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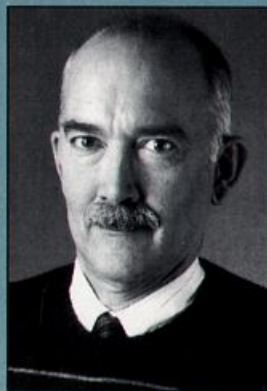
SHALLOW, BRAIDED, and sandy, flanked by low, grassy bluffs, the South Platte River flows across the high plains of Colorado, leaving the state at its northeast corner near Julesburg. From here it continues eastward, unites with the North Platte, and finally empties into the Missouri south of Omaha.

In June, 1820, a party of horsemen came riding up this lonely stretch of the South Platte. On orders from John C. Calhoun, President Monroe's Secretary of War, Major Stephen H. Long was leading an expedition to the Rocky Mountains to discover the headwaters of both the South Platte and the Arkansas rivers. With him were 13 officers and enlisted men, three French guides, an artist named Samuel Seymour, a young botanist named Edwin James, the zoologist Thomas Say, and Titian Ramsay Peale, Say's 20-year-old assistant.

Born on June 27, 1787, Thomas Say was the son of a prosperous Philadelphia physician, pharmacist, and member of the U.S. Congress. Thomas, whose formal education consisted of three years in a Quaker school, tried his hand at his father's drug business, but was soon devoting his time to collecting insects. At the age of 24, he became one of the founding members of the Academy of Natural Sciences. In 1817, the first issue of the Academy's *Journal* appeared, with a paper by Say entitled "Descriptions of seven species

John Farrand, Jr.

MOMENTS IN HISTORY



Thomas Say Goes to Colorado

of American fresh water and land shells, not noticed in the systems." Insects and mollusks were to remain Say's chief interests throughout his life.

Early in 1819, Say was made zoologist of the Long Expedition, and in May, the party traveled down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh on the first leg of the journey to the Rockies. On June 27 of the following year, as they rode past the green slopes along the South Platte, the expedition crossed a line not yet on any map, and entered what is now Colorado. It was Say's thirty-third birthday, and perhaps as a birthday present, he became the first experienced naturalist to visit the Centennial State.

This was just one of many firsts the expedition would achieve before it re-

turned. In the year before they reached Colorado, Say and Peale had discovered the first Lark Sparrow in Missouri, the first Long-billed Dowitcher in Iowa, and the first Orange-crowned Warbler and Yellow-headed Blackbird in Nebraska. Among mammals, they had found the first Least and Northern Short-tailed shrews. Lewis and Clark had already discovered the Coyote in South Dakota in 1804, but Say's specimen, taken in Nebraska, was the one that received a scientific name. Today the Coyote is known as *Canis latrans* Say.

Such discoveries continued as the

party worked its way up the South Platte. A few days after entering Colorado, Say found a Swift Fox; Lewis and Clark had already reported the “burrowing fox” in Montana, but again, it was Say who formally named it. On June 30, west of “Bijeu’s Creek”—probably modern Bijou Creek in Morgan County—they first saw the great Front Range, mistaking what would later be called Longs Peak for Pikes Peak, sighted by Zebulon Pike in 1806. On July 5, they camped on the site of Denver, and the next day, Say discovered the Rock Wren, “hopping about the branches, and singular compressed semi-procumbent trunks” of the Common Juniper.

In the days that followed, Say, Peale, and Edwin James made still more discoveries. About 20 miles north of Colorado Springs, Say collected a hen Blue Grouse. The Blue Grouse had already been found by Meriwether Lewis, who mentioned “fesants” in his journal for July 21, 1805, and also by Zebulon Pike, who reported “pheasants” during his attempt to climb what was later named Pikes Peak. Even these were not the first reports of the Blue Grouse. On August 26, 1776, Silvestre Valez de Escalante, a Franciscan friar from Mexico, had noted “a kind of chicken” on the Uncompahgre Plateau in what is now Montrose County. Escalante’s record is not only the first one of the Blue Grouse; it is the first of any bird in what is now Colorado. But it was Say’s specimen that was formally described.

Peale shot the first Band-tailed Pigeon near Castle Rock, “at a saline spring on a small tributary of the river Platte, within the first range of the Rocky Mountains; it was accompanied by another individual, probably its mate, which escaped.” Near the east fork of Plum Creek, below Castle Rock, James found a beautiful blue columbine, which he later named *Aquilegia caerulea*; it is now



Portrait of Thomas Say by the Philadelphia artist Charles Willson Peale, now in the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. Courtesy of The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.

the State Flower of Colorado.

The expedition was running low on food and was troubled by illness (Say was sick for most of the trip), so instead of following the South Platte into the rugged, pine-clad mountains, they headed south. Still near Colorado Springs, they collected a pair of House Finches, a species discovered in Mexico but never before seen north of the border. They also discovered the Lesser Goldfinch, “a very pretty little bird, [which] was frequently seen hopping about in the low trees or bushes, singing sweetly, somewhat in the manner of the American gold-finch.”

