



Mark Catesby's *Natural History*:
An Introduction

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Purple Martin. (Vol I, plate 51)



Catesby included this map in *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*. It was produced after Georgia became a British colony and was no longer part of Spanish Florida. *The Natural History* was given its title before this change. Catesby's time in "Florida" was actually spent in Georgia. He also spent time in Virginia, South Carolina, the Bahamas, Jamaica and Bermuda.



Ornamental headpiece for *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, designed by Mark Catesby incorporating Indian weapons, tools and necklaces.

Preface

Three centuries ago, Mark Catesby (1683-1749), one of the foremost English-speaking naturalists of the first half of the 18th century, explored the wilderness in Britain's North American colonies.

He first arrived with his sister in Virginia in 1712, where he stayed for seven years, exploring from the coast to the Appalachian Mountains plus side journeys to Jamaica and Bermuda.

Catesby returned to North America again in 1722, spending three years in South Carolina and a year in the Bahamas. During this time, he survived encounters with hurricanes, disease, rattlesnakes, poisonous trees, and an Indian ambush.

It was also during this period that he made some notable observations. He is credited with the first known written comments in English about the effects of habitat destruction on the survival of a species and he developed the first rational theory of bird migration.

Notably, in America, he was comfortable staying with the highest levels of Colonial society and exploring the wilderness with roughneck back country traders and with friendly Indians. His studies included not only the colonies' fauna and flora, but also the planters' and Indians' use of plants for economic and medicinal purposes.

Catesby was a careful observer, noticing such things as freshwater swamp, oak and hickory land, and pine-barren land. His descriptions of the different types of land in the coastal plain, based on the abundance and distribution of plants, were similar to how the state of South Carolina appraised land for tax purposes almost a century later.

After exploring the Bahamas, Catesby returned to England to personally write, etch and color *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*. First published in 1731, 100 years before John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, his accomplishments were described by a knowledgeable contemporary as "the most magnificent Work I know of, since the Art of Printing has been discover'd".

Catesby was recognized by being presented at court to Queen Caroline, Queen Regent of England, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, still the world's most prestigious scientific society. It has been documented that his *Natural History* volumes were a major influence on the works of Carl Linnaeus, President Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, John James Audubon and even Charles Darwin.

To learn more about this amazing man, you are encouraged to consult *The Curious Mister Catesby: a "truly ingenious" naturalist explores new worlds* and also Catesby's *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*.

