

## **Event Planning in Special Collections: An Audubon Day Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

Outreach events and public programming in academic libraries have grown to be an essential and regular part of institutional missions over the past twenty years. Events hosted by special collections and archives help break down the public perception of these spaces as unfamiliar and unwelcoming. Yet practical approaches to event planning in the literature to date rarely focus on the special collections field. This case study details the planning and execution of a long-running, well-attended, low-cost event hosted by an academic special collections library and provides guidance for library and archives staff looking to start similar events at their own institutions. The article discusses event planning, registration and publicity, donor outreach, additional event offerings, assessment methods, and future opportunities for expansion. The recommendations included can be modified to craft an event highlighting any collection of books or archival materials of interest to the general public.

**Keywords:** library outreach programs, library programming, academic libraries, special collections and archives

## Introduction

Over two hundred years ago in the summer of 1821, naturalist and painter John James Audubon spent four months serving as a tutor for a plantation owner's daughter at Oakley Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana. In his spare time, he worked on drawings for what would become the famed *Birds of America* folios – a four-volume compendium of life-sized watercolors considered one of the most valuable sets of books in the world. Audubon worked on 32 of the 435 plates for *Birds of America* at Oakley and completed at least 130 total drawings during his travels in Louisiana (Audubon State Historic Site, n.d.). Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge – home to LSU Libraries - Special Collections and to a complete copy of Audubon's *Birds of America* – is about 30 miles from St. Francisville. This connection to Audubon helped inspire Special Collections' biggest public programming event of the year: Audubon Day.

First held at LSU in 1994, Audubon Day is a free public viewing of the *Birds of America* folios hosted by the Libraries. Special Collections staff turn the pages of each of the four volumes simultaneously over the course of an hour as visitors roam the room, learn more about Audubon and the making of the folios, and explore the library's related natural history holdings. The event has grown in popularity since the 2011 publication of a Wall Street Journal feature article, "The Joys of Slow Looking," about Audubon Day (Spiegelman). Over the past 25 years, attendance for this single day event has ranged from approximately 50 guests to more than 200. By 2018, five hour-long viewings could accommodate up to 45 attendees per hour. While the basic structure of the event has remained the same since the event's origins, Special Collections has incorporated additional features like book signings, documentary viewings, coloring activities, and live birds to engage visitors of all interests and ages.

Events such as Audubon Day intersect with an increasing desire from administrators and stakeholders to understand and measure academic libraries' value and impact on the campus and community (Carter, 2012). One traditional approach to demonstrating the value of special collections is a showcase of unique "treasures" and "gems" found in the library. The very nature of rare materials like Audubon's *Birds of America* (which are typically stored away from public view rather than permanently displayed) turns their appearance in temporary exhibitions or open house events into a special occasion capable of drawing a large crowd. Measuring the impact of this type of approach, however, can be more difficult to quantify and requires thoughtful assessment practices. LSU Libraries - Special Collections' mission in hosting Audubon Day is not simply to celebrate Audubon, but to craft an event capable of appealing to returning library patrons as well as attracting new patrons and potential donors from the surrounding community.

Using Audubon Day as a case study, this article will detail the planning and execution of a long-running, well-attended, low-cost event hosted by a special collections department without the assistance of event planners or event funding. The article discusses registration and publicity, additional event offerings, donor outreach, assessment methods, and future opportunities for expansion. The aim of this piece is to share lessons learned throughout the process and provide guidance for library and archives staff looking to start similar outreach events at their own institutions. The recommendations provided can be modified to highlight any collection of books or archival materials of high interest to the community.

