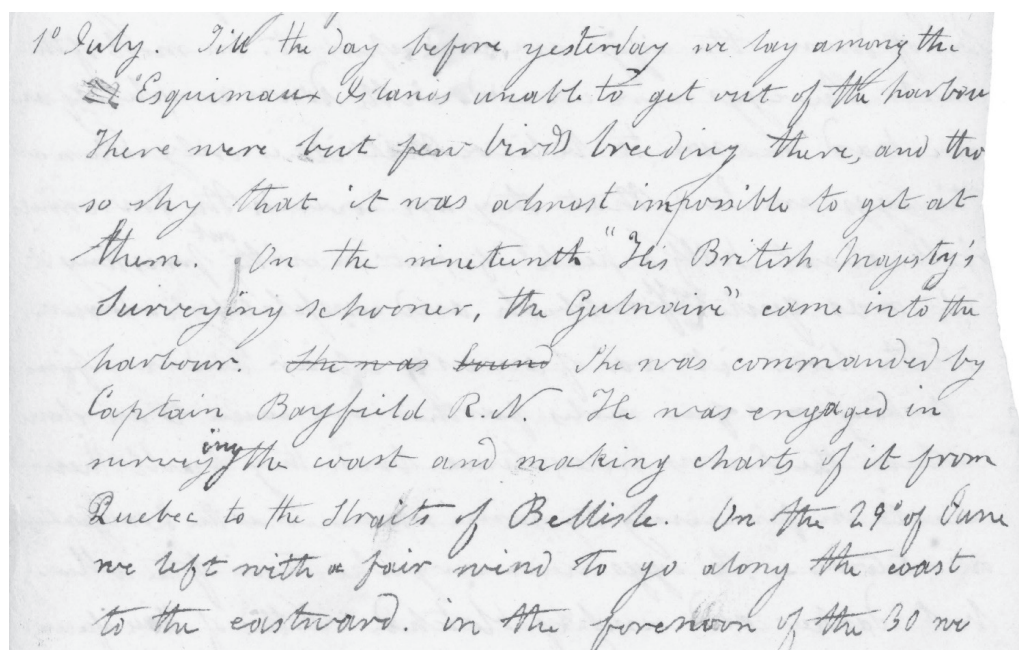


Figure 4. Digital scan of a portion of the 1 July 1833 entry in the diary of Thomas Lincoln, who accompanied Audubon on the Labrador expedition. The right side of the image shows damage from when Lincoln 'cut from the book the pages' (see text). Courtesy of the Delaware Museum of Nature & Science.

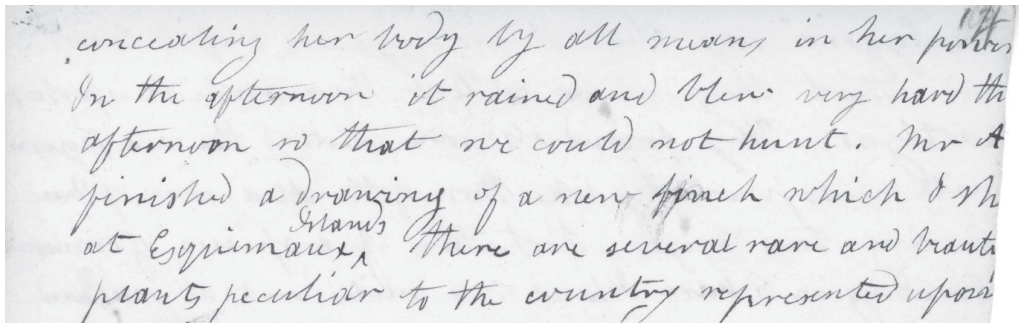


Figure 5. Digital scan of a portion of the 4 July 1833 entry in the diary of Thomas Lincoln, who accompanied Audubon on the Labrador expedition. The right side of the image shows damage from when Lincoln ‘cut from the book the pages’ (Townsend 1924; see text). Courtesy of the Delaware Museum of Nature & Science.

