

PRESS RELEASE

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SB Museum of Natural History Maximus Gallery Opens Exhibition of Vanishing Birds

- *Beneath a Wild Sky: Stories of America's Lost Birds*
- Upcoming exhibit in John and Peggy Maximus Gallery
- On view February 7 to May 3, 2020

SANTA BARBARA, CA—Antique prints and the prophetic words of 18th and 19th century naturalists tell the stories of vanished birds in a new exhibit from Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History's John and Peggy Maximus Gallery. Artwork and quotes from John James Audubon, Alexander Wilson, and Mark Catesby reveal the tragic histories of the Passenger Pigeon, the Great Auk, and other species lost or driven to the brink of extinction.

Maximus Gallery Curator Linda Miller first conceived an exhibition of America's lost birds portrayed by early artists and naturalists after reading the haunting conservation narrative *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* by Christopher Cokinos. "The challenge was finding the art to flesh out the story," says Miller. "Some of these prints are over 250 years old, and they're not easily found." When a rare opportunity arose in 2019 to acquire a scarce 1836 Audubon print featuring Passenger Pigeons, Miller jumped at the chance to assemble a complete exhibition.

Beneath a Wild Sky features eight vignettes of lost species as seen from the perspective of Catesby, Wilson, and Audubon. "They witnessed these birds when they were abundant in the American wilderness," Miller explains. "Their stories form a cautionary tale," illustrating how humans have unwittingly exterminated species through habitat destruction, hunting, and the introduction of predators.

Rebecca Fagan Coulter—who leads popular birdwatching courses for the Museum—reflects on the significance of the images in the exhibit: "There will never be an opportunity to see these birds animated, hear their voices, understand for ourselves how they fit into nature. All that's left of these birds is what the artists tell us."

Miller acknowledges the sadness of the subject: "I'll have a box of Kleenex in the gallery." Yet she hopes the ongoing story of the California Condor—also featured in the exhibit—will leave visitors with a sense of purpose. "It shows that when government policy and interested people get together and try to save a species, it makes it possible that this one will make it, though it will require long-term management." A recently restored 1838 Audubon engraving of a California Condor is prominently



displayed in the gallery for the first time during *Beneath a Wild Sky*, its large format suitable for a bird of imposing presence.

The California Condor—still listed as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)—has been the subject of a major recovery program by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The Museum has been involved with efforts to save the species, shown in a timeline in the gallery foyer profiling the work of biologist and SBMNH affiliate Jan Hamber. Hamber has been active in efforts to save the condor since the 1970s and is archivist for the California Condor Archives housed at the Museum. “I’m proud to continue the long tradition of SBMNH’s history of protecting and educating the public about the amazing California Condor,” says Hamber. She is passionate about seeing the California Condor returned to its historic range, and still volunteers to track birds in the field.

Museum President and CEO Luke Swetland commented: “*Beneath a Wild Sky* pointedly reminds us of those birds we have already lost, but it also shows where our courageous actions have brought back other species from the brink of extinction. This museum plays a vitally important role in being a trusted scientific institution that invites visitors to consider our impacts on the natural world we share with all living things.” To that end, data-driven advice from Cornell Lab of Ornithology is posted near the gallery entrance, sharing simple ways to help birds today, including making windows safer, keeping cats indoors, gardening with native plants, and reducing the use of pesticides and plastic.

Beneath a Wild Sky opens to the public February 7 and will be open daily, 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM through May 3.

For more information on the Maximus Gallery, visit sbnature.org/maximus.

About the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Powered by Science. Inspired by Nature. Founded in 1916, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History inspires a thirst for discovery and a passion for the natural world. The Museum seeks to connect people to nature for the betterment of both, and prides itself on being *naturally different*. For more information, visit sbnature.org.



John James Audubon, *California Vulture* [California Condor], 1838