

Famous Floridians: John James Audubon

Although he did not have a home in Florida, John James Audubon spent time here. He captured the birds and wildlife of Florida through his realistic art. He is famous as an American naturalist, ornithologist,* and artist. The National Audubon Society was founded in his honor.



Audubon with his gun.

Audubon was born in Saint Domingue, now Haiti. He grew up in France, where his stepmother encouraged his interests in drawing and the outdoors. His father sent him to the U.S. in 1803 to avoid Napoleon's draft into the French army.

In 1820, Audubon began his book, *The Birds of America*. It became a masterpiece. From then on, he devoted most of his time to the study of natural history, especially to making drawings of American birds. Audubon traveled in search of birds to paint.

His first expedition to the east coast of Florida was to find water birds and tropical species. Audubon's group arrived in St. Augustine in 1831. For almost six months, they hunted birds in northeast Florida. They visited plantations and explored the Halifax and St. Johns Rivers.

Audubon's next trip to Florida was from Charleston aboard a type of boat called a cutter. Five days later it passed the Cape Florida Light and ultimately arrived at Indian Key in the Florida Keys. Audubon remained for a week. While there, he hired James Egan, a Bahamian who had lived on the Miami River for about 30 years, as a guide.

With Egan as his guide, Audubon explored Florida Bay, including Sandy Key, a rookery near Cape Sable. Audubon wrote this about the experience: "...seldom have I experienced greater pleasures than when on the Florida Keys, under a burning sun, after pushing my bark for miles over a soapy flat, I have striven all day long, tormented by myriads of insects, to procure a heron new to me, and have at length succeeded in my efforts."

The expedition reached Key West several weeks later. After about a week in Key West, Audubon sailed to the Dry Tortugas. While there, he drew tropical birds. His timing was excellent because the birds were nesting. Audubon returned to Charleston, again on the cutter. He went by way of Key West with a stop at Indian Key.

* Person who studies birds

Audubon was so pleased with his Florida expedition that he planned to return in 1837 to explore the west coast. The outbreak of the Second Seminole War, however, made Florida much too dangerous a destination. He briefly visited Pensacola, but was unsuccessful in arranging for transportation east and south.

The original version of *The Birds of America* included 435 prints showing 1065 birds. Audubon, with a Scottish naturalist, wrote a companion volume, *The Ornithological Biography*. This book described the characters and habits of the birds he had painted. Between 1840 and 1844, the two books were combined with the drawings reduced in size. Again called *The Birds of America*, this work took seven volumes.

Audubon's bird prints have been reproduced many times. His Florida birds are among the favorites.

