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Front cover: *Showy Lady's-slipper, found in moist woods and swamps from Newfoundland to Manitoba.* O. E. Devitt, Richmond Hill, Ontario
Back cover: *Thundering Helmcken Falls on the Murtle River, Wells Gray Provincial Park, British Columbia.* T. W. Hall Penticton

Re. Dr. ³Thos McCulloch ⁷

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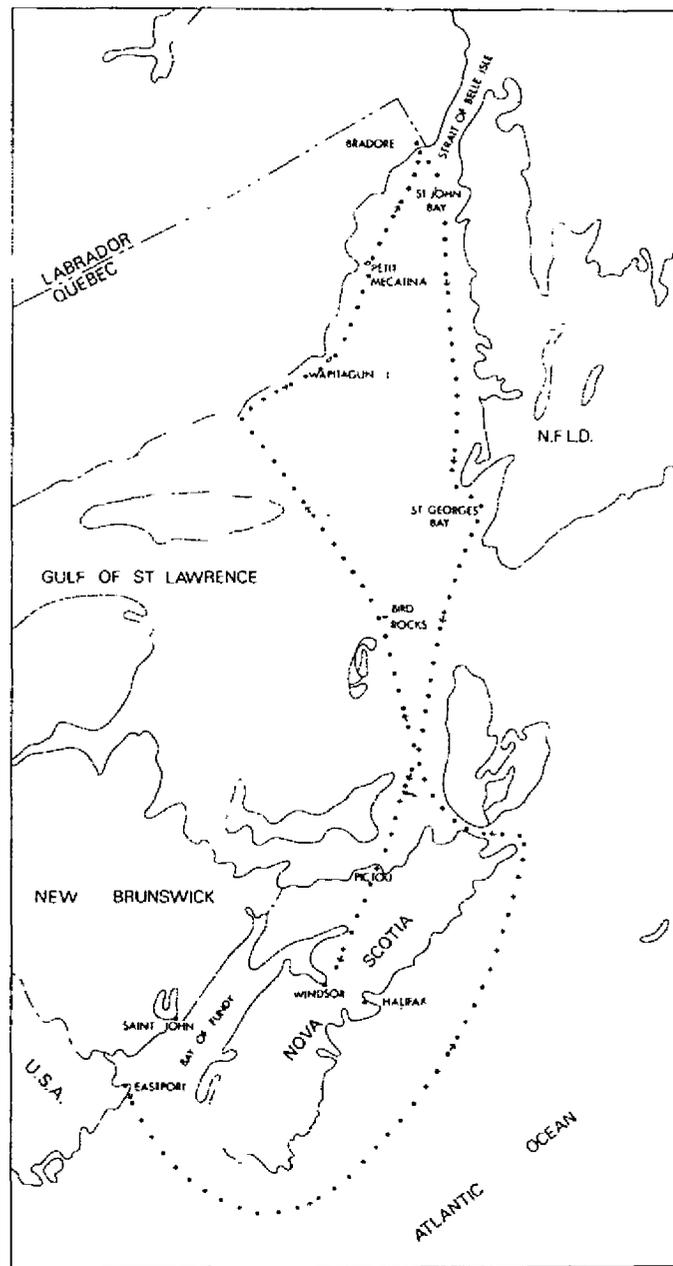
Audubon's Journey to Labrador

About ten o'clock the morning of June 14, a speck arose on the horizon. At eleven, I could see its top plainly; it seemed to be covered with snow several feet deep. I rubbed my eyes, took my spyglass to view the strangest of all pictures... a mass of birds... the air was filled with flying gannets, until they looked like a heavy snowfall from where we watched.'

by J. W. CHALMERS

The bird watcher was John James Audubon. Eight days before, on June 6, 1833, he had left Eastport, Maine, by chartered schooner, bound for the shores of the Labrador peninsula in search of new subjects for his monumental *Birds of America*. Having rounded Nova Scotia and cut through the Strait of Canso, his party was now passing the Bird Rocks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