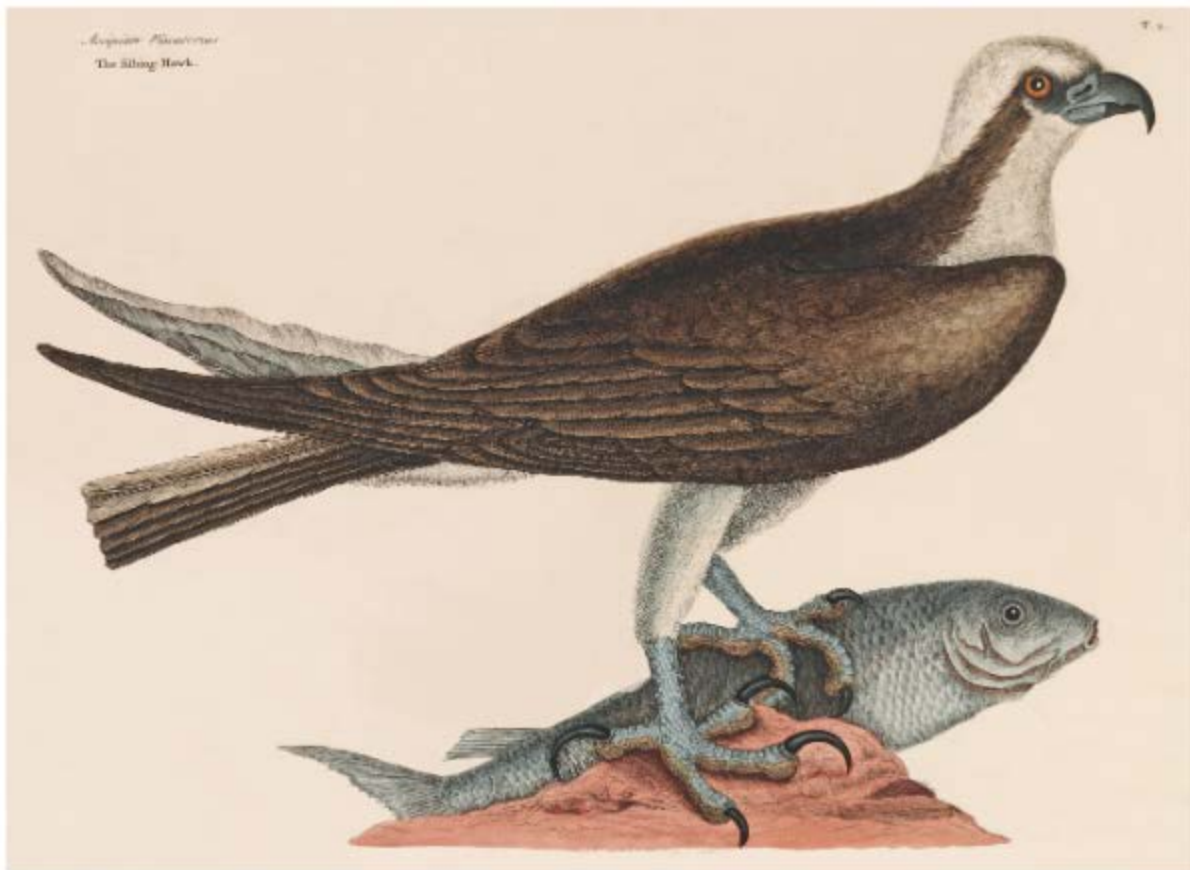
The best way to read this rare book is via the on-line version of the Smithsonian's excellent copy at www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/126524. In addition, the Catesby Trust website is another great source of information: www.catesbytrust.org.

Founded in 2002, the non-profit Catesby Commemorative Trust, Inc. exists to "inspire respect for early naturalist explorers and ensure conservation of their work, as well the plants, animals and habitat they studied, through education and research." Achievements to date include the very successful public broadcasting documentary *The Curious Mister Catesby*; the 2012 Catesby Tercentennial Symposium; receipt of the 2016 Literature Award of the Council on Botanical & Horticultural Libraries for *The Curious Mister Catesby: a "truly ingenious" naturalist explores new worlds*; and *Mark Catesby's New Worlds Journey*, a video presented to the first-ever U.S. meeting of the Linnean Society of London, founded in 1788.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored rectangular background. The signature reads "M. Catesby" in a cursive script. The "M" is large and stylized, with a loop at the top. The "Catesby" is written in a fluid, connected cursive hand.



This, the first known and still existing pen and ink drawing by Mark Catesby, depicts the leaf and flower of the American Lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*). Usually, he sent samples of dried plants to his sponsors in England, but this plant was too thick and fleshy to dry.



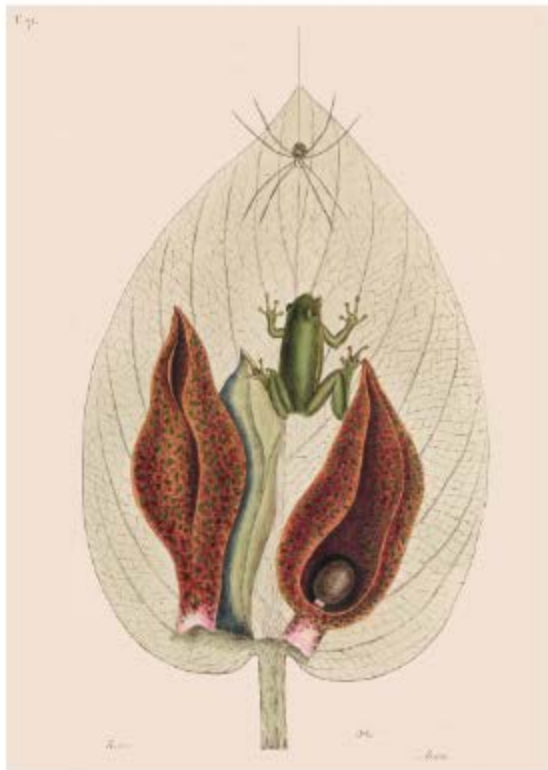
Catesby described how the "Fishing Hawk" (Osprey; *Pandion haliaetus*) hovered over water and, diving into it, rarely failed to emerge without a fish in its talons. However, Bald Eagles would watch them carefully and usually force them to give up their catch. (Vol I, plate 2)



