

## ALEXANDER WILSON'S "*ANAS VALISINERIA*"

GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

GEORGE Ord, in the first new edition of Alexander Wilson's "American Ornithology," an edition published in three volumes in 1828-29 by Collins and Company of New York and by Harrison Hall of Philadelphia, and frequently referred to as "Ord's reprint," has this to say of the Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*), the handsome North American anatid Wilson had described in 1814: "It is a circumstance calculated to excite our surprise, that the canvas-back, one of the commonest species of our country, a duck which frequents the waters of the Chesapeake in flocks of countless thousands, should yet have been either overlooked by the naturalists of Europe, or confounded with the pochard [*Aythya ferina*], a species whose characters are so obviously different. But that this is the fact the editor feels well assured, since he has carefully examined every author of repute to which he has had access, and has not been enabled to find any description which will correspond to the subject before us. The species, then, we hope, will stand as Wilson's own; and it is no small addition to the fame of the 'American Ornithology' that it contains the first scientific account of the finest duck that any country can boast of."

I have copied the above from the third volume (p. 33) of the only complete Wilson I have in my library—the Cassell Petter and Galpin printing of Sir William Jardine's edition of "American Ornithology," an edition published in 1832. Ord's resounding—and, I may add, amusingly American—praise may sound effusive to persons who do not know the Canvasback. But to those who have gone after the bird; to those who, half-frozen in a wild snow storm, have matched sharpness of eyesight and wits with it along the east shore of Lake Cayuga, it is, indeed, among the "finest" of waterfowl. With memory's eye I can half-see a flock of "cannies" now as, whirling in with the snow, they inspect the shore, swing out into the storm, disappear momentarily, then, as if convinced that what they had seen was inanimate and safe, whirl in again and alight.

I cannot recall how I happened to obtain the handsome drake whose direct-from-life portrait I painted in water color in my room on the third floor of Fernow Hall, on the Cornell campus, on 18 February 1939. I recall that my model was surprisingly well-behaved. He did not, for all his strength and fierce wildness, even try to bite me. I recall how amazed, how almost stunned, I was by the fiery brilliance of his eye.

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