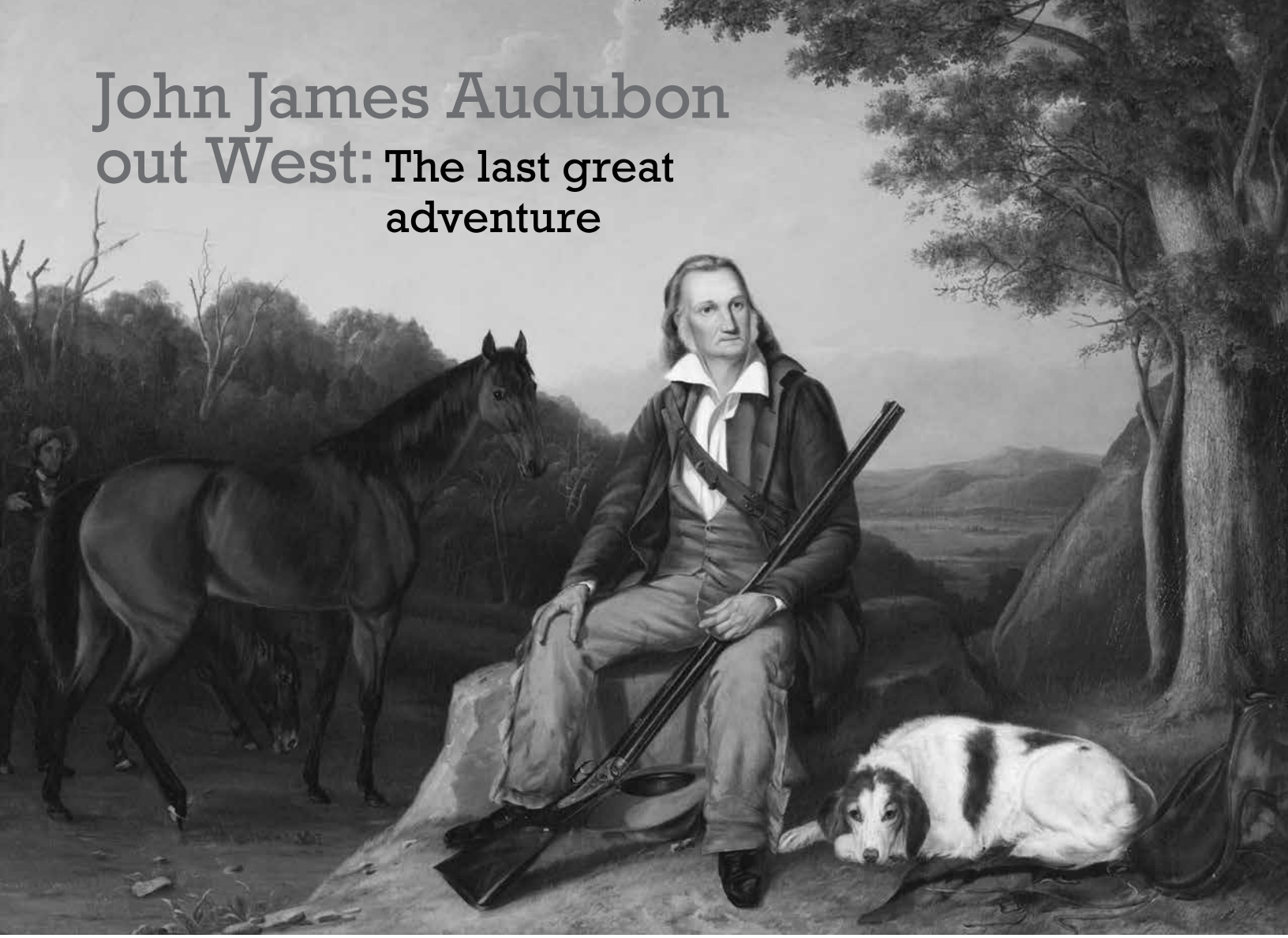
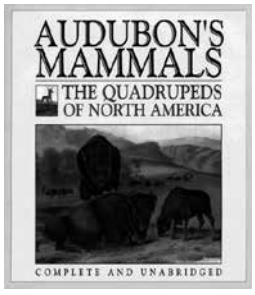
John James Audubon out West: The last great adventure

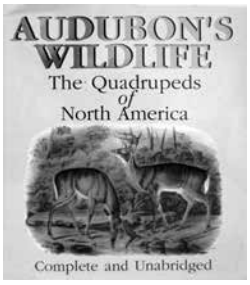


John James Audubon, a portrait painted by Audubon's sons, Victor and Johnny. Denis Finnin. Image #1822, American Museum of Natural History, Library.