### **Literature Review**

Outreach events and programs inspire a considerable body of scholarly work in professional literature, as this type of programming has grown over the past twenty years to be an essential and regular part of institutional missions. The current definition of outreach in the

Society of American Archivists' Dictionary of Archives Terminology (n.d.) is "the process of identifying and providing services to constituencies with needs relevant to the repository's mission and tailoring services to meet those needs." Tamar Chute's 2002 survey of archivists helped create a baseline understanding of the types of outreach commonly used in the special collections and archives field. The survey revealed the most common outreach activities at the time to be exhibits, internal and external presentations, tours, and donor relations. An Association of College and Research Libraries' SPEC Kit released in 2010 used the term 'engagement' to encompass all special collections activities that "foster use of materials and resources to enhance both research and education" (Berenbak et al). In special collections and archives today, outreach can broadly encompass any number of activities from the traditional forms mentioned in Chute's survey, to teaching and instruction (K-12 and higher education), crowdsourcing and transcription events, Wikipedia edit-a-thons, public programming, and other types of library advocacy in the community.

Among the numerous forms of outreach, an event like Audubon Day might best be considered public programming or, more specifically, as a type of open house. This article fills a gap because most publications about open house events in academic libraries describe outreach opportunities for campus constituents, like undergraduates or graduate students, rather than events for the public (Evans, 2015; Eyer, 2016; Caminita, et al, 2015). In addition, while brief how-to articles describing event planning in libraries have appeared in library magazines, they do not typically include considerations unique to special collections and archives (Meskauskas, 1996; Wilson, 2004).

Articles about outreach in special collections often position public events as an ideal way to break down the perception of forbidden spaces and foreboding library staff. Daniel Traister

urged special collections libraries to be more engaged in promoting their services in a way that allows visitors to “feel invited and welcome to, and comfortable in” a special collections environment (2003, p. 89). Valerie Harris suggested librarians and archivists need to “put as much care and innovation into public services programs as they have in developing processes for description, access, and preservation,” (2010, p. 71). Special collections staff at the Ringling Museum developed a public lecture series in part to mitigate their institution’s history of restrictive access policies for researchers (Oliver, 2016). These examples point to the need for special collections institutions to use outreach as a tool to reverse potentially harmful practices of the past and reestablish themselves as inviting to members of the public.

Because special collections and archives in academic institutions serve all kinds of visitors outside the campus community, their staff are also best positioned to become “ambassadors for [the] institution” and to present the public with a welcoming atmosphere (Harris & Weller, 2012, p. 295). An event like Audubon Day could fall into the category of ‘friend-raising,’ which Kevin S. Fleming and Morna Gerrard defined as outreach “designed to let existing friends, and hopefully, new friends (including students and faculty) know about the activities and collections within Special Collections” (2014, p. 9). Friend-raising events provide a direct contrast to fundraising, where the primary goal is to raise money or financially support programs. Both approaches are needed in libraries, and friend-raising can lead to modest fundraising. Audubon Day at LSU similarly functions as an initial entrée to the Special Collections department, as well as a bridge between returning library patrons and those for whom the event is their first experience with special collections or rare books.

Library-hosted celebrations of John James Audubon or of *Birds of America* are not a new phenomenon. In 1909, Dr. Margaret Clark, a trustee of the public library in Waterloo, Iowa

recommended civic-minded women help their librarians set up public programs that “call attention to special days, e.g. Audubon Day” and suggested a bird talk to commemorate the occasion (p.44). This ‘Audubon Day’ is most likely referring to Audubon’s birthday on April 26 – the time of year most likely to prompt Audubon-related events. In recent years several libraries, both academic and public, have hosted their own version of Audubon Day – most notably the University of Pittsburgh, which displays a selection of loose plates from its Audubon double-elephant folios (“Celebrate ‘Birds of America,’ 2018). The Manlius Library, part of the Onondaga County Public Library system in New York, planned multiple Audubon Day events starting in 2015 to celebrate the donation of 135 Audubon prints to the library (Manlius Library, 2017). The Swansea Public Library in Massachusetts offered a summer series of Audubon events for kids in partnership with a local wildlife sanctuary (Murphy, 2018). The monthly page turnings of *Birds of America* at Bowdoin College’s Hawthorne-Longfellow Library have turned into a popular event, with guest speakers invited to “help interpret the bird of the month and the legacy of Audubon’s work,” (Bowdoin College, 2019). These examples suggest the range and breadth of Audubon’s work are well positioned to connect to a variety of audiences and themes and offer numerous potential avenues to develop public programming.

