

Empty Skies

“The pigeon was a biological storm. He was the lightning that played between two opposing potentials of intolerable intensity; the fat of the land and the oxygen of the air . . .”

— Aldo Leopold
From A Sand County Almanac

By Phil Sander

Researching the bibliography of the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) it is inconceivable that a single species of bird that frequented Wisconsin skies, like a mighty undulating cloud, has now been extirpated.

The pigeon once migrated in the North American continent in such vast numbers that reliable observers reported, “From a given point, and from horizon to horizon, the dense wave after wave formed a canopy that would take approximately four hours to pass.” Their flight defied comprehension, and their widespread phalanx partly blotted out the sky.

At the time of America’s discovery, the passenger pigeon could have numbered three to five billion birds. The feathered tempest, migrating through Kentucky in 1810, was observed by Alexander Wilson. He estimated one flock was 240 miles long and contained 2,230,272,000 birds — in a single formation.

John James Audubon estimated a flight, in 1813, to contain 1,150,136,000 birds. It is evident that this streamline migratorius was the most abundant species of bird ever to populate America, probably adding up to nearly half of the total bird life in this country.

Wisconsin’s ideal temperature, with its staple crop of acorns and beechnuts, supplemented with other seeds and berries, attracted the massive flights each spring. Roughly a zone between 43° and 45° north latitude was their prime territory in Wisconsin, and eastward through the forests of Michigan, Pennsylvania and New York. All had a similar biotic zone that was favorable for roosts and nesting colonies.

Starting in 1850, immense flocks of pigeons migrated into Wisconsin mainly through the western two-thirds of the state. There also appeared the market hunters with their guns, nets and traps. In 1871, the oak and beech forests of central Wisconsin drew the largest community of birds known. This ideal site occurred in the area of some 850 square miles, or 544,000 acres.

Its shape was like a huge “L”. The long arm of the “L” had an average width of six miles and ran from Black River Falls to Kilbourn (Wisconsin Dells), a distance of 75 miles. The short arm reached from

Kilbourn toward Wisconsin Rapids for 50 miles, averaging eight miles in width. It was estimated by Dr. A. W. Schorger that the area may have contained as many as 136 million nesting pigeons.

At the rookery sites, trees were overburdened with a multitude of nests. Gregarious in habits, the bird existed well in crowded roosts and nesting colonies. When nesting, the female laid only one egg. The tom assisted the hen in the fourteen-day incubation period. Later both adults would feed the squab. Often they had a second hatching if the nesting was broken by shooting or trapping.

Should one of the adult birds be killed by man or predator, the egg would be lost by chilling after the remaining bird left the nest for its feeding grounds. Likewise the squab would suffer and die from malnutrition. Adult birds often flew 50 miles or more in search of food. Overshooting and netting had a definite effect on the pigeons’ annual reproduction.

The 1871 bumper crop of acorns attracted the greatest contingent of birds ever assembled to the west-central sites of Wisconsin. Here pigeons were slaughtered in the thousands by the commercial hunters and local people. Railroads shipped freight-car loads of iced carcasses in barrels and other containers to the food markets in the big cities of the midwest and eastern states.

Prices paid by the pigeon trade varied, but were considered highly profitable. The price ranged from 35 to 40 cents per dozen at the nesting sites. Chicago markets paid 50 to 60 cents a dozen. Squabs in the metropolitan markets were 60 to 70 cents per dozen. Live birds, in cities, brought \$1.00 to \$2.00 per dozen. The flesh was a good economical food source. Parts of the viscera were used in the manufacture of patent medicines, and feathers were made into pillows and quilts.

Shooting started with the northern migration in March and April; then through mid-summer at the roosts. Squabs were preferred by the market trade, ending with the southern migration in August and September. This long season gave a continuous spring-fall harvest for the professional pigeoners.

John Muir described the passenger pigeon in flight.

"I have seen flocks streaming south in the fall so large that they were flowing from horizon to horizon in an almost continuous stream all day long."

Since there was no thought of conservation; there were no seasons or limits. No game laws were enacted until it was too late. By 1882 the last shipment of birds by railroad ended, as market hunting ceased to be profitable. This was an early sign that the bird was doomed.

