

## Passenger Pigeons – From abundance to extinction

2014 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the extinction of the passenger pigeon. Once the most plentiful land bird on earth it went from abundance to extinction in a period of about fifty years.

When Europeans began exploring North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries historians estimate there were 3 to 5 billion passenger pigeons. Yes, that really is billion. They made up, perhaps, 40 percent of the total North American bird population. Each spring flocks migrated from the South to the Midwest, making the return journey in the fall, darkening the sky with their passing. A flight over Columbus, Ohio, in 1855 prompted the following eye-witness account: “As the watchers stared, the hum increased to a mighty throbbing. Now everyone was out of the houses and stores, looking apprehensively at the growing cloud, which was blotting out the rays of the sun. Children screamed and ran for home. Women gathered their long skirts and hurried for the shelter of stores. Horses bolted. A few people mumbled frightened words about the approach of the millennium, and several dropped on their knees and prayed.”

Passenger pigeons would fly and nest as huge groups. John James Audubon, famed naturalist, recorded a flock flying at sixty miles an hour that passed overhead continuously for three entire days, and upon finding their roost he found the ground covered in two inches of bird droppings.

The largest recorded nesting was in Wisconsin in 1871. A conservative estimate of the nesting area was 850 square miles, and estimates put the number of nesting pigeons at 136 million. With as many as 100 nests in a tree, the weight sometimes caused branches to fall off and trees to collapse.

So, what happened? In the late 1800s pigeon hunters followed flocks around the country via rail, searching for nesting grounds. They put their bounty in barrels and then refrigerated box cars and shipped them east. Squab was a tasty delicacy. Operating on an enormous scale, hunters crammed tens of thousands of birds into boxcars. Hunting of passenger pigeons decreased their numbers, especially since they laid only one egg a year.

All this coincided with an explosion in logging, which began destroying the habitat of pigeons just as hunters were destroying the pigeons themselves.

Deforestation of the land played a huge part in their extinction. The birds fed voraciously from the tree nuts of mature beech and oak forests. A Detroit newspaper in the late nineteenth century described the squabs as having “the digestive capacity of half a dozen 14-year-old boys.” Once the forests were cut down, the food source disappeared.

In their wake, passenger pigeons left behind stripped fields and ravaged woods; Their droppings, which coated branches and lay a foot thick on the ground, like snow, proved toxic to the undergrowth and fatal to the trees.

The abundance was misleading. In 1900, a boy in Ohio shot a passenger pigeon out of a tree with a twelve-gauge shotgun, killing what was probably the last wild member of the species. A small captive population remained at the Cincinnati Zoo, including a pair named George and Martha. By 1910, Martha was the sole survivor. Officials offered a thousand-dollar reward for a mate, but on September 1, 1914, the last passenger pigeon in the world died.

The last live bird seen in Sheboygan County, as noted in a diary entry, was in the town of Mitchell in the 1880s. A January 3, 1930 *Sheboygan Press* article noted that the Smithsonian was home to thirty-five to forty stuffed passenger pigeons including Martha. A *Milwaukee Sentinel* article from February 2, 1933 reported that the Milwaukee Public Museum owned just one pair. In 1963, a *Sheboygan Press* article highlighted the pair of pigeons on display at the Sheboygan County Museum. They had come from the Carl Benninghaus collection,

but because of safety concerns from arsenic used during the taxidermy process, they were removed from the collection in the 1990s and sent to a facility more able to deal with such issues.

Excessive hunting, loss of habitat and overpopulation of the birds themselves created a perfect storm which ended a species. All that remains of the once abundant birds in Wisconsin is a monument in Wyalusing State Park on the Mississippi River.