On June 18, they sighted cod-fishing boats at the mouth of the Natashquan River on the north shore of the Gulf, the real starting point of the expedition. Although they were actually in the Province of Quebec, Audubon considered the coast part of Labrador, "farther north than I ever was before. But what a country! When we landed and passed the beach, we sank nearly up to our knees in mosses of



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various sorts, producing as we moved through them a curious sensation. . . . We scrambled about, and with anxiety stretched our necks and looked over the country far and near, but not a square foot of earth could we see."²

The schooner made its way slowly eastward along the Quebec coast, stopping when weather and surf permitted. Audubon's son John, along with other assistants and crew members, were in the field from four a.m. hunting for birds and their eggs, as well as mineral, botanical, and other specimens. Occasionally, Audubon himself would join the searchers, though at other times he passed the daylight hours at his drawing board under the schooner's open hatch. At one place, Audubon witnessed the depredations of eggers raiding nesting colonies of gulls, ducks, guillemots, puffins, and other seabirds for meat, eggs, and eiderdown.

It wasn't only birds, marine life, and the wilderness that interested Audubon; the people he encountered on the trip were fascinating to him as well. He visited the modest mud and stone home of a squatter named Pierre Michaud, whom Audubon had first come upon kneeling before a rough wooden cross. A Dutch stove filled half the single room of the squatter's home; a pile of deerskins served as a bed. A bowl, a jug, and an iron pot rested on a shelf; three rusty muskets stood by the door. When Michaud prayed

in the summer, he looked toward the sea, the source of his livelihood. In winter, however, he faced the mainland mountains, whence came the caribou which furnished him with food and clothing. Audubon also visited another settler, a more prosperous fortune seeker, who owned several houses and even a small library. Audubon wrote: "His demeanor was that of a gentleman," and he was obviously the lord of the little outpost. From newspapers he regularly received, this man had been aware of Audubon's intention to visit Labrador.

In late June, the party continued eastward, stopping at Wapitagan Island where Audubon sketched the willow ptarmigan: male, female and young. By the middle of July, the party had progressed about a hundred miles up the coast to the mouth of the Petit-Mécata, about which Audubon wrote in his journal: "How small some of the ducks looked which flew between us and the rocks, so stupendously high were the rough shores."³ A couple of weeks later, the schooner reached Bras d'Or (now Bradore), grand rendezvous of cod fishermen, where the activity of 150 vessels in the harbour "surprised us after so many weeks of wilderness and loneliness."⁴ Here, at the entrance to the Strait of Belle Isle which divides the mainland from the island of Newfoundland and marks the real beginning of Labrador, the artist portrayed the great auk and the Labrador duck, both doomed to early extinction.

While at Bras d'Or, Audubon visited the home of a generous couple who supplied the expedition with fresh butter and milk. Sensing that Audubon "knew something of the fine arts," the chatelaine led him to walls adorned with elegant Italian pictures ("vile prints" he called them) which had cost a shilling apiece. Her ladyship also claimed to be an accomplished musician — on the hand-organ. Audubon later forgave her affectations, however, when he saw her rescue a tiny captive siskin from the hands of her teasing children.

On August 11, the schooner crossed the St. John Bay toward the island of Newfoundland on the course which would take it home. By now, the rigours of the trip were evidently beginning to wear on Audubon, then 48, for as he watched the mainland of Canada disappear he wrote: "Seldom in my life have I left a country with as little regret as I do this. . . . As we sailed away and I saw, probably for the last time, the high rugged hills partly immersed in masses of the thick fog that usually hovers over them. . . . I felt rejoiced."⁵