Lincoln’s diary gives no indication that he knew he had collected a new species, until after Audubon had been working on the drawing for several days. Recall that, according to Buchanan (1868), Audubon wrote in his diary on 28 June, ‘Began drawing a new finch I discovered, and outlined another’ (i.e., a personal claim of discovery). In contrast, the discovery of *M. lincolnii* was not mentioned in Lincoln’s diary until 4 July, when Lincoln wrote nonchalantly: ‘Mr. A. finished a drawing of a new finch which I [shot] at Esquimaux Islands [i.e., where they departed on 29 June]. There are several rare and [beautiful] plants peculiar to the country represented upon [it]’ (Fig. 5). This dated entry in Lincoln’s diary is corroborated by Audubon’s original painting (Fig. 6; N-YHS 1863.17.193), which bears an extremely faint annotation: ‘July 4th – 1833 – *Fringilla lincolnii* – Nob’ (Fig. 7), and Maria Audubon’s (1897) transcript of Audubon’s diary entry for 4 July (‘I have drawn all day, and have finished the plate of the *Fringilla lincolnii*’). Notably, every part of Audubon’s annotation was mistranscribed on the New-York Historical Society website (www.nyhistory.org, ‘July 31st – 1832 – *Fringilla Auduboni* – No 6’), which caused considerable confusion during the early stages of this research (accessed 1 January 2022). These errors were exposed only after I obtained a high-resolution scan of the painting and digitally manipulated it to boost the contrast (Fig. 7).

Financial compensation

During the 19th century, scientific collectors were often paid directly, or were otherwise financially indebted (e.g., for travel costs) to the ornithologists who published their discoveries. In such cases, it was generally assumed that a scientist’s obligation to the collector, with respect to acknowledging their role in the discovery of a new species, was discharged by the financial compensation. Thus, one might be tempted to justify the false narrative published by Audubon (1834) as a common practice for the time. However, during the Labrador expedition, Audubon did not pay his assistants. Rather, he expected them to contribute three dollars per week to cover their own share of the expedition expenses (Fries 2006: 73). This amounted to c.\$35 per assistant, which, adjusted for inflation, is equivalent to approximately \$1,700 today. Thus, Lincoln was not hired by Audubon—rather, he paid Audubon for the opportunity.

It was no coincidence that Audubon’s young companions were members of wealthy families, who could afford to send their sons on such an expensive trip. Lincoln was the son of a judge, and Ingalls and George C. Shattuck, Jr. (1813–93) were the sons of physicians. On 31 May 1833, immediately after listing the members of his expedition party (including Lincoln) in a letter to his eldest son, Victor Gifford Audubon (1809–60), Audubon wrote (my



Figure 6. Audubon's original painting of Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834), executed with watercolour, graphite, pastel and gouache with touches of black ink and selective glazing on paper, laid on card (N-YHS no. 1863.17.193). An annotation with the date and identification of the species, inscribed below the image, is barely visible without digital manipulation (see Fig. 7). It is reproduced here courtesy of the New-York Historical Society; digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

italics): 'we pay three hundred and fifty Dollars per month for the entire use of the Vessel with men &c. but have to supply ourselves with provisions' (Corning 1969: 231). The entire expenditure was approximately \$1,500, according to Maria Audubon (1897: 346), and 'about \$2000', according to a letter from Audubon to Victor (Corning 1930, 1: 243). Therefore, by

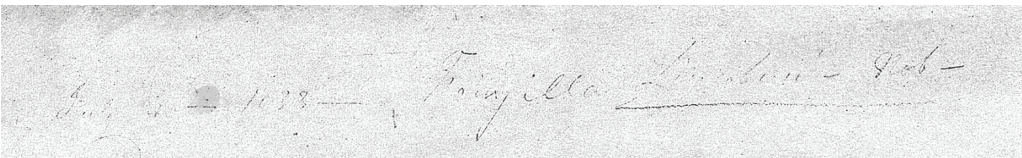


Figure 7. Digitally manipulated image of the faint annotation on Audubon’s original painting of Lincoln’s Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834), written in Audubon’s hand (N-YHS no. 1863.17.193). The annotation reads: ‘July 4th – 1833 – *Fringilla lincolnii* – Nob’. Notably, the annotation was mistranscribed (‘July 31st – 1832 – *Fringilla Auduboni* – No 6’) on the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) website (www.nyhistory.org, accessed 1 April 2022). Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

inviting the sons of wealthy acquaintances, Audubon was able to defray as much as 10% of the total cost of the expedition, while simultaneously benefitting from their free labour. Incidentally, this was not the first time Audubon asked Lincoln to pay his own way on a collecting trip. Modern field guides are typically paid for their labour and expertise, but in late August 1832, when Lincoln ‘offered to lead [Audubon] to those retired woods [at Point Lepreau, Quebec] where the Spruce Partridges are found’ (Audubon 1834: 437), he was also asked to contribute to the expenses. According to an unpublished letter dated 7 November 1833, ‘[Lincoln] paid John [his] portion of the Lepreaux expedition expenses’ (DMNH library).

