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## Book Review [of *John Kirk Townsend: Collector of Audubon's Western Birds and Mammals*]

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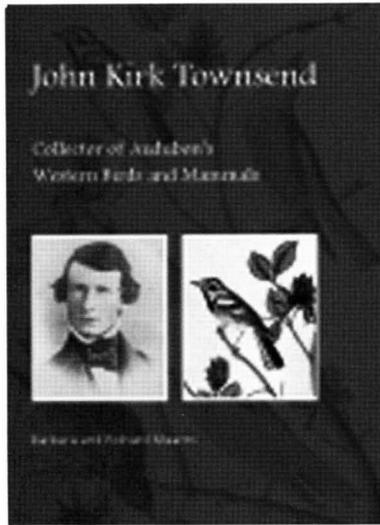
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## Book Review

*John Kirk Townsend: Collector of Audubon's Western Birds and Mammals*. Barbara and Richard Mearns. 2007. Published by the authors, Dumfries, UK. 389 pp., with 18 appendices, and a bibliography of nearly 150 entries. No price given. ISBN 978-0-9556739-0-0



This large (9 x 12") and sumptuously-illustrated book details the life and biological contributions of John Townsend, one of the earliest biologists after Lewis and Clark (1804) and Prince Maximilian (1832) to visit what is now Nebraska, preceding John J. Audubon's visit (1843) by nearly a decade. Townsend ascended the upper Platte Valley during an 1834 expedition organized by Thomas Nuttall for exploring the American interior from Philadelphia to the Pacific Coast. John James Audubon later used many of the specimens Townsend collected on that trip in painting his monumental *Birds of America*, including Townsend's namesake species, Townsend's Warbler. His name is also taxonomically associated with several western American mammals that he collected, including a ground squirrel, a chipmunk, a mole, a vole, and the white-tailed jackrabbit. Townsend also

collected and described a still uncertainly-identified bird that he named the Audubon's "Bunting" (*Emberiza auduboni*), which was possibly an aberrant Dickcissel.

The Nebraska segment of the Nuttall–Townsend expedition occurred between the middle and end of May, 1834. The two entered what is now Nebraska via the Little Blue River, where on the 15th of May they observed gray wolves and pronghorns, probably near present-day Nelson. By the 18th of May they were on the central Platte. There they reported seeing Long-billed Curlews and "great numbers" of Sandhill Cranes, although mid-May would seem a very late date for large crane flocks still to be in the Platte Valley. They had their first views of bison on May 20th, and soon were in sight of large groups of bison, elk and pronghorns.

Townsend's two most important Nebraska contributions to ornithology came on May 25 and May 28th. On the 25th they were proceeding up the North Platte River (in present-day Keith or Garden County), and collected a male Lark Bunting, which Townsend called a "Prairie Finch", and recognized as a new species. A female Lark Bunting was collected on May 28. This evidently occurred in what is now Morrill County, on the day before they passed Chimney Rock. Also on the 28th Townsend shot a male specimen of second new bird species, the Chestnut-collared Longspur. This he named the "Brown-colored Finch", which Audubon later illustrated and renamed, as the "Chestnut-collared Lark Bunting".

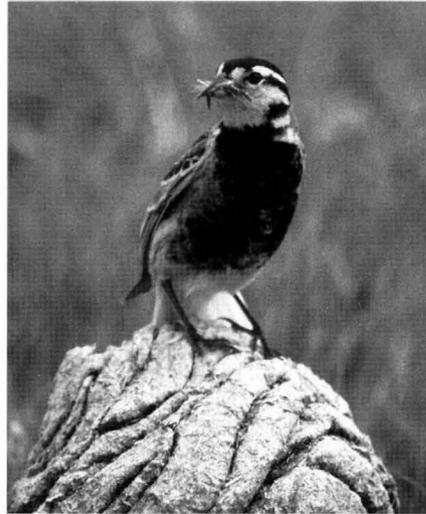
All told, Townsend collected and described 11 species of western American birds. Nine more were described and named by other famous naturalists such as J. J. Audubon, John Nuttall, Charles Bonaparte and John Cassin, based on specimens obtained by Townsend. Ten western American mammals were also named on the

basis of Townsend's specimens. Four additional bird species were named from specimens that Townsend collected on the Hawaiian Islands and Tahiti during his voyage back to the Atlantic coast.

Sadly, Townsend's life was cut short in February of 1851 at the age of 41, as the result of a still-unknown illness. His death occurred only ten days after that of John J. Audubon at the age of 65, whose pioneering monographs on birds and mammals had greatly benefited from the many observations and collections made by Townsend.

This grand and comprehensive biography of John Townsend is a marvelous contribution to the history of American ornithology, and is the first book to fully document the life of this highly talented but relatively little known biologist. The book also illuminates the many interactions among Townsend, Nuttall, Audubon, and other important American naturalists of the day.

—Paul A. Johnsgard



Chestnut-collared Longspur. Photo courtesy of Barbara and Richard Mearns.