The pigeon was an important source of food for the Indian people. They gathered only what their needs warranted. The Potawatomi name for the pigeon was O-Me-Me-OO or MEEME. The Chippewas call it ME-ME. Their names mimicked the call-note or cooing of the bird. Other names used were "Pigeon of Passage" or "Poor Man's Chicken." Early accounts simply called the bird "Wild Pigeon."

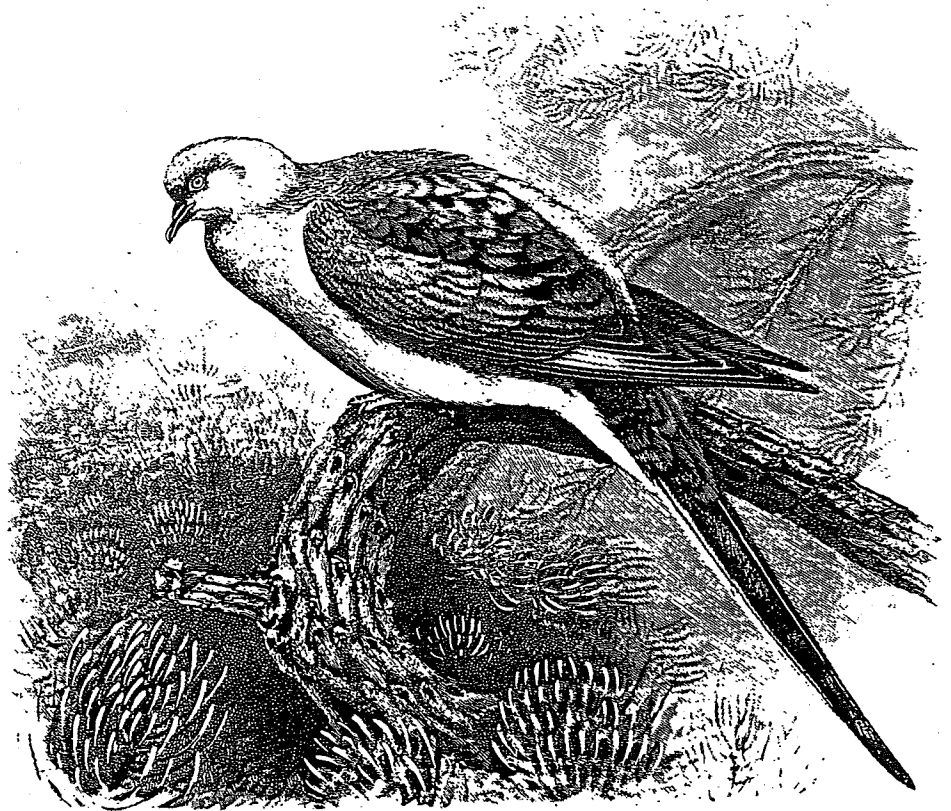
There are other factors to examine which contributed to extinction. The pigeons did show all signs of old age, such as their build-up of countless numbers. As their flocks were reduced, they entered a stage in which they could not cope with the environment.

My research, relative to the pigeons decline, evolves around a series of pitfalls. Principally, the uncontrolled harvest of adult birds, especially during the breeding period, taking of nesting squabs, and the loss of unhatched eggs. In addition, clearing beech and oak forests greatly decreased their food supply.

These multiple factors put pigeon flocks under a pattern of constant stress. When breeding and egg hatching is suddenly disturbed, a crash decline in reproduction results. Furthermore, the ratio of old birds to young birds increases, leading to a gradual dieoff of a

"Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question of whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free."

— Aldo Leopold
Sand County Almanac



In 1899, records show the last pigeon in Wisconsin was shot near Babcock. The last surviving pigeon in the United States, named Martha, died at the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens, September, 1914. Thus ended the fate of *Ectopistes migratorius* and it passed into oblivion.

There are a number of questions for researchers to answer. Why did the species dwindle so abruptly? Could there have been other causes beside hunter depredation that resulted in the pigeons' extinction? It was true that easy harvest and man's lust for financial gain contributed to exploiting a natural resource that seemed inexhaustible.

once prolific species.