Conclusions and implications

Audubon’s (1834) claim to have personally discovered *M. lincolnii* in the field, by noticing its unique voice, immediately before Lincoln collected the first specimen, was evidently not true. Lucy’s transcript of her husband’s diary (Buchanan 1868) and the scant information in Lincoln’s diary, transcribed herein, are difficult to reconcile with Audubon’s (1834) account, which is only supported by Maria Audubon (1897). The most parsimonious explanation for these primary source anomalies, including the altered entries on 27 and 28 June, is that Audubon (1834) published a false story to bolster his authority with respect

TABLE 1
Reconstructed sequence of events in the history of Lincoln’s Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834), as I suspect they most likely happened (see text).

27 June 1833 (day)	Lincoln collects the type(s) of <i>M. lincolnii</i> and fails to recognise that he had found a new species. Meanwhile, Audubon remains on the boat working on his illustrations (‘Drawing all day’; Buchanan 1868).
27 June (evening)	Lincoln and companions return to the boat with their specimens, which they show to Audubon. They tell him about their experiences in the field. Audubon recognises Lincoln’s Sparrow as an undescribed species, but probably keeps this information to himself. Lincoln does not write in his diary.
28 June	Audubon writes in his diary, ‘Began drawing a new finch I discovered, and outlined another’ (Buchanan 1868), later altered by Maria Audubon (1897) to read ‘one of my new finches’. Lincoln does not write in his diary.
29–30 June	Lincoln does not write in his diary.
1–3 July	Lincoln resumes his diary but does not mention the new species, possibly because Audubon still has not divulged that information.
4 July	Lincoln writes in his diary, ‘Mr. A. finished a drawing of a new finch which I [shot] at Esquimaux Islands. There are several rare and [beautiful] plants peculiar to the county represented upon [it]’. Audubon annotates the painting with the name <i>Fringilla lincolnii</i> .
1 February–14 June 1834	Pl. 193 of <i>The birds of America</i> is published in London (Fig. 1; Stone 1906: 302).
‘after 1 January 1835’	Audubon’s (‘1834’) text account of ‘Lincoln’s Finch’ is published (Stone 1906: 303), containing the false narrative of his discovery of <i>M. lincolnii</i> .

to the species' discovery, and then his granddaughter tried to cover it up. Narcissism appears to have been Audubon's primary motive, as evidenced by a comment written to his son Victor, immediately after he returned from the Labrador expedition: '...it will give me decided superiority over all that has ever been undertaken or ever will be on the Birds of our Country' (Corning 1930, 1: 243). When the false narrative was published, Lincoln apparently did not protest, probably because he was the beneficiary of the eponym. A reconstruction of critical events, as I suspect they most likely occurred, is provided in Table 1.

The case of Lincoln's Sparrow corroborates previous work (see Halley 2020, and references therein) demonstrating that Audubon's published accounts, even those that have not previously been doubted, cannot be trusted unless corroborated by independent primary sources. Maria Audubon (1897) published a doctored transcript of her grandfather's diaries, then destroyed the originals, so her work cannot be considered 'primary' for this purpose. Diary extracts in Audubon (1897) are evidently no more reliable than information in Audubon's published works, and we cannot know the full extent of Maria's manipulations of the primary record. Therefore, I encourage scholars to take a more conservative approach to the 'primary source problem', by requiring those 'facts' found only in these unreliable works to be verified by at least one independent primary source, before they are presented as such. This approach is admittedly onerous, but necessary if Audubon scholarship is to be distinguished from historical fiction.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Robert M. Peck (Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, Philadelphia), Colin Windhorst (Dennys River Historical Society) and Peter B. Logan for their valuable insight about Audubon, Lincoln, and the 'primary source problem'. Windhorst provided the digital file of Lincoln's portrait. Warren E. Howell and John E. duPont 'rescued' the diary and letters from the private market by depositing them in the DMNH library, where staff and volunteers including David M. Niles, Virginia Schiavelli, Gene K. Hess and Jean L. Woods, cared for them apparently without realising their historical novelty or importance. Kenn Kaufmann commented on a final draft, reminding me of a useful reference. Finally, I thank Guy M. Kirwan, Robert P. Prŷs-Jones and Pamela C. Rasmussen for their constructive criticism and suggestions during peer review.

