

# Audubon faces a backlash after deciding to keep name that evokes a racist enslaver

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John James Audubon inspired generation with his *Birds of America* compendium. But his legacy also includes racist views and the owning and selling of enslaved people — bringing calls for the National Audubon Society to change its name.

*Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

Famous naturalist John James Audubon "did despicable things" and supported his work by buying and selling enslaved people — and that's according to the organization that bears his name. But the National Audubon Society's board of directors rejected the idea of changing its name this week, setting off resignations amid plans from local groups to rename themselves anyway.

This week's vote focused on whether the nonprofit should decide whether to keep Audubon's name or change it. No new names were considered as possible alternatives.

The organization cited two main reasons for keeping Audubon's name: it's grappling with the critical challenge facing birds and other wildlife due to climate change and other pressures; and it believes the name of the group, founded some 50 years after Audubon's death, "has come to represent so much more than the work of one person."

Still, it added, "We must reckon with the racist legacy."

### **3 board members resigned**

The debate over how to approach that legacy seems to have divided people at its highest levels: In an email to NPR, the society confirmed board members had resigned after the name decision.

While the NAS did not name the members individually, a leadership page on the group's website is currently missing the names of three board directors who were listed earlier this month: Sara Fuentes, Erin Giese and Stephen Tan, who served as a vice chair.

The three former board members did not respond to NPR's requests for comment.

In a message to NPR, National Audubon Society Board Chair Susan Bell said the body is "disappointed to lose these directors and the wisdom and dedication they brought." She cited the "diverse and reasoned perspectives that these directors – and others – have brought to this difficult conversation for our organization."

### **Local groups are nixing Audubon's name**

Those criticizing the continued use of the Audubon name include leaders of the D.C. Audubon Society a chapter in the nation's capital that is moving ahead with a plan to rename itself.

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I think it is disappointing, but not surprising that the National Audubon Society decided to not change their name," chapter President Tykee James told NPR member station WAMU/DCist. "They don't listen to their chapter leaders, and I believe that this will divide the network even further."

## **Maryland Audubon group changes name due to namesake's racist past**

Some of that division was seen on the national body's Facebook page, where commenters debated how the group's history should fit into the reckoning of America's racist legacy that has taken place in recent years.

"It's a missed opportunity to move away from an exclusive white male club shotgun ornithology image," one commenter wrote, "to something more appropriate to the times we live in."

## **The national reckoning over race and history is playing out in the world of birds**

A patchwork of conservation groups carry the Audubon name across the U.S.; some are local chapters affiliated with the national society, while others are independent. So far, at least five groups have dropped the Audubon name or are in the process of doing so.

The first to ditch the name was the Audubon Naturalist Society, based just outside of Washington, D.C. — it's now called Nature Forward. Others planning similar moves include Seattle Audubon, Chicago Audubon and Portland Audubon. In some cases, they've put a slash mark through Audubon's name where it appears on their websites.

## **Historical review isn't kind to Audubon, the man**

The NAS board decided against a name change more than a year after it said it would consider shelving its longtime eponym. Its review process was "robust and inclusive," the group said, adding that more than 2,300 people had provided input. The process, the NAS said, emphasized "reaching people of color and younger people."

The NAS commissioned a historical review of Audubon's life and views. The picture that came back was not a flattering one. Even before that evaluation, the NAS had published articles that depicted Audubon as an influential painter, promoter and cataloger of nature — and someone whose views of Black and Indigenous people were deeply rooted in racism.

"His contributions to ornithology, art, and culture are enormous, but he was a complex and troubling character who did despicable things even by the standards of his day," the National Audubon Society says on its main page about Audubon.

The bio page reels off a list of transgressions, from Audubon's repeated buying and selling of enslaved people to his criticisms of emancipation and allegations of plagiarism. Audubon also lied about his own heritage: his mother was French or Haitian Creole, despite his claim that she was a wealthy Spanish woman, as a 2021 article notes.

In a 2020 contribution to *Audubon* magazine, biographer Gregory Nobles filled in more details:

"In early 1819, for instance, Audubon took two enslaved men with him down the Mississippi to New Orleans on a skiff, and when he got there, he put the boat and the men up for sale. The Audubons then acquired several more enslaved people during the 1820s, but again sold them in 1830, when they moved to England, where Audubon was overseeing the production of what he called his 'Great Work,' *The Birds of America*, the massive, four-volume compendium of avian art that made him famous."