

Birds of Colonial Williamsburg

An “eloquent expression of Nature’s beauty”

Introducing Our New Bird Book

by Robert M. McClung



BIRDS, as noted ornithologist Frank Chapman has observed, are “the most eloquent expression of Nature’s beauty, joy, and freedom.” Most people would agree with that judgment. From time immemorial humans have admired the color and beauty of the birds about them, enjoyed listening to their songs, and watched their graceful and intricate aerial maneuvers.

“... the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land,” exulted an unknown poet thousands of years ago, as recorded in King Solomon’s *Song of Songs*. “To be a bird,” 20th-century enthusiast N. J. Berrill has declared, “is to be alive more intensely than any other living creature, man included. Birds have hotter blood, brighter colors, stronger emotions . . . they live in a world that is always the present, mostly full of joy.”

Today, as in bygone times, visitors to Colonial Williamsburg delight in the abundant feathered life of the area. They marvel at the ways of a bird in the air: a hummingbird flashing from blossom to blossom, a red-tailed hawk soaring against the blue sky, a barn swallow swooping and turning in acrobatic flight. They thrill to the sight of a pair of courting wood ducks on the pond behind the Governor’s Palace, the flash of red or blue as a cardinal or eastern bluebird flies past. All of these, and a host of other birds as well, are brought to life in a splendid new book, *Birds of Colonial Williamsburg: A Historical Portfolio*.

Two leading ornithologists—bird artist H. Douglas Pratt and scholar Alan Feduccia—have teamed together to create this handsome and meticulously produced volume. Within its covers, a parade of beautiful illustrations portrays as never before the varied and colorful bird life of Colonial

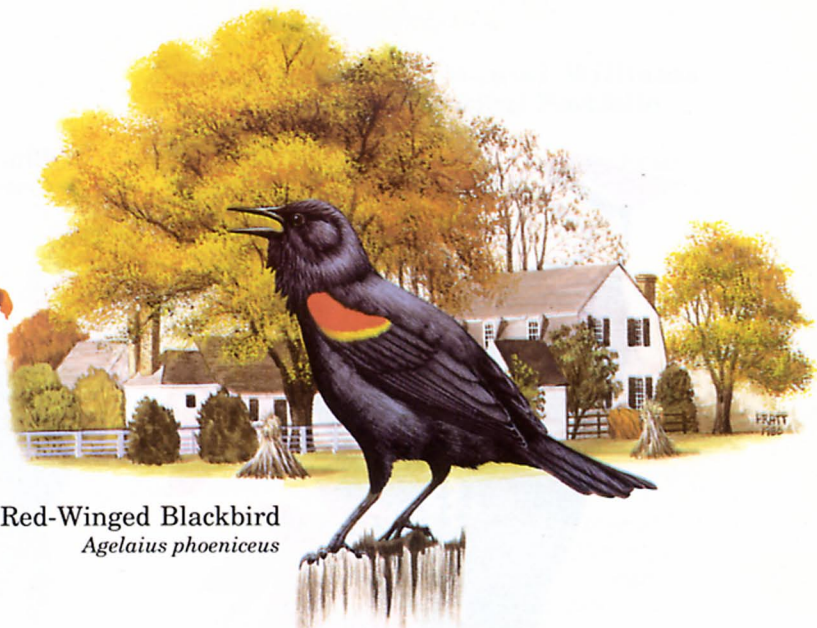
Williamsburg. The text, intermingling observations of the birds during colonial times with the latest scientific findings, provides a fascinating record of the advances of ornithological knowledge in America.

A preeminent painter of natural history subjects, especially birds, Pratt has illustrated a number of publications. He contributed 60 color plates to the National Geographic Society’s *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and designed postage stamps depicting birds of the South Pacific for the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Marshall Islands. He is also co-author of *A Field Guide to the Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific*.

