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MOMENTS IN HISTORY

The Oldest Lewis' Woodpecker

The Lewis and Clark Expedition had been conceived by Thomas Jefferson early in his first term as President, and had finally been launched a few months after the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States.

AT 4:00 P.M. ON MAY 14, 1804, UNDER gray skies and intermittent rain, with a cannon firing and a crowd of onlookers waving and cheering, three large wooden boats pulled away from the shore at Camp Wood in Illinois, rowed out across the Mississippi River, and slowly made their way into the mouth of the flood-swollen Missouri just north of St. Louis. After years of planning and preparation, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with William Clark in temporary command, had at last begun its celebrated journey across North America to the Pacific Ocean.

Six days later, on May 20, Meriwether Lewis joined the expedition at St. Charles, a French settlement about 25 miles up the Missouri from its junction with the Mississippi. With the arrival of their leader, the party now numbered 43.

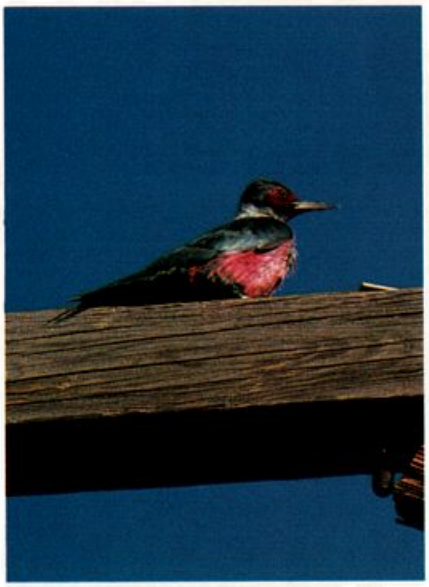
The Lewis and Clark Expedition had been conceived by Thomas Jefferson early in his first term as President, and had finally been launched a few months after the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States. Its tasks, said Jefferson, were to explore the Missouri River, to find a "practicable" route to the Pacific Ocean, to lay the foundation for peaceful trade with the Indian nations of the Upper Missouri and the Far Northwest, to prepare maps, and to report on the natural history of this vast and little-known region.

To achieve these many goals, Jefferson appointed his 28-year-old personal secretary, Meriwether Lewis, to lead what he called the "Corps of Discovery." Lewis, who probably coined the name "Lewis and Clark Expedition" himself, chose William Clark as his second in command. Jefferson, Lewis, and Clark were all Virginians.

During that first leg of the trip, progress was slow against the mighty current of the Missouri. When the winter of 1804–1805 settled in, the expedition camped near the great earth-lodge villages of the Mandan Indians, not far from the present site of Stanton, North Dakota. Here they met the neighboring Hidatsa tribe, and hired the French-Canadian Toussaint Charbonneau as interpreter and guide. The following spring, accompanied by Charbonneau, his Shoshoni wife the intrepid Sacagawea or Bird Woman, and their infant son Baptiste, the expedition resumed its arduous trek by boat and on foot towards the great wall of mountains that barred the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Lewis' Woodpecker was not long in putting in an appearance. On Saturday, July 20, 1805, on the pine-clad banks of the Missouri north of present-day Helena, in Lewis and Clark County, Montana, Lewis made the following entry in his journal: "I saw a black woodpecker (or crow) today about the size of the lark woodpecker as black as a crow. I indevoured to get a shoot at it but could not." He added that "it is a distinct species of woodpecker; it has a long tail and flys a good deel like the jay bird." Spelling was not one of Lewis' strong points.

Little is heard of the new woodpecker for nearly a year, a time during which the expedition crossed the rugged mountains, spent the winter of 1805–1806 on the Pacific coast at



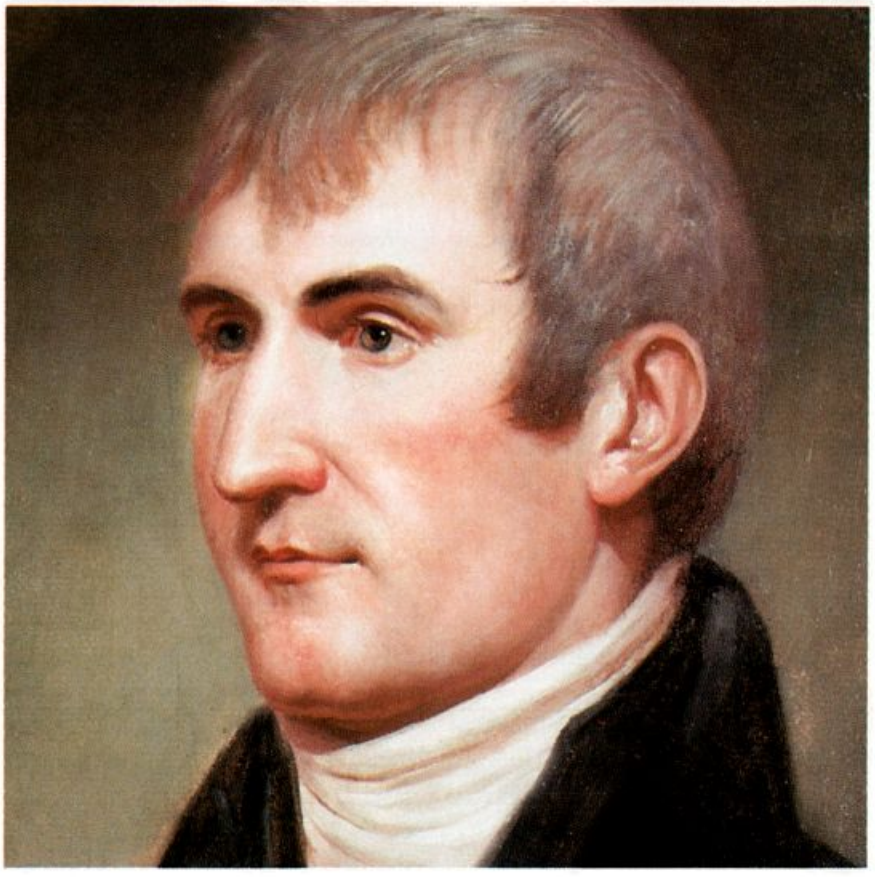
This modern-day Lewis' Woodpecker perched on a telephone pole in Corrales, New Mexico. Photo/Geoffrey S. LeBaron.

