WHITE-HEADED EAGLE WITH YELLOW CATFISH

PLATE 31 FROM BIRDS OF AMERICA, NO. 7

With his sharp talons, piercing eye, pointed beak, and imposing size, this white-headed eagle appears strong and fierce. Also known as the bald eagle, this bird is easily recognizable because of its white head and tail, which stand out against its dark brown body. As the official emblem of the United States of America, it represents majesty and courage.

As a young man, John James Audubon, a budding scientist and artist, enjoyed studying birds on his father’s farm near Philadelphia. In 1820, he took a three-month expedition down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, carefully observing a variety of birds and recording information about them through drawing, painting, and writing. His original watercolor paintings were later etched and printed in a seven-volume set of books called Birds of America, which included 435 large prints. This print is one page from volume 7. Audubon presented the birds in their natural habitats, engaging in typical activities such as hunting, feeding, courting, and caring for their young. Each image was accompanied by a written description.

In his text, Audubon described the bald eagle’s “strength, daring, and cool courage,” and noted its “ferocious, overbearing, and tyrannical temper.” He admired its majesty in flight, soaring high with its impressive wingspan of seven to eight feet. Audubon witnessed bald eagles catching their prey and stealing recent kill of other birds, a notorious tactic of the eagle. Perhaps such scenes inspired Audubon’s image, in which the bald eagle grasps a catfish with his razor-sharp talons.

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