For *Birds of Colonial Williamsburg* he has painted more than 70 full-color bird portraits, all of them richly detailed and scientifically accurate. As one looks at them, the words of early explorer John Lawson can be appreci-



American Goldfinch
Carduelis tristis



Red-Winged Blackbird
Agelaius phoeniceus

ated: "Birds in America more beautiful than in Europe." Pratt paints his subjects amid the native plant life of the region, frequently in authentic Williamsburg settings where visitors may see them in real life. A northern flicker is shown with the Powder Magazine in the background, the American kestrel near the Gaol, the killdeer against the Courthouse, and the crow and osprey at Carter's Grove. A wood thrush perches on a flowering dogwood near the Ludwell Paradise Stable, ready to whistle its haunting *ee-oh-lee, ee-oh-lay*. Searching for insects, a white-breasted nuthatch

creeps down a tree trunk in front of the John Crump House.

Alan Feduccia, who wrote the text that accompanies these illustrations, is a professor of biology at the University of North Carolina, a fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, and author of many scientific papers as well as *The Age of Birds*, an authoritative and widely used book on avian evolution. He also edited *Catesby's Birds of Colonial America*.

After a brief but fact-filled introduction sketching the development of bird study in America, particularly in relation to Williamsburg, Feduccia

gives a succinct and graceful essay, full of interesting information and anecdotes, about each species portrayed. The bird's habits are discussed as well as its song, its nest and eggs, its overall range and migration routes, and the status of local populations. A brief account of the history of the species in America is often included, and the text is sprinkled with engaging quotes from 17th- and 18th-century observers.

One of America's most beautiful and beloved birds, the cardinal, leads the parade of striking bird portraits in *Birds of Colonial Williamsburg*. The red bird, as Catesby and countless others since his time have called it, is celebrated today as the state bird not only of Virginia and North Carolina, but of five other states as well—West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. In this book it is shown perched on a branch of flowering magnolia, with one of Colonial Williamsburg's guest houses in the background. "They sing very prettily," Lawson observed, "when taken old and put in a cage." Catesby noted that "they are very frequently brought from Virginia, and other parts of North America, for their beauty and agreeable singing; they having some notes not unlike our Nightingale. . . ."

The eastern bluebird is shown sitting on a springtime branch of redbud next to the Alexander Craig Kitchen. In recent years the numbers of this species have dwindled, as favored



Author Alan Feduccia



Artist H. Douglas Pratt



Pilated Woodpecker
Dryocopus pileatus

Blue Jay
Cyanocitta cristata



nesting cavities were pre-empted by the more aggressive starling and house sparrow. Now the bluebird is staging a partial comeback in some areas due to the efforts of conservationists. The Williamsburg Bird Club has erected many bluebird houses at Carter's Grove and along the Country Road leading to it.

Since colonial days, the red-winged blackbird has been a common permanent resident of Williamsburg. During this century, winter roosts of an estimated 15 million or more have been recorded in Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp. Farmers afflicted by these feathered locusts look upon the red-wing as a plague species, just as early settlers did. Lawson wrote that they were "the worst vermin in America." They fly sometimes in such Flocks, that they destroy everything before them." Catesby concurred: "They are the boldest and most destructive birds in the Country."

The wild turkey was a very common bird in Virginia in early times, and Feduccia notes that it was a major item in the diets of both the Indians and the colonists. "I have seen about five hundred in a Flock," Lawson ob-

served in 1709. The species was greatly admired by Benjamin Franklin, who thought it should have been chosen as the representative of our country instead of the bald eagle. "For in truth," he declared, "the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird . . . a bird of courage."

In a letter to his niece, the sage of Philadelphia explained that "he [the bald eagle] is a bird of bad moral character; he does not get his living honestly." Franklin was referring to the eagle's habit of swooping on an osprey carrying a fish and harrying it until the osprey relinquished its prey. Long before Franklin's time, Lawson had noted that "the Fishing-Hawk is the Eagle's Jackal, which most commonly . . . takes his Prey for him."

Populations of the bald eagle and the osprey, as well as those of many other fish-eating birds, plummeted after World War II as a result of the widespread use of DDT. Concentrations of this insecticide accumulated in the tissues of fish the birds ate, resulting in disastrous thinning of eggshells and reproductive failure. After DDT was finally banned for use in the United States in 1972, these birds be-

gan a slow but steady recovery.

