

# Alexander Wilson Biography

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# Biography

The 13-volume *American Ornithology* of Alexander Wilson (1766-1813), Scottish-American ornithologist and poet, was the first great comprehensive descriptive and illustrated work on the birds of the eastern United States.

Alexander Wilson was born on July 6, 1766, in Paisley, Scotland, into a large, poor family. Apprenticed at the age of 13 in the weaving trade, he spent ten years as a weaver. He then began tramping about Scotland as a peddler and writing dialect poems, which he published in *Poems* (1790). Discouraged by poverty and by political persecution because of some satires he wrote, he emigrated to America in 1794.

Though entirely self-educated, Wilson supported himself as a teacher around Philadelphia. The turning point in his life came in 1802, when he took charge of a school at Gray's Ferry, near the home and gardens of William Bartram, the Philadelphia naturalist. Bartram helped channel Wilson's natural love of birds and the outdoors into systematic scientific endeavors. Wilson became convinced that no single work on American birds was free from defect, and he decided to produce a comprehensive illustrated work on the birds of the eastern United States.

Wilson spent 10 years gathering specimens and materials for his classic work, *American Ornithology*; the first seven volumes were published in 1808-1813, the others posthumously. In 1807 he secured a position as assistant editor with a Philadelphia publisher, which relieved him of the drudgery of teaching and undoubtedly made possible the completion of his massive work. In 1808, to assure publication of his masterpiece, Wilson traveled all over the eastern United States in search of 250 subscribers.

*American Ornithology* is noted for the elegance of the essays on individual birds and for the excellent illustrations, which Wilson did himself. Although skilled as an artist, he needed the help of Alexander Lawson to translate his drawings into the plates from which the illustrations were printed. *American Ornithology* was acclaimed by both American and European scientists as the best work on American birds, and it went through two subsequent editions.

Wilson's health broke down while he was preparing the eighth volume of *American Ornithology* for publication, and he died in Philadelphia on Aug. 23, 1813. His friend George Ord completed the eighth and ninth volumes from Wilson's manuscript notes and saw them through publication in 1814. Charles Lucien Bonaparte published the four final volumes in 1825-1833.