the mouth of the Columbia River, and began the long journey back to civilization. But on Tuesday, May 27, 1806, Lewis made another journal entry at a camp in the country of the Nez Perce Indians, on a broad green meadow in Idaho County, Idaho, across the Clearwater River from the site of modern Kamiah. They camped here for nearly a month, from May 14 until June 10, waiting for the snow to melt in the high passes over the Bitterroot Range to the east.

With time on his hands, Lewis wrote a lengthy and detailed description of the woodpecker, noting that "I had never an opportunity of examining [these birds] untill a few days since when we killed and preserved several of them." His description of the bird's underparts has never been excelled: "the belly and breast is a curious mixture of white and blood reed which has much the appearance of having been artificially painted or stained of that colour." He concluded by observing that "the pointed tail seems to assist it in seting with more eas or retaining it its resting position against the perpendicular side of a tree," and that "it feeds on bugs worms and a variety of insects."

Two weeks later the expedition resumed its trip over the mountains, and fourteen weeks after that, in September of 1806, they arrived at St. Louis. The return of Lewis and Clark was a triumphant one, for they had achieved everything Thomas Jefferson had hoped. The "Corps of Discovery" had found a route to the Pacific, had established good relations with nearly every Indian tribe along the way, had amassed a large collection of natural history specimens and Indian artifacts, and had made such thorough notes and maps that when their original journals were finally published a century later, they filled eight fat volumes.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark became national heroes. Lewis was made Governor of the Louisiana Territory, and Clark was made Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the vast region he had helped to explore. The expedition's numerous scientific specimens were turned over to Charles Willson Peale's Museum in Philadelphia—the country's first natural history museum—in 1809.



In 1807, after the Lewis and Clark expedition, C.W. Peale painted this portrait of Meriweather Lewis. Photo courtesy of Independence National Historic Park.

His description of the bird's underparts has never been excelled.

But in October of that same year in Tennessee, Lewis died of gunshot wounds, an apparent suicide. The nation grieved, and no one grieved more than Alexander Wilson, whose task it was to describe the expedition's new birds. In 1811, when he published his formal description of Lewis' Woodpecker in his *American Ornithology*, based on Peale's Museum Specimen No. 2020, he wrote: "It was the request and particular wish of Captain Lewis, made to me in person, that I should make drawings of such of the feathered tribes as had been preserved, and were new. That brave soldier, that amiable and excellent man, over whose solitary grave in the wilderness I have since shed tears of affliction, having been cut off in the prime of his life, I hope I shall be pardoned for consecrating this humble note to his memory, until a more able pen shall do better justice to the subject." At the same time, Wilson published the first descriptions of Clark's Nutcracker and the Western Tanager, both based on Lewis and Clark's specimens in Peale's Museum.

Hard times lay ahead for Peale's Museum and the specimens it contained. Despite Peale's efforts to have his museum taken over by the federal government, the collections were eventually dispersed. In 1850, the natural history specimens were acquired by the Boston Museum. In

1893, most of them were given to the Boston Society of Natural History, and in 1900, after a fire destroyed some of the birds, the remainder, their precious labels still intact, were sold to Charles J. Maynard of West Newton, Massachusetts, the discoverer of the Ipswich Sparrow. Maynard at once realized that the collection might include birds taken by Lewis and Clark and also by Thomas Say and Titian Ramsey Peale during their expedition to Colorado in 1820. With Witmer Stone, then Curator of Birds at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, Maynard attempted to identify specimens handled by Wilson and by Say.

Maynard and Stone agreed that at least one bird, a Lewis' Woodpecker, had almost certainly been brought back by Lewis and Clark. There was no sign of the Western Tanager or Clark's Nutcracker. Stone wrote that the woodpecker was "without much doubt the original specimen"—in other words, Peale's Museum No. 2020. But then there occurred what can only be termed a disaster. The collection was "redeemed" by the Boston Society of Natural History. Unaware of their historic importance, someone removed all the labels and then lost them, thus obscuring forever the birds' true identity.

In 1914, this sad remnant of Peale's collection was acquired by Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, where it was examined by Walter Faxon. Among the birds was the specimen of Lewis' Woodpecker, which became M.C.Z. No. 67854. Faxon, a scholarly and cautious man, called it a "venerable looking specimen," but he was unable to satisfy himself that it really was Lewis' (and Wilson's) original bird. The specimen is still safe at Harvard, but its precise origin remains a mystery to this day.

We know that M.C.Z. No. 67854 was part of Peale's Museum, and so we know it is the oldest Lewis' Woodpecker in existence. But was it collected by Lewis and Clark in Idaho? And is it therefore the bird used by Alexander Wilson to describe Lewis' Woodpecker as a new species? Faxon thought instead that it might be one of two birds collected by Thomas Say and Titian Ramsey Peale in Colorado in July of 1820, 14 years later.

We will never know for sure, but if Maynard and Stone were right, then this "venerable looking" woodpecker is the only animal specimen that survives from Lewis and Clark's great transcontinental journey of nearly two centuries ago. If they were right, then Lewis' Woodpecker No. 67854 is a silent and priceless witness to one of the most celebrated and successful undertakings in the history of the exploration of North America.