Birds of Colonial Williamsburg includes two species—the passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet—that were common in colonial times, but which have long since vanished forever. When the first European explorers arrived in North America, the passenger pigeon was undoubtedly the most numerous bird species on the continent, with a population that has been estimated at between three and five billion birds. They nested in vast colonies and migrated in flocks that darkened the skies. "In Virginia I have seen them fly in such continued trains three days successively," Catesby observed, "that there was not the least interval in losing sight of them." Lawson, after viewing a woodland where the pigeons roosted at night, said that "they had broke down the Limbs of a great many large Trees all over those Woods . . . wherever these Fowl came in such Numbers, as I saw them then, they clear all before them, scarce leaving one Acorn upon the Ground." Yet, as a result of the cutting of the forests and the relentless slaughter of the pigeons for the market, our ancestors finally de-

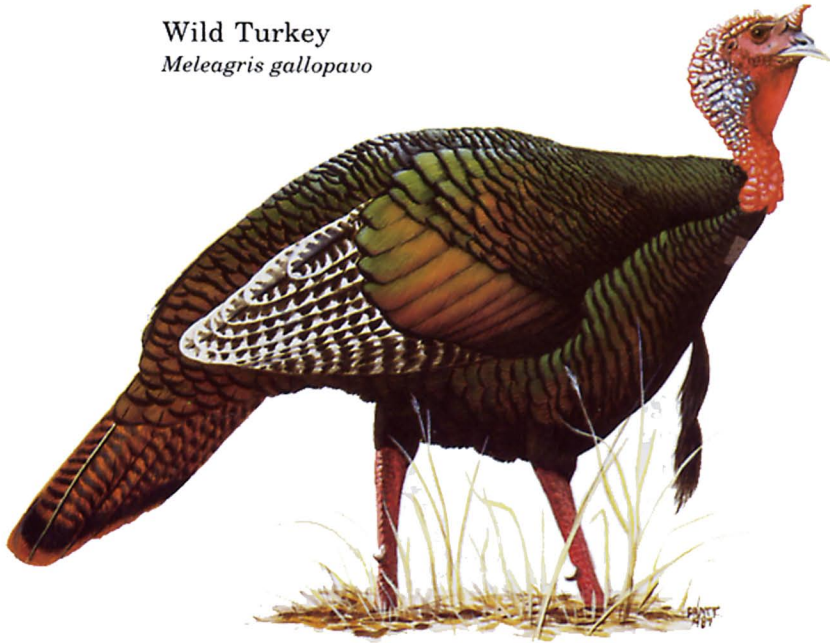
Birds of Colonial Williamsburg: A Historical Portfolio

by Alan Feduccia

illustrations by H. Douglas Pratt

Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo



162 pages; 73 color illustrations;

page size 11-1/4" x 12"

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Robert M. McClung is author of numerous books about wildlife and conservation, including the widely acclaimed *Lost Wild America* and *America's Endangered Birds*. He formerly was curator of mammals and birds at the Bronx Zoo and served as natural history editor for *National Geographic* books. He and his wife Gale live in Amherst, Massachusetts.

stroyed this mighty multitude. The last passenger pigeon, a captive female, died in the Cincinnati Zoological Garden in September 1914. That same month and in the same zoo, the last captive specimen of the attractive little Carolina parakeet suffered the same fate. Within a few years, the last surviving wild specimens disappeared.

The record for the introduced English or house sparrow and European starling is a very different story. Unknown in the New World in colonial days, these two immigrants are now common—abundant in many areas—throughout much of North America. Their introductions, as Feduccia notes, have become “two of the worst ‘natural’ tragedies of our time.”

Today, millions of people throughout the United States enjoy the birds they observe and take an active interest in their welfare. Many pursue bird-watching as a hobby, and even more feed the birds that come to their yards and put out nest boxes for them. *Birds of Colonial Williamsburg: A Historical Portfolio* will be enjoyed not only by them, but by anyone who has ever watched birds with pleasure and wondered about their behavior. ▲