They raced southwestward down the Newfoundland coast; apparently once Audubon had made up his mind to return home, he was in a hurry. Still he found time, during the mild and clear mid-August weather, to comment on his surroundings. "I gazed on the romantic scenery spread along the bold, often magnificent shores whose luxuriant growth far surpasses that to the north," he wrote. "Sometimes a cliff would resemble the lost half of some mountain sunk in the depths of the sea. The dashing of waters at its foot was enough to make the most daring seaman wary. In the huge masses of broken rock before me, I fancied I felt a power supporting the gigantic fragments which everywhere hung as if by magic, and almost as if awaiting the

proper moment to fall and crush some impious, pirate vessel. Now and again, the gently swelling hills came into view, rearing their heads skyward as if desirous of existence within the azure purity."⁶

The morning of August 13, the schooner entered St. George's Bay at the southwest corner of Newfoundland. There, some of the men broiled lobsters, while Audubon collected a few more specimens. Local villagers held a dance to the accompaniment of flageolet, flute, and violin, and medleys of French, British, and American airs continued far into the night.

When they left St. George's Bay, a gale carried the schooner off course far to the northeast. Audubon managed to land on a small island near the Nova Scotia town of Pictou, however. On the evening of August 22, he called on Dr. Thomas McCulloch of Pictou, a well-known naturalist in the area. Professor McCulloch ". . . received us very kindly," Audubon later wrote, "gave us a glass of wine, showed his collection of well-preserved birds and other things, and invited us to breakfast tomorrow when we are again to inspect his curiosities."⁷ On the following day, Audubon recorded in his journal: "We had an excellent Scotch breakfast at Professor McCulloch's. His whole family was present, four sons and a daughter, besides his wife and his sister. I became more pleased with the pro-



Iceland or Jer Falcon, *FALCO ISLANDICUS*, Lath., Female Birds

fessor the more he talked. I showed him a few Labrador drawings, after which we went to the University (Pictou Academy) once more to examine his fine collection. I found there half a dozen specimens of birds which I longed for, and said so; the professor had the cases opened, the specimens taken out, and he offered them to me with so much apparent good will that I took them. He then asked me to look around and not leave any object which might be of assistance in my publication, but so generous had he already proved himself that I remained mute. I saw several I would have liked to have, but I could not mention them. He offered me all his freshwater shells, and any minerals I might choose."⁷ For a number of years following his northern trip, Audubon carried on a correspondence with Dr. McCulloch's son, Thomas McCulloch, Jr., receiving a great deal of information on the habits and life histories of birds from Nova Scotia.

From Pictou, Audubon travelled to Windsor on the Bay of Fundy. There he watched the famous tides in the Windsor River "and saw the mass of water accumulating with a rapidity that I cannot describe. At half-flow, the water rose three feet in ten minutes, but it is even more rapid than this. A few minutes after its greatest height is attained, it begins to recede and in a few minutes the whole bed of the river is again emptied."⁸

Audubon finally reached Eastport, Maine, on the last day of August, travelling through Halifax and Saint John. Although the Labrador trip had exhausted him and cost him about \$2,000, he was considerably pleased with its

results. He said he had obtained eight new birds, made 25 drawings, and now had enough material to complete the second volume of his *Birds of America*. More than that, the Labrador trip assured him that his would be the best book on North American birds. □

¹Ford, Alice, ed. *Audubon, By Himself*. Natural History Press, New York, 1969, pp. 230-1.

²Adams, Alexander B. *John James Audubon*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1966, p. 408.

³Adams, p. 410.

⁴Ford, p. 240.

⁵Adams, p. 412.

⁶Ford, p. 241.

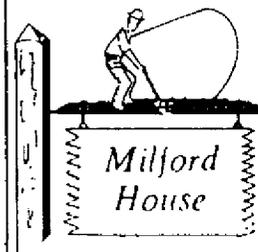
⁷Lewis, Harrison F. "Some Canadian Auduboniana." *Canadian Field-Naturalist*, 47(9), 1933, pp. 162-72.

⁸Adams, pp. 412-3.

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