By Nancy Plain

"We are advancing in this strange wilderness," John James Audubon wrote as the steamboat *Omega* labored up the Missouri River from St. Louis toward Fort Union in present-day North Dakota, and "we have had a great deal that interested us all."





It was 1843, and the artist/ornithologist was already famous for *The Birds of America*, his magnificent four-volume collection of watercolors depicting 489 species of American birds. Now working on a book to be called *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, he was attempting to do for America's mammals what he had done for its "feathered tribes."

Having amassed enough drawings of Eastern animals, he had set out with a small team of assistants – a taxidermist, an artist, and two friends – to draw the quadrupeds of the West. At age 58 and after a lifetime of roving, he knew that this would be his last adventure in the wild. According to Audubon, the *Omega*'s other passengers were an "extraordinary and motley crew" – more than a hundred rowdy trappers from assorted nations, as well as a group of Indians who had visited St. Louis and were now homeward bound. In April, when the boat had pushed off from the dock, the trappers, drunk and raucous, had fired their guns in the air and cheered.

For hundreds of miles the *Omega* would battle sandbars, sunken logs and the roiling current. Whenever the crew rowed ashore to chop wood for fuel, Audubon went too, "in search of quadrupeds, birds, and adventures." The steamboat passed the Platte River – the path of the Oregon Trail – where wagon trains were just beginning to roll west. It passed Council Bluffs, where less than 40 years before, Lewis and Clark had first met with chiefs of the Missouri River tribes. Then deeper into the Great Plains it went, into the heart of Indian country. The vast land that would become the states of Kansas, Nebraska and South and North Dakota was not even organized into territories yet, and few Americans had ventured this far.

Strange wilderness, indeed. Audubon was transfixed by blood-red sunrises and long, moonlit nights. High bluffs lined the Missouri, and behind them the prairie swept on into infinity. Audubon, who had spent much of his life wandering the lush forests of Pennsylvania and the Kentucky frontier, marveled at the scarcity of trees. Winding his way upriver, he saw his first prairie-dog village and his first buffalo. Teepees clustered around Fort Clark, a trading post in present-day South Dakota. In North Dakota, Audubon toured a Mandan village.

He was shocked to see how poor the Mandans were and to learn that they were so hungry that they had been reduced to eating the rotting flesh of drowned buffalo. In his journal, Audubon mocked the artist George Catlin for his glowing descriptions of that tribe during the latter's 1832 visit: "Ah, Mr. Catlin, I am now sorry to see and to read your accounts of the Indians *you* saw – how very different they must have been from any that I have seen!"

Well, they were. Catlin had come West before 1837, the year a steamboat brought smallpox to the Upper Missouri. The ensuing epidemic raced through the region, killing many native peoples, who had no immunity to the disease. Audubon was told that that particular strain of smallpox had been "of the most virulent type, so that within a few hours after death the bodies were a mass of rottenness."

Blue jays painting by John James Audubon. Library of Congress

Portraits of John James Audubon. Library of Congress

The Mandans were hardest hit; possibly 90 percent of them died. Audubon heard desperate stories, including one about "an extremely handsome and powerful Indian who lost an only son, a beautiful boy, upon whom all his hopes and affections were placed." This father said to the boy's mother, "Why should we live? All we cared for is taken from us and why not at once join our child in the land of the Great Spirit?" The mother, too, wanted to die.

Audubon writes, "In an instant he shot her dead, reloaded his gun, put the muzzle in his mouth, touched the trigger, and fell back dead."

In June, the *Omega* reached Fort Union, where the Yellowstone flows into the Missouri. The boat had set a speed record – 2,000 miles in 48 days. This was the farthest west Audubon had ever been and he could not have wished for a wilder place. "Wolves howling and [buffalo] bulls roaring, just like the long continued roll of a hundred drums." He was given a special room to draw in, and he unpacked for a two-month stay.