### **Event Origins and Context**

LSU Libraries acquired *Birds of America* in 1964 with a grant from the Crown Zellerbach Foundation. The folios originally belonged to Hugh Percy, Duke of Northumberland (1785-1847) and were auctioned by antiquarian dealer Quaritch of London. After the acquisition, a custom-built display case featured one open volume of *Birds of America* in the main library. Library staff turned the pages on a regular basis to prevent deterioration and light damage. Several recent Audubon Day visitors who were students in the 1960s recalled stopping by the

library to witness the scheduled page turning. The folios remained on view for almost 30 years but were “‘migrated’ to safety...when [a hurricane] threatened [the city] in 1992,” according to a Libraries newsletter (LSU, 1995, p. 6). The decision to permanently store the folios in the special collections stacks prompted the idea for Audubon Day.

Departmental records in Special Collections suggest Audubon Day started in January 1994 – less than two years after moving the folios from public view to the special collections stacks (LSU, 1993). In the first few years, the event was often presented biannually with viewings during the fall and spring semesters, instead of the annual event it is today. Audubon Day’s status as a periodic special event offered the public a chance to see the *Birds of America* folios, “not merely one plate at a time as used to be the case, but the entire work in all its splendor” (LSU, 1993, p. 5). The timing of the Audubon Day has varied over the years. Some events have been held on Saturdays and some on weekday afternoons, typically in spring months between March and June, though a few were hosted in late fall. This variance likely affected the size and makeup of each event’s audience. However, the intention of the event has not changed from its beginnings as an occasion for the community to experience *Birds of America*.

The author joined LSU Special Collections as the Head of Public and Research Services in early 2018. One of the responsibilities of this position is coordinating departmental outreach events, so the planning stages for Audubon Day 2018 began immediately upon arrival. Audubon Day had not been held in 2017 due to staff shortages, so there was a heightened importance to the event’s return in 2018. To a newcomer to the university and the state who was also unfamiliar with the traditions of Audubon Day, managing Special Collections’ signature event was an overwhelming – but ultimately rewarding – experience. The LSU Libraries do not have any staff specifically assigned to assist with event planning, so most of the details needed to be

handled by special collections staff in addition to regular day-to-day duties. Seeing Audubon Day with fresh eyes has allowed for more leeway to suggest changes and increase efficiencies that minimize the time spent planning the event each year.

### **Event Planning and Set Up**

Intensive planning for Audubon Day begins at least three months prior to the scheduled event date. A core group of library staff manage most of the details, but all special collections staff are invited to participate in the initial planning meeting and share thoughts or suggestions to improve the event. A collaborative process provides everyone in the department with the opportunity to feel invested in the event. As Audubon Day has grown in scale, more volunteers are needed to staff the *Birds of America* viewings. In 2019, the event required eleven volunteers per hour, including the four folio page-turners, two event check-in staff, and additional staff spaced out in various rooms to help direct visitors and make sure materials were handled properly. Special collections staff are given first choice of the volunteer positions before the remaining slots are opened to staff in other academic library units. Smaller sized libraries and archives may wish to open volunteer positions to friends and supporters of the library or restrict the number of event attendees accordingly based on space or staffing limitations.

In the weeks leading up to Audubon Day, new and returning volunteers attend a short orientation session that includes an opportunity for the *Birds of America* page-turners to practice their technique (with clean, dry hands and no gloves). Information packets with facts about Audubon, the making of the folios, and the history of LSU's copy are distributed to any staff who want to read more before the event. These FAQ packets, along with copies of the *Handbook of Audubon Prints*, are available for event attendees to browse on their own during Audubon Day, which helps minimize pressure on library staff to answer every question asked by visitors.



The special collections building manager and other core members of the planning group meet to determine the final furniture arrangement for the two large rooms used during Audubon Day – one for the folio viewings and one for extra event offerings discussed below. Furniture set-up typically occurs the day before the event. These steps proceed relatively smoothly, as minimal changes are made from year to year.

