



## BOOK REVIEWS

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EDITED BY BARBARA E. KUS

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**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.**—John Kirk Townsend; introduction and annotation by George Jobanek. 1999. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis, Oregon. xxix + 290 pp. ISBN 0-87071-525-9. \$16.95 (paper).

This is an unexpurgated version of ornithologist John Kirk Townsend's personal narrative of his part in Captain Nathaniel Wyeth's 1834 expedition to the Oregon region, the two years that he subsequently spent at Fort Vancouver at the mouth of the Columbia River, and his journey home to Philadelphia by way of Hawai'i and Chile. Townsend was the first explorer-collector to the Pacific Northwest who actually focused on birds. He served in the employ of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia at the invitation of the eminent British botanist Thomas Nuttall, who handled the botanical investigations on the journey.

The narrative is introduced and annotated by historian George Jobanek, whose scholarly contributions alone would make this modest volume worth the price. As Jobanek notes, Townsend's success as a diarist has largely overshadowed his contributions as a naturalist. The narrative, which was originally prepared only for Townsend's family members and published in 1839 following his return to Philadelphia, reads with the same excited air of discovery as the now sacred Lewis and Clark account from a couple of decades earlier.

The reader cannot help but be impressed by Townsend's coolheadedness and resourcefulness under amazingly diverse stresses, ranging from near-starvation to threats from hostile Indians and extreme climatic challenges. How anyone forced to endure so many life-threatening experiences could amass a valuable collection of specimens along the way almost defies belief. Townsend's anthropological observations, made relatively soon after the first incursions of Europeans into the Pacific Northwest, are particularly fascinating. He seemed to take a special interest in the variety of Native American cultures he found on his way West, professing great admiration for some tribes, especially the Nez Perce, but contempt for the customs and lifestyle of others that offended his Philadelphian Quaker sensibilities.

The ornithological accounts are largely confined to an appendix, which includes a list of 208 species recorded in the Territory of Oregon by Townsend, and brief notes on 24 species new to science (described formally in two publications, one by Townsend and another by John James Audubon). Among them are some of the most characteristic and widespread western species or subspecies, including Oregon (Dark-

eyed) Junco (*Junco hyemalis oregonus*), Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*), Chestnut-backed Chickadee (*Poecile rufescens*), Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*), Black-throated Gray Warbler (*Dendroica nigrescens*), Audubon's (Yellow-rumped) Warbler (*D. coronata auduboni*), Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*), Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*), and two which still bear the discoverer's name, Townsend's Warbler (*D. townsendi*) and Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*). Regrettably, Townsend mentions little of ornithological interest in his notes from two trips to Hawai'i, or his stay in Chile on his voyage home, where he spent several weeks bedridden with a serious illness.

Because they were collected in portions of the Far West where John James Audubon did not travel, Townsend's specimens served as virtually the only source of information for 74 of the 508 species treated in Audubon's monumental *Birds of America*. Jobanek notes that Audubon's looming persona, the ornithopolitics of the time, and Townsend's ever-precarious financial condition probably inhibited the publication of his own observations. Indeed, owing to the fact that Nuttall had returned to Philadelphia in 1836 with a large portion of Townsend's bird skin collection, Audubon was able to paint and even publish on many of the specimens before Townsend himself returned home the following year. Coues called attention to a prospectus for the first installment of a book by Townsend entitled *Ornithology of the United States of America, or Descriptions of Birds Inhabiting the States and Territories of the Union, with an Accurate Figure of Each Drawn from Nature*. This first installment was printed in 1839, the same year that Audubon's opus appeared, and one cannot avoid the suspicion, supported by Coues, that the latter, more ambitious work discouraged the completion of the former.

It is a pity that Townsend did not personally publish more of his own observations and that many of the most important ones were filtered through Audubon, who was often careless with details. Townsend himself was critical of Audubon's text, noting several instances where Audubon had transposed his notes or those of Nuttall under the wrong species, or made other errors of fact. Audubon provided a lengthy transmission of Townsend's observations on California Condors (*Gymnogyps californianus*), a tantalizing hint of what he must have seen on this expedition. He purportedly saw these birds along the Columbia River up to 500 miles from its mouth, placing the species far east of the range documented by later explorers. He noted that the "Californian Vulture" was "... often met near the Indian

villages, being attracted by the offal of the fish thrown around the habitations.’”

Townsend served in the employ of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and, following his return to Philadelphia, for a time eked out a meager living as a specimen preparator for the National Institute for the Promotion of Science in Washington, DC. He died in 1851 at the early age of 41, probably as a result of poisoning from the use of arsenic in the preparation of bird specimens.

In an era where new bird species can now be dis-

covered without reference to a study skin, let alone personal acquaintance with the actual living creature, Townsend’s account serves as a fascinating record of one of the earliest stages in the ontogeny of present ornithological knowledge. I recommend this account and its highly useful annotations to those who enjoy a good story of ornithological discovery and exploration.—LLOYD F. KIFF, The Peregrine Fund, 566 W. Flying Hawk Lane, Boise, ID 83709, E-mail: lkiff@peregrinefund.org