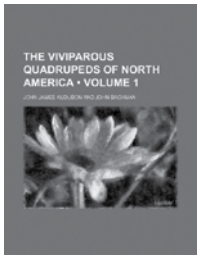
The fort had been established to handle trade with the Blackfeet and other Upper Missouri tribes. The agent in charge was Alexander Culbertson. His wife was a Blackfoot named Natawista. One day the couple put on war paint and, along with Natawista's servant, staged a horse race. "Mrs. Culbertson and her maid rode astride like men," wrote Audubon, "and all rode a furious race … for more than one mile on the prairie …. Mr. Culbertson rode with

Golden eagle with Northern Hare, painted by John James Audubon in 1833. Library of Congress

them, the horses running as if wild, with these extraordinary Indian riders, Mrs. Culbertson's magnificent black hair floating like a banner behind her."

Audubon's team left the fort daily to explore and hunt. Audubon hunted for food, he hunted for specimens to study and draw, and he hunted for the sheer love of it. Antelope bounded over the prairie. Elk bearing huge antlers swam the river, and grizzly bears foraged in the brush. Wolves ranged everywhere, even approaching the fort, where they provided target practice for men standing on the ramparts. Audubon made a special trip to North Dakota's Badlands, where wind and ancient rivers had carved a strange landscape, to see bighorn sheep as they scampered up and down rock towers one thousand feet high.

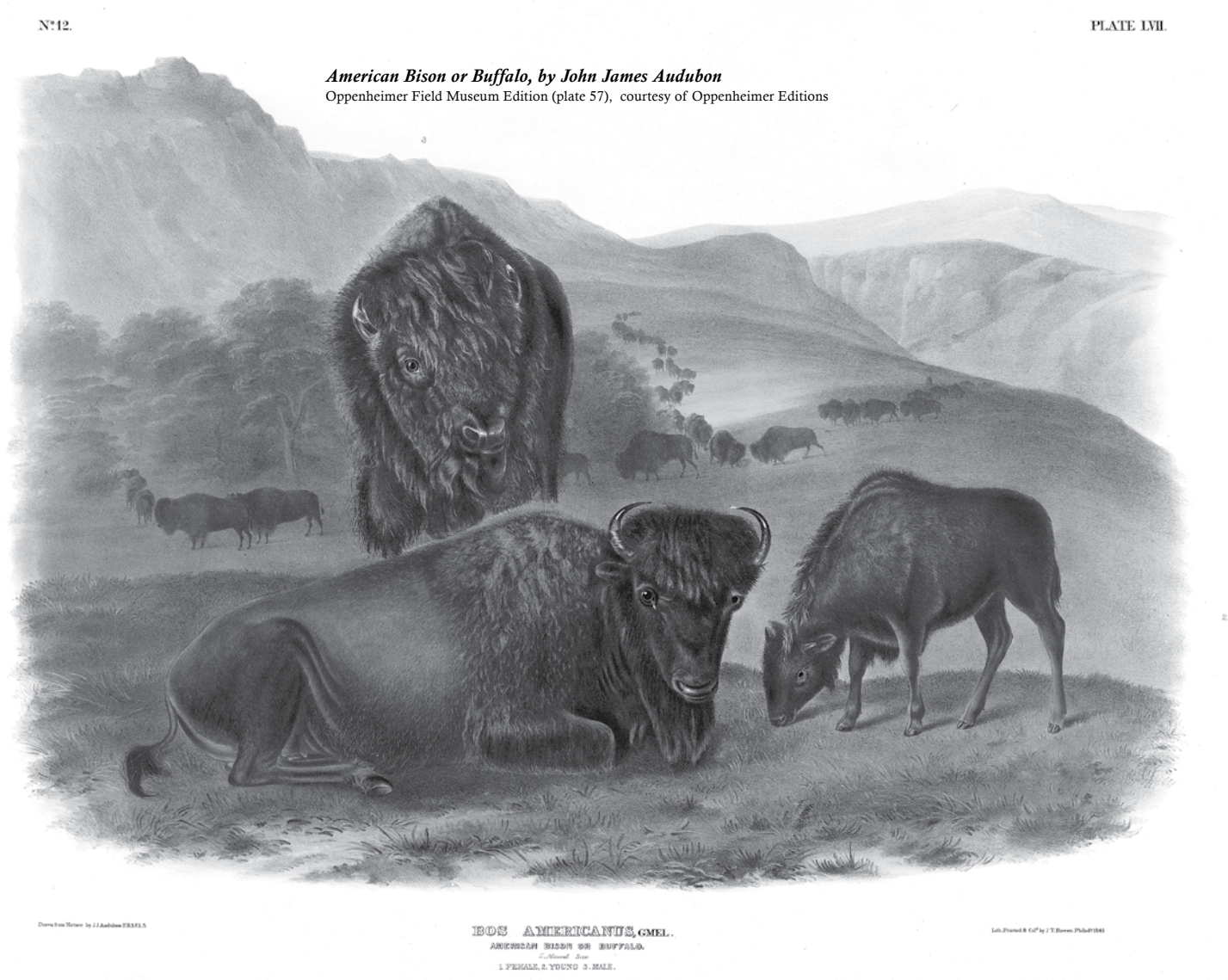
He and his friends shot as many animal species as they could find and sent



