

# Substantiating Audubon's Washington Eagle

by Scott Maruna

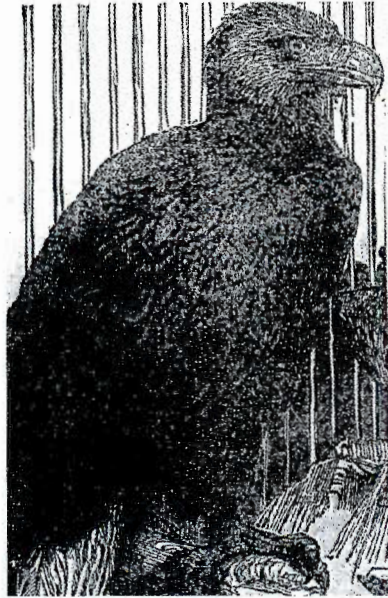
Most Americans know that statesman Benjamin Franklin lobbied for the Wild Turkey to serve as the national ornithological representative, but few know of the species that the great naturalist John James Audubon would have promoted had he had a voice in the matter. His preference can be gleaned from the following excerpt from his early writings, in his *Ornithological Biographies*:

...it is indisputably the noblest bird of its genus that has yet been discovered in the United States, I trust I shall be allowed to honour it with the name of one yet nobler, who was the saviour of his country, and whose name will ever be dear, to it. To those who may be curious to know my reasons, I can only say, that, as the new world gave me birth and liberty, the great man who ensured its independence is next to my heart. He had a nobility of mind, and a generosity of soul, such as are seldom possessed. He was brave, so is the Eagle; like it, too, he was the terror of his foes; and his fame, extending from pole to pole, resembles the majestic soarings of the mightiest of the feathered tribe. If America has reason to be proud of her Washington, so has she to be proud of her great eagle (Aud. 1999 220).

Audubon had studied, resided with, and painted both Bald and Golden Eagles, but this "mightiest of the feathered tribe" and "great eagle" that he lauded was neither of these. Though North America was once home to no fewer than seven species of eagles, the emergence of humans onto the continent and the demise of the great mega-fauna that once dominated the New World landscape whittled the number of native species to two long before Columbus arrived (Domazlicky 1992). That is, unless one considers the historic writings of the early 19th century; it is here that archivists find Audubon's (and others') detailed descriptions of a possible third American eagle species surviving into the modern era: the "great eagle"—the Bird of Washington.

For many decades, this bird was academically referred to by several con-substantial names: Washington's eagle, Washington's sea-eagle, Washington eagle and the great sea-eagle. Audubon's most frequently used moniker, though, was simply the "Bird of Washington." For simplicity in pluralizing, the bird will hereafter be referred to as the Washington eagle.

This eagle became an instant favorite of Audubon's, eliciting an almost poetic expression of his feelings after sightings of the species:



*The immature Washington Eagle as depicted in T. Bilby's "Young Folks Illustrated Book of Birds" published in 1887.*

It was in the month of February... that I obtained the first sight of this noble bird, and never shall I forget the delight which it gave me. Not even HERSCHEL, when he discovered the planet which bears his name, could have experienced more rapturous feelings (Aud. 1999 217).

Later, upon finally acquiring a specimen, Audubon described himself as being filled "with a pride which they alone can feel, who, like me, have devoted themselves from their earliest childhood to such pursuits, and who have derived from them their first pleasures."

Acceptance of the Washington eagle (*Falco washingtonii* Aud. 1831) as the ninth and largest of the worldwide species of sea-eagles persisted throughout Audubon's lifetime and for several years thereafter. Eventually, though, a tide of personal controversies caused many skeptics to question the scientific integrity of his work.

When Audubon illustrated mockingbirds for his *Birds of America*, he depicted them defending a nest against an arboreal rattlesnake attack. His enemies and detractors—of whom there were surprisingly many—used this to discredit him, noting that rattlesnakes cannot climb trees. Future observations, though, justified Audubon's artistic license and showed that rattlesnakes can indeed climb trees, though they rarely do (A.I.R.M.). Likewise, until his death Audubon was accused by botanists of having fabricated the existence of the "yellow water-lily," which he included in his *Birds of America* under the name of *Nymphaea lutea*. It was only decades later, in 1876, that his defiant refusal to retract his description was justified by the "discovery" of the long-lost flower in the Florida Everglades (Blavatsky 1888).