### **Registration and Publicity**

It is difficult to know exactly how many people attended Audubon Day each year since its beginning. The existing event announcements from years' past indicated about 40 people could be admitted at once and encouraged interested parties to call to reserve a time. In the event's early years, the open house format allowed for people to stay as long as they pleased, compared to the current format which offers guests set time slots. The 2011 event advertisement is the first to mention four hour-long viewing times, likely indicating a necessary change due to Audubon Day's increased popularity (Spiegelman, 2011). Around 2010, library staff implemented an online reservation form for guests to submit their preferred time, in addition to continuing phone reservations. This type of reservation system required staff to maintain detailed lists of attendee names, number of people in their party, and contact information, and to personally contact each group to confirm their reservation time or assign them a different time depending on the room capacity.

In 2018, the author implemented SpringShare's LibCal system to track Audubon Day reservations. LibCal presents numerous benefits for easy tracking of attendees compared to the previous labor-intensive system. Library staff can set a maximum registration count per hour, allowing interested attendees to easily see how many spaces remained for each time slot before submitting their registration. The registration form allows one person to sign up for a group of up

to 10 guests rather than requiring each guest to fill out the form. Staff enabled a wait list that automatically registers the next person on the list if an attendee cancels. LibCal also facilitates multiple automated reminder emails to all registered attendees in the days before the event.

At the same time, the author also created a publicity spreadsheet to track outreach to campus and local media outlets. Special collections staff and the Libraries' communications and publications department divided the responsibilities for advertising. Promotion on campus included banners on the university's online portal, slides on closed-circuit TV screens in the student union and the library, and a banner image in the Libraries' e-newsletter. Community outreach included a post on the tourism bureau calendar, emails sent to local magazines for inclusion in their online or print event calendars, a 30 second radio spot sent to the regional NPR affiliate, and an event announcement in the local newspaper. None of the media outlets listed require a fee to advertise. Social media outreach represented a major aspect of the publicity approach over the past few years. In 2018, Special Collections administration supported spending up to \$150 to boost the Audubon Day posts on Facebook. The more aggressive approach to outreach included weekly bird-related posts on Twitter and Facebook for #Feathersday and the creation of an event on Facebook directing interested parties to the official reservation page. However, the increased advertising resulted in an overwhelming response to the event and forced department leadership to add a fifth public viewing time on short notice to accommodate more attendees. Library staff learned that popular interest in the event and the range of options for free publicity generated enough attention to make paid advertising unnecessary.

### **Donor Engagement**

After years of hosting Audubon Day as a single-day event for the campus community and

general public, the LSU Libraries' development officer along with Special Collections leadership decided to incorporate a donor-only aspect for the 2018 event. The motivation for the donor event was a mixture of a few factors; first, the desire to capitalize on the biggest Special Collections event of the year, and second, library administration's interest in establishing an annual occasion to thank donors. The resulting event developed as an evening "preview party" the night before Audubon Day for Friends of the Library, members of the Library Council, and other previous donors or patrons of Special Collections, such as faculty members who regularly bring classes to the library. LSU's Friends of the Library organization is open to anyone who donates \$25 or more to the library in a calendar year. Print invitations were mailed to approximately 175 donors and friends and resulted in about 45 attendees. The following year, the invite was sent electronically using the Paperless Post platform and attracted about the same number of attendees. While the preview party was not intended to serve as a fundraising opportunity, a modest amount of money was received from invited guests – enough to offset expenses for the preview party setup and food.

The 2018 donor event included hors d'oeuvres and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, along with a live string quartet located in a first-floor space suitable for food and drink; these were the only out-of-pocket expenses for the department in hosting the event. Visitors proceeded to a secure second-floor space for the Audubon folio viewings. This event functioned as a scaled-down version of a typical Audubon Day set up. Instead of turning pages of all four volumes at the same time, two to three library staff turned pages as needed while visitors roamed the room, engaged with additional materials related to Audubon, and mingled with library staff. The Friday format allowed donors to stay longer and not feel rushed to complete the viewing within the one-hour window, as is the case for the public viewings on

Audubon Day proper.

