

Title A copy of John James Audubon's Birds of America has become the most expensive book ever sold when it went under the hammer at Sotheby's for a staggering US\$11,542,683 (£7,321,250). The auction was a rare chance to own one of the best preserved editions of the 19th century masterpiece, with its 435 hand-coloured illustrations, seen as a key volume on US natural history. BirdLife Partner in the USA the National Audubon Society are named after the book's artist. The National Audubon Society is dedicated to protecting birds, other wildlife and the habitat that supports them, including an Important Bird Area program throughout North America, and, increasingly, in parts of Central and South America. John James Audubon's Birds of America plates were printed in black and white and hand-coloured afterwards, and made from engravings of Audubon's watercolours. The book measures more than 3 ft by 2 ft (90 cm by 60cm) because he wanted to paint the birds life size. A fiery enthusiasm among four collectors bidding on the phones and in the room drove the price rapidly beyond pre-sale expectations of US\$6.3-9.5 million.



The book was finally bought by London dealer Michael Tollemache, who was bidding in the room and who described the work after the sale as 'priceless'. David Goldthorpe, Sotheby's Director of Books and Manuscripts Department, said after the sale: 'Lord Hesketh's magnificent copy of Audubon's Birds of America fully deserved the extraordinary price it achieved today which represents a record price for a printed book at auction'. 'It is a remarkable work' both in terms of its scale, and in terms of the dedication that went into producing it. 'To have handled such rare and splendid volumes has been a privilege and a joy.' Today one in eight bird species are currently threatened with global extinction, and at least 33 bird species would have gone extinct in the last century including 16 during the last 15 years alone, without dedicated conservation action of organisations like BirdLife. So, with disappointed buyers for Audubon's Birds of America now left looking for their next purchase, should they now focus their wealth on conservation action as well, so future generations don't have to just look at pictures?