their bodies whole or in parts, pickled in brine, back to Audubon's home in New York so that he could sketch them for his book.

Of great interest to Audubon in his pursuit of "viviparous quadrupeds" was the buffalo, the largest mammal on the North American continent, and Fort Union was set squarely in that animal's kingdom. The shaggy beasts then walked the land in herds so immense that Audubon found it "impossible to describe." One frontiersman told him that it had taken six days to ride through just one herd. And for everyone at the fort, nothing compared to the thrill – and danger – of the buffalo hunt.

Audubon rode along on several of these, but he had trouble shooting his



American Bison or Buffalo, by John James Audubon
Oppenheimer Field Museum Edition (plate 57), courtesy of Oppenheimer Editions

William Henry Jackson took this photograph of Mount Audubon, near Ward, Colorado, in 1901. Library of Congress

rifle while riding at a mad gallop, and once he was almost gored by a wounded bull. "How I wish I were twenty-five years younger!" he wrote as he reluctantly relegated himself to the role of observer. After one hunt, he looked on amazed as Natawista scooped out the still warm brains of a dead buffalo and ate them, raw and dripping.

In spite of his lifelong passion for hunting, Audubon realized that species could become extinct, and as the years passed, he had become increasingly concerned. He saw that, like the passenger pigeon and other bird species back East, buffalo were being slaughtered at an alarming rate.

"What a terrible destruction of life, as it were for nothing, or next to it. … The prairies are literally *covered* with the skulls of the victims …." And he added, "This cannot last; even now there is a perceptible difference in the size of the herds, and before many years the Buffalo, like the Great Auk, will have disappeared; surely this should not be permitted."

But it was permitted, and although he would not live to see his prediction come true, by the 1880s almost all the buffalo would be gone.

Winter comes early to the Upper Missouri country. By mid-August, there was a sharp bite in the wind, and the air was thick with the coming snows. Audubon and his men built an oar-powered barge called a mackinaw to carry them home. The naturalist had not had time to go as far as he had wanted, to the Rocky Mountains and beyond, but he had seen an awe-inspiring part of the West and a wealth of its wild creatures.

The mackinaw made its way down past the Mandan village and the Sioux encampments, down through the prairie that Audubon called "sublime." From St. Louis he traveled back to his home and family in New York. His hair and beard, all white now, were long, and he had brought back with him a coat trimmed with wolf fur. His son Johnny painted a portrait of Audubon, looking like a true Western frontiersman.

As soon as his barrels of specimens arrived, Audubon sat down to perfect his drawings. With pencil and ink, he drew every whisker and eyelash. He used watercolor, pastel and oil to show the softness of fur and its many shadings. His quadrupeds would be as lifelike as his birds.

The quadruped pictures were printed on lithographed plates and colored by hand. Audubon brought sample prints to Washington, D.C., to entice members of Congress into

buying a subscription to *The Viviparous Quadrupeds*. The artist was amazed at how little the politicians knew about the animals of their own country. "The Great Folk call the Rats Squirrels, the squirrels flying ones, and the Marmots, poor things, are regularly called Beavers or Musk Rats."