In 2019, the Audubon Day preview party moved from Friday night to Saturday morning in an attempt to reduce the burden on the staff volunteering to run the event. The donor event started with a continental breakfast, coffee, and mimosas, followed by remarks by the library dean and an announcement about the Special Collections Purchasing Committee, an initiative that allows a small group of library supporters to provide advice on book acquisitions and collection development policies. However, because the four public viewings of *Birds of America* have traditionally been held at 10 am, 11 am, 12 pm, and 1 pm, the donor viewing was scheduled for 9-10 am, with the building opening at 8:30 am on Saturday morning. Even for a crowd of early birds, this timing did not work very well. Further evaluation is needed to determine how best to move forward with the donor preview party in a format that will suit both staff and invited guests.

### **Additional Event Offerings and Assessment**

In Louisiana, the word ‘lagniappe’ (LAN-yap) is used to describe something a merchant throws in for good measure, like the thirteenth item in a baker’s dozen. In other words, “a little something extra.” At Audubon Day, the lagniappe consists of additional special offerings meant to enhance the viewing of the *Birds of America* folios. For example, at the first Audubon Day in 1994, Lois Bannon, co-author of *Handbook of Audubon Prints*, and John O’Neill, an ornithologist and artist, were invited to speak to attendees about Audubon’s work and to share their knowledge of birds (Goldsmith, 1994). Other speakers and special guests have appeared at the event during select years. In 2010 following a two-year hiatus to accommodate the full conservation of *Birds of America*, Audubon Day returned to a Saturday schedule and included a viewing of the documentary *A Summer of Birds*, a Louisiana Public Broadcasting film based on

Danny Heitman's book of the same title which chronicles Audubon's time at Oakley Plantation in 1821.

Audubon Day's lagniappe eventually expanded to include complementary exhibitions, like "I Remember: An Art Show of Environmental Significance" sponsored by the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act in 2014, and local organizations whose missions benefit birds or the environment. Representatives from a dog food company, the local parks department, the local chapter of the Audubon Society, and the campus's Museum of Natural Science have all attended Audubon Day. LSU Press has also attended Audubon Day with copies of new and back-catalog books for purchase, including a few book signing opportunities with authors. In 2016, the program managers from the university veterinary school's Raptor Rehabilitation program attended Audubon Day for the first time, bringing along a live owl and hawk rescued from the wild due to injury. The birds and their handlers quickly grew to become a favorite part of Audubon Day for some visitors and also provide a contrast to the stuffed bird specimens on display from the Museum of Natural Science. More recently, library staff set up a coloring table to help accommodate families with children (and adults who like to color). A talented staff member created coloring pages based on plates from *Birds of America* as a unique way to connect to the event.

There are many ways to expand upon the original intent of a special event, especially a long-running event with an established audience. The makeup of attendees has likely become more diverse over time as Audubon Day moved from a weekday afternoon open house to a midday Saturday event and as the library's commitment to advertising has expanded. Attendees in recent years have ranged from university students and families with young children to members of local birding clubs and retirement homes, spanning all ages. With such a wide range

of participants, soliciting event feedback is necessary to ensure continued success and to help staff critically evaluate the effectiveness of the lagniappe offerings.

To achieve this goal, staff implemented a feedback survey for Audubon Day attendees in 2019. This effort appeared to be the first time formal feedback had ever been gathered from event participants. Using the LibCal system, the survey was automatically emailed to all attendees who registered online (99% of attendees) on the day following the event. The brief survey asked attendees three questions: 1) how they heard about the event, with radio boxes to select specific publicity outlets, 2) whether the event met their expectations, and 3) how likely they were to recommend the event to family and friends. An open-ended text field asked for comments or suggestions to improve the following year's Audubon Day. The largely positive responses allowed staff to decide what to change or keep for upcoming iterations of the event. Feedback from attendees prompted a need to reevaluate how to handle personal belongings of visitors. The most common response was that one hour was not long enough to see everything of interest – yet that is the one aspect of Audubon Day not likely to change due to the building's space limitations and reluctance to ask library staff to commit to an even longer event.

