

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

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across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River and a Visit to the Sandwich Islands (1839). Because John James Audubon initially published many of Townsend's zoological discoveries, when Townsend is remembered today it is usually for his association with that famed artist and naturalist, whose achievement continues to cast quite a long shadow. In this sumptuously produced and meticulously researched book, the husband-and-wife team of Barbara and Richard Mearns shed much-needed light on Townsend's own life and scientific contributions.

Born in 1809 to a devout Quaker family of modest means, Townsend developed a passion for bird collecting at a tender young age, despite opposition from his mother, who despised the killing and worried that the pursuit of natural history offered no future for her son. As the cultural hub of the young American republic, however, Philadelphia had much to entice a budding naturalist, including a bevy of fellow natural-history enthusiasts, as well as Charles Willson Peale's renowned museum, only a short walk from the Townsend household, and the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, an institution with which Townsend would remain associated for much of his life. In 1833, while collecting around the home of close friend and fellow naturalist Ezra Michener at New Garden, Pennsylvania, Townsend discovered a curious new bird. In the next installment of his *Ornithological Biography*, Audubon named the previously undescribed form Townsend's Bunting and painted a beautiful portrait of the find for his *Birds of America*. The original specimen remains in the Smithsonian Institution, although ornithologists now consider it an abnormally plumaged Dickcissel or a hybrid (with a Dickcissel as one parent) rather than a new species.

Having earned a reputation as a skilled marksman and taxidermist, Townsend welcomed Thomas Nuttall's invitation to join him on Nathaniel Wyatt's second overland expedition to the Columbia River. With sponsorship from the Academy of Natural Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, in early 1834 the 24-year-old young naturalist departed from Philadelphia with Nuttall, who was more than two decades his senior. Despite the age difference, the two seemed to get along quite well: Nuttall, who seldom bothered to carry a gun, focused on plants, while Townsend collected birds and mammals. Both clearly relished the opportunity to explore a relatively uncharted region of the vast American West. After making the arduous journey to Fort Vancouver by September 1834, Townsend and Nuttall set sail to Hawaii in December, where they remained for the next several months. The two naturalists then returned to the Columbia River, finally parting company in September 1835, when Nuttall began the long ocean voyage home. Townsend remained in the Pacific Northwest for more than a year longer, for part of that time accepting a position as surgeon for the Hudson's Bay Company, before heading back to Philadelphia. In all he managed to collect, prepare, and safely ship home more than 1000 bird skins, 100 mammals, 10 human skulls, and an assortment of insects, crustaceans, and mollusks. Included among this bounty were the type specimens of numerous eponymous species, including Townsend's Warbler (*Dendroica townsendi*), Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), Townsend's Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus townsendii*), Townsend's Mole (*Scapanus townsendii*), Townsend's Vole (*Microtus townsendii*), and the White-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*).

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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, UK. 389 pp., ca. 350 illustrations (300 in color), 10 maps, and 4 flow charts. ISBN 978-0-9556739-0-0. £48.00 (cloth).

John Kirk Townsend was a Philadelphia naturalist whose scientific reputation rests primarily on his three-and-a-half-year journey to the Pacific Northwest and the Hawaiian Islands in the mid-1830s. That adventure-filled trip, undertaken in the company of the British botanist and ornithologist Thomas Nuttall, resulted in the discovery of numerous new birds and mammals as well as publication of Townsend's notable book, *Narrative of a Journey*

According to Mearns and Mearns, Audubon depicted more than 134 of Townsend's bird skins in all. Some of these specimens were new to science, some quite rare in other collections, and some simply better prepared than others to which he had access. The authors conclude that Townsend "probably provided more skins for *The Birds of America* than any other individual (with the exception of Audubon himself)" (p. 272).

After returning to Philadelphia, Townsend completed his *Narrative* (which soon sold out), published several papers on western birds, and issued a single installment of his *Ornithology of the United States of America*, which was intended as a compact guide to North American birds. He soon abandoned the project, however, probably because it failed to compete effectively with Audubon's octavo version of *Birds of America*, which was already under way at the time. In 1840 he moved to Washington, D.C., to assume a post at the newly organized National Institute for the Promotion of Science, which had begun organizing the vast natural-history collections gathered by the Wilkes Exploring Expedition. Townsend's hopes of obtaining a permanent position at the National Institute were dashed, however, when the organization languished for lack of permanent funding and effective leadership. Returning to Philadelphia in 1845, he decided to take up the study of dentistry and medicine. He died in 1850, at the age of 41.

The centerpiece of this fine biography is a carefully edited version of Townsend's *Narrative*, whose 237 pages constitute just over three-quarters of the main body of the book. The authors have produced an extremely useful edition of this charming travelogue, which they annotate with numerous previously unpublished excerpts from Townsend's manuscript journal and illustrate with a variety of useful maps, photographs of the

specimens he collected and the region he traversed, and paintings and engravings of the birds, mammals, and people he encountered. A detailed chronology and a brief account of Townsend's life leading up to his western trip introduce the book, and a short account of his life afterward concludes it. Although the authors do a nice job of mining primary and secondary sources directly related to Townsend's life and his work, they prove less successful in reconstructing the broader scientific and cultural context in which he labored. Here such standard historical accounts as John Greene's *American Science in the Age of Jefferson*, Charlotte Porter's *The Eagle's Nest: Natural History and American Ideas, 1812–1842*, George Daniels's *American Science in the Age of Jackson*, Robert Bruce's *The Launching of Modern American Science, 1846–1876*, and Paul Farber's *The Emergence of Ornithology as a Scientific Discipline, 1769–1850* would have been useful references. The volume concludes with a series of 18 valuable appendices that explore the fate of Townsend's natural-history collections, provide numerous lists of the birds and mammals he encountered during his travels, reconstruct his numbered catalog of bird specimens, and cover a variety of other interesting topics. Although the appendices are quite helpful, the large volume of material has forced the authors to reproduce the text in an extremely small font.

Clearly a labor of love, this carefully produced, self-published book goes a long way toward rescuing John Kirk Townsend from relative obscurity. It will appeal to a wide audience, ranging from practicing ornithologists and historians of natural history to western-history enthusiasts and collectors of Audubon's bird prints.—MARK V. BARROW, JR., Department of History (0117), Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24060. E-mail: [barrow@vt.edu](mailto:barrow@vt.edu).