

Second Place Writing – Age 14-18
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Birding in the 1800's: Lewis' and Clark's Contribution to Ornithology

Earlier this summer on May 26, my good friend Adam Nisbett boarded a plane in St. Louis and less than five hours later he walked into the terminal of Portland International Airport, several thousand miles away. Later he remarked, "You know, I just traveled the same route as Lewis and Clark, but I guess I probably covered the distance a little bit faster." That comment got me thinking. After all, our family lives in Clark County Washington, only a few miles from the Lewis River and less than an hour and a half away from Fort Clatsop, the expedition's historic 1805 winter refuge. I go birding at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge which is located on the same Columbia River floodplains that Lewis and Clark were so familiar with; what's more, I even attend Clark College. Not too long ago, our family stood on the banks of the Columbia right where the corps of Discovery landed to establish Fort Clatsop in 1805. It's incredible to think that we live in the midst of one of our nation's crowning historical achievements, and I'm inspired when I consider that these two men were not only the first Americans to set eyes on my home state, but they were the earliest dedicated naturalists to delve deep into the western unknown.

It was May 14, 1804. William Clark and his crew of 42 set sail and guided their keelboat into the waters of the Mississippi as the neighboring settlers stood on the shore cheering and bidding them farewell.¹ The party was to join up with Meriwether Lewis, the young army officer appointed by Jefferson to head the expedition, at St. Louis, and from there proceed up the Missouri River. Their destination was the newly acquired western regions – never yet penetrated by any American – and their primary mission was simply to record and collect anything unknown, interesting and new to science. This they did, with tremendous curiosity, perceptiveness, and a great deal of perseverance. Utilizing very deliberate scientific methods, direct questioning and careful observation, Lewis and Clark delivered their honest assessment of their discoveries in their journals, everything from trees and flowers, climate and people, to prairie dogs and birds.² Now that's where I really get interested.

These men shared the age-long human fascination with birds, and this shows through in their journals. Though they weren't poetic and fanciful like Wordsworth or Shelley, who revered and personified birds almost as gods in their poetry, Lewis and Clark applied their roaming curiosity and down-to-earth scientific approach to ornithology without supposing themselves to be poetic or eloquent. Consider the huge disparity between these two excerpts from their writings.

Thou, ranging up and down the bowers

Art sole in thy employment;

A Life, a Presence like the Air,

*Scattering thy gladness without care,
Too bless'd with any on to pair,
Thyself thy own enjoyment*³

William Wordsworth. "The Green Linnet," 1802/1803

*"The large woodpecker or log cock, the lark woodpecker and the small white woodpecker with a red head are the same with those of the Atlantic states and are found exclusively in the timbered country."*⁴ Capt. Lewis, March 4, 1805

Wordsworth is incredibly idealistic, Lewis is very practical – two completely different angles of the same subject. The one resurrects the ancient mythical quality of birds, while the other hammers out the details, reasserting reality.

Both Lewis and Clark kept semi-regular journals, which can be somewhat dry with their fastidious detail and multitudes of raw facts (of course, that is exactly what Jefferson asked them to do), but more than a few times you can detect undertones of admiration and awe. For instance, when Lewis described the stunning Black-billed Magpie, he referred to it as a "remarkable, beautiful thing" – he is so delighted he can't stop talking about it.⁵

Now every birder knows it's very easy to make mistakes. Mistakes in identification, classification, vocalization, plumage. . . etc. These men had the same problem, and we can't fault them too much for it. They had limited knowledge, experience, time and resources, and it's admirable that they were able to dedicate themselves as much as they did to the study of birds. Thankfully both Lewis and Clark were unassuming and straightforward when it came to their avian discoveries. "Without feeling any embarrassment that he (Lewis) was not expert enough to do justice to any of them, he wrote them up on his terms."⁶ They were quick to correct themselves too. Lewis believed that the Steller's Jay was "of the hawk or vulture kind,"⁷ but later identified his mistake and reclassified it in the *Corvus* genus.

Even though Lewis only received brief scientific instruction in Washington before he departed, I was amazed as I read through segments of his journals how intimately familiar he was with most eastern bird species. He compares the most particular details of two similar species in a very knowledgeable tone, betraying a remarkable proclivity for birds in general. On March 3, 1806 Captain Lewis wrote in his journal, "*The small brown pheasant is an inhabitant of the same country and is of the size and shape of the speckled pheasant which it also resembles in its economy and habits. The stripe above the eye in this species is scarcely perceptible, and is when closely examined of a yellow or orange colour instead of the vermilion of the others.*"⁸ Several days later, Lewis comments on a "small swan" which differs in size and its note from the common Trumpeter Swan, indication that he was very familiar with the larger species at home. He even ventured to list the distinguishing characteristics of the two meadowlark

species! Lewis had probably visited Charles Peale's great museum of natural science in Philadelphia in 1803, where he could have studied a beautiful collection of over seven hundred bird specimens arranged categorically.⁹ We know that he was a dedicated student of nature at a very young age, so his extensive knowledge is understandable. But most importantly, he understood there were things he didn't yet know, and that spurred him on to new discoveries. "For to discover something new means to be aware of limitations in the extent of what everyone knows or has known until now."¹⁰

Try reading excerpts from Lewis' and Clark's journals. Different, huh? Personally I find their style of writing charming and sometimes humorous for its antiquated vocabulary, archaic spelling, and omitted words ("gees," "duckinmallard," "goodeel," "haulk," "Parrot queets," "piney country," "Sand Hill crains," "a large hooting," "the flycatch").¹¹ A lot of that is just shorthand. You see a familiar species in an entirely new light when you read about it from their point of view. Often they applied familiar designations to unfamiliar birds, such as "lark woodpecker," (Northern Flicker) "log cock," (Pileated Woodpecker) "goatsucker," (Whippoorwill) "pheasant," (Grouse);¹² when they had exhausted all the variety they could from those terms they resorted to simple mundane titles – "small white wood pecker with a red head" "little brown ren" or "the blue crested Corvus."¹³ It's really quite intriguing. You're seeing birds that perhaps you know very well through the eyes of people seeing them for the very first time.

In my mind both of these remarkable men join the ranks of such contemporaries as John James Audubon and Alexander Wilson in the world of naturalism. It wasn't so much that they were incredibly gifted. Lewis and Clark overcame tremendous difficulty and hardship for one primary purpose – to explore and document the unknown. No matter what they went through, each man was always ready to pay attention to a fresh flower, or to take meticulous measurements and notes on a new species. In the year 1806 the Corps of Discovery returned in triumph, having conquered the unknown, expanded the nation's knowledge of its own geography, collected valuable natural specimens, and left its indelible mark on the story of our country.

¹ Moulton, Gary E. The Lewis and Clark Journals: An American Epic of Discovery. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. pg xvi

² Furtwangler, Albert. Acts of Discovery: Visions of America in the Lewis and Clark Journals. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999. pg. 3

³ Ibid. page. 141

⁴ "Northern Flicker." Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History <http://www.mnh.si.edu/lewisandclark/index.html?loc=/lewisandclark/home.html>

⁵ Ibid. Furtwangler, Albert. pg. 146

⁶ Ibid. pg. 152

⁷ "Steller's Jay." Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History <http://www.mnh.si.edu/lewisandclark/index.html?loc=/lewisandclark/home.html>

⁸ "Ruffed Grouse." Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History <http://www.mnh.si.edu/lewisandclark/index.html?loc=/lewisandclark/home.html>

⁹ Ibid. Furtwangler, Albert. pg. 140

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 3

¹¹ Ibid. Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History
<http://www.mnh.si.edu/lewisandclark/index.html>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.