By 1845, Audubon had finished half the illustrations for the book. But his eyesight was failing, and his mind was beginning to fail, too. As his days of drawing and writing neared an end, Audubon's family members and a co-author, a naturalist named John Bachmann, stepped in to complete the project. *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America* was published in three volumes, between 1845 and 1848, and it was hailed as a landmark of natural history, the most complete record of American mammals of its time. Its creator, who would die in 1851, had accomplished in his 66 years of life a range of work that few of his contemporaries had thought possible. Audubon had looked at the American wilderness of his day as a kind of Garden of Eden and had made it his mission "to search out the things which have been hidden since the creation of this wondrous world."

Sources

John James Audubon. *Ornithological Biography*, Volume Two. Memphis: General Books, LLC, 2012.

Christoph Irmscher, editor. *Audubon: Writings and Drawings*. New York: The Library of America, 1999.

Reviews and listings

To submit a book for possible review, mail one copy to Editor, Roundup Magazine, 10 Dovela Road, Santa Fe, NM 87508 as soon as available. Professional advance reading copies are also accepted. **IN THE CHUTE** is an advance listing of forthcoming books. Information should be emailed to roundupwwa@aol.com at least six months before publication.

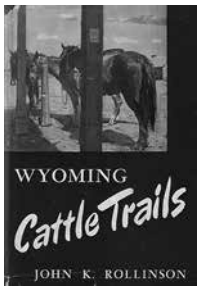
WYOMING *(from page 13)*

We round out this survey of Wyoming fiction writers with Annie Proulx, who has sojourned in Wyoming. With *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999), *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2* (2004) and *Fine Just the Way It Is: Wyoming Stories 3* (2008), Proulx has managed to enthrall many readers and displease others. The reader of Proulx's fiction may decide for herself whether the author portrays Wyoming as it is or as outsiders would like to think Wyoming and its people are.

Annie Proulx

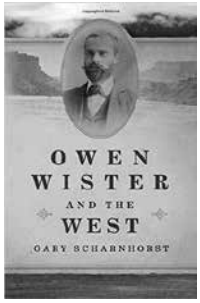
This has been, by necessity, a limited survey, but it is based on my reading of all of the authors and almost all of the titles mentioned. I hope it shows something of the diversity in Wyoming fiction, and I hope it has introduced to some readers a few titles worth looking into.

TOP 10 *(from page 14)*

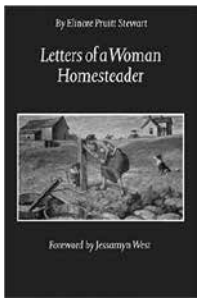


New York-born Rollinson, who also wrote *Pony Trails in Wyoming* (Caxton, 1941), headed to Wyoming at age 15, worked as a hay hand and cowboy and eventually started his own cattle-and-horse ranch. This book includes trail reminiscences and an overview of the state's cattle industry from 1880 to 1910.

9. Gary Scharnhorst's *Owen Wister and the West* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2015): More than a biography of the man who created the Western novel with *The Virginian,* this book illustrates how the West, and specifically Wyoming, helped shape Wister's literary career, his life and his values.



10. Elinore Pruitt Stewart's *Letters of a Wyoming Homesteader* (Bison Books, 1990): "I was twenty-four hours on the train and two days on the stage, and, oh, those two days!" Elinore Pruitt Stewart wrote from Burnt Fork in 1909. "The snow was just beginning to melt and the mud was the worst I ever heard of!" First published in book form in 1914 and often republished since, Stewart's letters offer an authentic depiction of life in the West. The 1980 film *Heartland* was based on her letters and journals.



WWA supports Authors Guild's 'Fair Contract Initiative'

From Staff Reports

WWA has endorsed the Authors Guild's "Fair Contract Initiative," which aims to give all authors "a fair shake" when negotiating with publishers for contracts.

The WWA board of directors unanimously approved the endorsement. Other writing organizations have also endorsed the move by the Authors Guild, America's oldest and largest professional organization for writers and a longtime advocate for free speech, fair contracts and copyright.

Basically, the initiative seeks to have publishers revise typical boilerplate contract items dealing with net eBook income and reversion of rights.

WWA also has supported the Authors Guild's ongoing lawsuit against Google as the board voted to provide up to $2,000 as the Authors Guild appeals a lower-court ruling to the Supreme Court.

"We use funds received from the Authors Coalition of America for these legal efforts on behalf of our members," WWA executive director Candy Moulton said.

A 2015 Authors Guild survey revealed that writing-related income for full- and part-time book authors has dropped 30 and 38 percent, respectively, since 2009.