### **Future Audubon Days**

The global coronavirus pandemic led to the cancellation of the 2020 and 2021 Audubon Day events. In thinking creatively about the future of all types of outreach programs which usually depend on in-person engagement, Special Collections has brainstormed ways to move the Audubon Day experience online. Since the pandemic, the department has created an online exhibition page adapted from a 2008 physical display of watercolors from Audubon's *Birds of America*, as well as an Audubon research guide to explore related resources in the university's collections (LSU Libraries, 2021). The department has also considered hosting an online event to

mirror the in-person experience. What might this event look like in a virtual environment? Perhaps one staff member can turn the pages of a volume of *Birds of America* while other staff members provide scripted information about the creation and production of the volumes, about history of the folios, and about Audubon himself. Staff could also respond to questions submitted by attendees. Like the in-person event, this opportunity could last about an hour, allowing viewers to see every page of the single volume selected for display.

Determining an event format then leads to additional questions: What kind of camera set-up would be necessary to allow viewers to see the watercolors to their best advantage? Should the event be live, or recorded and made available later? How will the availability of a virtual Audubon Day recording affect visitors' interest in attending the annual in-person event? The overwhelmingly positive responses received from previous years' attendees indicates interest should be high regardless of the event's format. The vividness of the colors, the sheer scale of the double-elephant folios, and Audubon's ability to make the watercolors come alive ensure people of all ages will continue to be inspired by *Birds of America*.

For libraries looking to plan an event with a similar scope or theme, this article serves as a practical guide, while illustrating just one of many ways to approach library outreach and special events. The following key recommendations should be considered when creating an institution's signature public event:

- Select a theme or topic locally of interest to the community.
- Determine the budget and target audience for the event early in the process and tailor event planning appropriately. Create an event timeline with target dates for steps like registration, publicity, and room set-up.

- Position large events as a departmental initiative and encourage assistance from all units of the library to help distribute volunteer tasks. Listen to suggestions and feedback from staff involved in the event.
- Send event announcements or invitations directly to existing supporters of the organization (donors, regular patrons, instructors who use the collections, etc.).
- Build partnerships with organizations, groups, or others most likely to attend to aid in publicity and promotion.
- Consider automating the reservation or ticketing system to conserve staff time and energy for other event planning tasks.
- For recurring events, implement assessment measures to effectively improve future occurrences.

### Conclusion

Audubon Day has grown to become the keystone of Special Collections' outreach efforts over the past 25 years. The LSU Libraries are not unique in creating an event to celebrate Audubon's *Birds of America* folios – the works are highly valued and globally renowned. Yet, the longevity of Audubon Day is worth examining. Its long-term success may be due in part to the simplicity of the event at its core, the “slow looking” as described by William Spiegelman in his Wall Street Journal feature. It could be tied to the staff's ability to adapt and change the event gradually according to public interest, or the familiarity with John James Audubon that seems to exist in the state.

Ultimately, Audubon Day is an event equally of interest to the campus community and to the general public in Baton Rouge, in addition to those in birding or wildlife groups and visitors from out of town. One Texas family drove hours to attend Audubon Day because their teenage



son is an amateur birder. A *Birds of America* fan from Chicago tries to plan his yearly trip to Louisiana to coincide with the event. Another avid birder from hours away signed up for all four viewing times so she could see every folio in one day. And while Special Collections currently offers a broad range of special events and outreach, including open houses, lectures, and exhibit tours, it is Audubon Day that often provides attendees with their first exposure to special collections or rare books, which can turn first-time visitors into ones who will return year after year. LSU Libraries' experience with this event illustrates the outreach possibilities for other institutions looking to build a wider audience and cultivate return visitors.

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