This is another example of Catesby showing a bird (Bobolink; *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) with an ecologically appropriate plant. These birds were known to clear 40 acres of rice (*Oryza sativa*) so completely that the remains were hardly worth harvesting. However, the planters took revenge; the birds were considered to be a great delicacy and were easily shot after they had gorged on rice. But their greatest importance to Catesby lay in his realization that birds migrate rather than spending the winter in the bottom of lakes or hollow trees - a theory that had held since the days of Aristotle. While lying on the deck of a sloop at Andros Island in the Bahamas, he heard "Rice-birds" flying overhead on their way from Cuba, where the rice crop had been harvested, to Carolina where it was ripening. This led to the first rational theory of bird migration, which Catesby later presented in a paper to the Royal Society. While inaccurate in many ways, Catesby's paper was a major step forward in understanding of how and why birds migrate. (Vol I, plate 14)



“The Parrot of Carolina” (Carolina Parakeet; *Conuropsis carolinensis*) was the only parrot present in British North America. They were very destructive of apples in orchards, which may help explain why they also have been extinct for a century. The Cypress of America (Bald Cypress; *Taxodium distichum*), in addition to being a food source for the parakeets, was known for its fine balsamic fragrance and for providing excellent, weather-resistant timber for building houses. (Vol I, plate 11)



(left) Catesby noted that the Green Tree Frog (*Hyla cinerea*) had unusual feet that acted as suction cups on even the smoothest leaves. They could jump up to four yards from one surface to another, and clung to the backs of leaves to hide from predators. Also depicted is “The Skunk Weed” (Skunk cabbage; *Symplocarpus foetidus*). The spider (Green Lynx Spider; *Psecetia viridans*) is not mentioned in the text of *The Natural History*. (Vol II, plate 71)

(right) While Catesby had good knowledge of the American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*), neither he nor his contemporaries appear to have known that alligators and crocodiles are different species. This etching is very likely of the now extinct Bahaman crocodile in appropriate habitat “The Mangrove Tree” (Red Mangrove; *Rhizophora mangle*). (Vol II, plate 63)



(left) The Lamb Laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*) was sent to Catesby by John Bartram from a remote part of Pennsylvania, where it grew on rocky, shady hillsides and river banks. While he found that it grew in England, it didn't blossom. In contrast, the Great Laurel (right) (*Rhododendron maximum*), also supplied to him by John Bartram and a shrub rather than a tree, flowered for several years. (Appendix 17)



(right) The Lily Thorn (*Catesbasa spinosa*) was found by Catesby near Nassau. He brought seeds from the Bahamas to England. One gardener successfully raised seedlings and distributed plants to the famous gardening enthusiast Peter Collinson. Catesby felt honored that Dr. J. F. Gronovius of Holland, and patron of Linnaeus, named the genus after him. The accompanying butterfly is the Zebra Swallowtail (*Protographium marcellus*), which from the long Latin polynomial Catesby used, he'd probably found in Carolina. (Vol II, plate 100)

This handsome book is the perfect introduction to Mark Catesby - artist, scientist and explorer. It provides an overview of Catesby's travels as he explored southeastern North America before the land was extensively populated by Europeans. His paintings were created to show the wonders of America to the people across the Atlantic who could never travel so far. Thanks to this book and its interpretive text, we can still marvel at these pictures today.

Glyn Church, New Zealand -- Author of *Complete Hydrangeas* and horticulturist

Mark Catesby was a plantsman of rare vision and an artist of extraordinary skill. As a naturalist, Catesby was the first to suggest the intricate relationships between plants and birds long before the term "ecology" was understood. This beautifully illustrated book introduces Catesby's genius to anyone curious about the natural world. A splendid introduction for students and for all those who still love to explore.

Linda Lear -- Author of *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature*.