As the pigeons' range changed, they were crowded into smaller and smaller areas. The possibility of an unknown avian disease could have spread among the heavy concentration of birds. Disease would have had a disastrous effect on the large colonies. This was not known or recognized by early ornithologists. Today's example is avian botulism, that attacks concentrations of wild geese, ducks and shore birds. The spread of a virus today is of concern to state and federal researchers.

The question of food could be considered. A shortage of mast necessary to feed the hordes of pigeons may have been another factor which led to their depletion. Acorn and beechnut crops are known to materialize at irregular intervals, two to three year appearances.

Large amounts of food were necessary to sustain both the adult and squabs in order to perpetuate the hungry flocks. The result — birds were weakened gradually by drastic and wide-spread declines in their food sources.

Recalling a meeting in Madison in 1947, the writer had an opportunity to talk with Dr. A. W. Schorger, ornithologist and naturalist, about the possibility of the pigeon's survival in today's environment. Could it exist as its counterpart, the mourning dove?

He indicated that the wild pigeon could never be restored. Some creatures cannot exist in numbers below a certain level. What happens is that either they refuse to breed or else grow sterile. The birds were highly colonized. They lived, flew and nested en masse.

Adding to their mortality rate was the lumberman who denuded their prime nesting range. A second harmful influence was agriculture, the clearing of the habitat and natural foods along their migrating routes.

A close cousin and the best known of the wild pigeons in North America is the mourning dove (*Zenaidura macroura*). It is the only North American bird to nest in every state in the Union except Hawaii.

A virulent disease that takes a toll on doves is trichomoniasis, a protozoal disease that is called frounce or canker disease. Trichomoniasis affects birds of the Columbidae family, such as doves and pigeons.

This disease can drastically reduce a dove population because it can destroy nestlings as well as adult and juveniles. Some ornithologists believe trichomoniasis may have been a significant factor in the extermination of the passenger pigeon.

Overlooking the great Mississippi River at Wyalusing State Park, a lone passenger pigeon, graven in bronze, watches over the old ancestral flyway. It is a

reminder of birds that once flew over Wisconsin. Their wing-beats were like the roar of an oncoming cyclone. Now the *empty skies* are silent.

A plaque and monument, designed by the writer, was dedicated May 11, 1947, at the state park by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology as a tribute to a magnificent bird that is now extinct.

The legend on the bronze tablet reads:

Dedicated
To The Last Wisconsin
Passenger Pigeon
Shot At Babcock, Sept. 1899

This Species Became Extinct
Through The Avarice And
Thoughtlessness Of Man

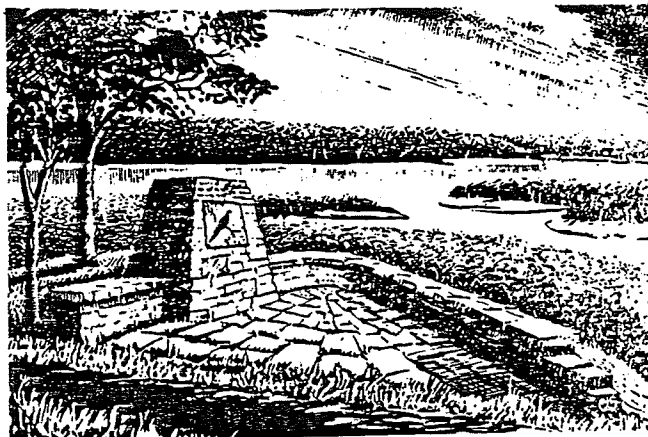
Erected By
The Wisconsin Society For Ornithology

Although the passenger pigeon has vanished its name has been retained on maps of Wisconsin and is the title of the society's publication, *The Passenger Pigeon*.

Researching the name pigeon, with the assistance of the Walter Scott Historical and Scientific Library, revealed that the name was given to four lakes, seven creeks, four rivers, a grove, one island, and a waterfall in Wisconsin. Also the word was adopted in other states as a nameplace.

At the I-94 rest area in Jackson County, stands an official Wisconsin Historical Marker that tells the traveler the story of the huge flocks of passenger pigeons that once were commonplace in Wisconsin.

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Passenger Pigeon Monument