



# **A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House (The Hill Collection: Holdings of the LSU Libraries)**

*Danny Heitman*

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As the summer of 1821 began, John James Audubon's ambition to create a comprehensive pictorial record of American birds was still largely a dream. Then, out of economic necessity, Audubon came to Oakley Plantation, a sprawling estate in Louisiana's West Feliciana Parish. Teeming with an abundance of birds, the woods of Oakley galvanized Audubon's sense of possibility for one of the most audacious undertakings in the annals of art.

In *A Summer of Birds*, journalist and essayist Danny Heitman sorts through the facts and romance of Audubon's summer at Oakley, a season that clearly shaped the destiny of the world's most famous bird artist. Heitman draws from a rich variety of sources -- including Audubon's own extensive journals, more recent Audubon scholarship, and Robert Penn Warren's poetry -- to create a stimulating excursion across time, linking the historical man Audubon to the present-day civic and cultural icon. He considers the financial straits that led to Audubon's employment at Oakley as a private tutor to fifteen-year-old Eliza Pirrie, Audubon's family history, his flamboyance as a master of self-invention, his naturalist and artistic techniques, and the possible reasons for his dismissal. Illustrations include photographs of Oakley House -- now a state historic site -- Audubon's paintings from his Oakley period, and portraits of the Pirrie family members.

A favorable combination of climate and geography made Oakley a birding haven, and Audubon completed or began at least twenty-three bird paintings -- among his finest work -- while staying there. *A Summer of Birds* will inform and delight readers in its exploration of this eventful but unsung 1821 interlude, a fascinating chapter in the life of America's foremost bird artist. It is an indispensable pleasure for birders, Audubon enthusiasts, and visitors to Oakley House.

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