On July 12 or 14 (the exact date is uncertain), Edwin James and five companions reached the summit of Pikes Peak, and James became the first botanist to visit the alpine tundra of western North America. Here he found the Snow-lover, a white-flowered relative of the snapdragons that grows only above timberline in Colorado and Wyoming; this plant was later named *Chionophila jamesii*.

On July 16, the expedition reached the Arkansas River, above the site of the city of Pueblo. Still determined to trace the Arkansas to its source, they moved upstream. Near what is now Canon City, Say

and Peale discovered the Lazuli Bunting, noting that "they frequent the bushy valleys, keeping much in the grass, and seldom alight in shrubs or trees. In this respect they resemble the Indigo-bird, and probably their habits are the same, although the note is entirely dissimilar." They also obtained the first Colorado Chipmunk and collected a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel—another species found by Lewis and Clark but named by Say.

When they tried to follow the Arkansas River westward beyond Canon City, they were stopped by the Royal Gorge, then an impassable obstacle. The expedition finally began to descend the Arkansas on July 19. Somewhere near La Junta—the date is not certain—they collected the first Western Kingbird.

On the 24th, at the mouth of the Huerfano River in Pueblo County, the expedition split into two parties. One, led by Long and including Peale and James, went south, intending to trace the course of the Red River. Instead they followed the Canadian River, and only realized their mistake as they approached Fort Smith, Arkansas, the planned termination of the expedition.

The other party, which included Thomas Say, continued eastward along the Arkansas and left Colorado on either July 26 or 27. The prairie, green when they had entered Colorado a month before, was now dry and gold. On August 31, ten days away from Fort Smith, three of the soldiers deserted, taking with them Say's notebooks. Finding them useless, the deserters must have left Say's precious notes scattered across the prairie. Fortunately, James' notebooks and the expedition's specimens made it back safely. They were deposited in Philadelphia in "Peale's Museum," founded in 1784 by Charles Willson Peale, the noted portrait painter and father of Titian Peale.

Edwin James took charge of writ-



Say's Phoebe, which was originally called Say's Flycatcher. Photograph/D.&M. Zimmerman/VIREO.

ing the *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, published in 1823 in Philadelphia and London. Say, Long, and the others contributed, but without Say's notes and his careful topographic journal, many of the dates and exact localities remain uncertain. Since Thomas Say's contribution was drawn from memory and the notes of others, it is not surprising that he failed to describe two of the new birds the expedition had found. One was the Yellow-headed Blackbird, the other a flycatcher with pale rusty underparts.

These birds didn't wait long to be named. In the early 1820s, after the death of Napoleon I, his nephew Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino and Musignano, was living near Philadelphia with his cousin-bridge, the Princess Zénaïde. In 1825, young Bonaparte was a constant visitor to Peale's Museum, then housed in Independence Hall. In that year he began producing his four-volume *American Ornithology*. With plates by Titian Peale, he described and illustrated all the birds found by Say and Peale in Colorado, including the two still unnamed. This was Bonaparte's first important publication, and it established him as a major ornithologist.

"Say's Flycatcher," *Muscicapa*

saya, now Say's Phoebe, was collected by Titian Peale on July 17, 1820, "near the Arkansaw river, about twenty miles from the Rocky Mountains." In his description Bonaparte wrote: "I dedicate it to my friend Thomas Say, a naturalist, of whom America may justly be proud, and whose talents and knowledge are only equalled by his modesty." Others, too, thought highly of Say. George Ord, who completed Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* after Wilson died in 1813, later wrote the first biography of Thomas Say, recalling that his name "was synonymous with honour, and his word the expression of truth."

In 1825, the year the new phoebe was named, Thomas Say left Philadelphia to live in the socialist community of New Harmony, Indiana. Here he married and continued his entomological work. But plagued by dysentery, perhaps contracted in Colorado, Say died at New Harmony on October 10, 1834. He was 47 years old.

Bonaparte's regard for Thomas Say was long-lasting. By the 1850s, ornithologists had realized that the flycatchers were far too varied to be contained in a catchall genus like *Muscicapa*. In 1854, back in France, Bonaparte created the genus *Sayornis* for the Black Phoebe, which had been described in 1827 by William Swainson. The Eastern Phoebe and Say's Phoebe were soon placed in *Sayornis*, where all three species still remain. *Sayornis*, of course, means "Say's bird."

Thomas Say has been called the father of American entomology and the father of American conchology. Perhaps it's a good thing he didn't describe that new phoebe from Colorado, because he would never have named it after himself. Thanks to his friend Charles Lucien Bonaparte, this modest naturalist from Philadelphia is remembered today by birders, too. ■