References:

- Anon. 1984. *The St. Lawrence survey journals of Captain Henry Wolsey Bayfield, 1829–1853*. Champlain Society, Toronto.
- Arthur, S. C. 1937. *Audubon: an intimate life of the American woodsman*. Harmanson, New Orleans.
- Audubon, J. J. 1827–38. *The birds of America*. Havell edn. Privately published, Edinburgh & London.
- Audubon, J. J. '1834' (= 1835). *Ornithological biography*, vol. 2. Adam & Charles Black, Edinburgh.
- Audubon, L. (ed.) 1869. *The life of John James Audubon, the naturalist*. G. P. Putnam, New York.
- Audubon, M. (ed.) 1897. *Audubon and his journals*, 2 vols. Scribner's Sons, New York.
- Bent, A. C. & collaborators. 1968. Life histories of North American cardinals, grosbeaks, buntings, towhees, finches, sparrows and allies. Part 3. *US Natl. Bull.* 237.
- Buchanan, R. (ed.) 1868. *The life and adventures of John James Audubon, the naturalist*. S. Low & Marston, London.
- Corning, H. (ed.) 1929. *Journal of John James Audubon made during his trip to New Orleans in 1820–1821*. The Business Historical Society, Cambridge, MA.
- Corning, H. (ed.) 1969. *Letters of John James Audubon, 1826–1840*. The Club of Odd Volumes, Boston (Kraus Reprint Co., New York).
- Deane, R. 1910. Audubon's Labrador trip of 1833. *Auk* 27: 42–52.
- Fries, W. H. 2006. *The double elephant folio: the story of Audubon's Birds of America*. Reprint. Zenaida Publishing, Amherst, MA.
- Halley, M. R. 2015. The heart of Audubon: five unpublished letters (1825–1830) reveal the ornithologist's dream and how he (almost) achieved it. *Commonplace: J. Early Amer. Life* 16(1) (<http://commonplace.online/article/the-heart-of-audubon/>, accessed 5 December 2021).
- Halley, M. R. 2016. Neglected type specimens of Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta* from Audubon's last expedition. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 136: 287–290.
- Halley, M. R. 2018a. Audubon's famous banding experiment: fact or fiction? *Arch. Nat. Hist.* 45: 118–121.

- Halley, M. R. 2018b. The ambiguous identity of *Turdus mustelinus* Wilson, and a neotype designation for the Veery *Catharus fuscescens* (Stephens). *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 138: 78–91.
- Halley, M. R. 2018c. Lost tales of American ornithology: Reuben Haines and the Canada Geese of Wyck (1818–1828). *Cassinia* 76: 52–63.
- Halley, M. R. 2019. The misidentification of *Turdus ustulatus* Nuttall, and the names of the nightingale-thrushes (Turdidae: *Catharus*). *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 139: 238–259.
- Halley, M. R. 2020a. Audubon's Bird of Washington: unravelling the fraud that launched *The birds of America*. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 140: 110–141.
- Halley, M. R. 2020b. The theft of Morton's Hawk, now known as Harris's Hawk. *Cassinia* 77: 27–33.
- Halley, M. R. in prep. Audubon's expedition to Labrador revisited with the lost diary of Thomas Lincoln and thirteen unpublished letters.
- Logan, P. B. 2016. *Audubon: America's greatest naturalist and his voyage of discovery to Labrador*. Ashbryn Press, San Francisco.
- Patterson, D. (ed.) 2016. *The Missouri River journals of John James Audubon*. Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Rhodes, R. 2004. *John James Audubon: the making of an American*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Souder, W. 2004. *Under a wild sky: John James Audubon and the making of The birds of America*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux: North Point Press, New York.
- Stone, W. 1906. A bibliography and nomenclator of the ornithological works of John James Audubon. *Auk* 23: 298–312.
- Townsend, C. W. 1924. A visit to Tom Lincoln's house with some Auduboniana. *Auk* 41: 237–242.
- Address: Delaware Museum of Nature & Science, Wilmington, Delaware 19807; and Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104, USA, e-mail: matthewhalley@gmail.com