Historical Perspective

The Passenger Pigeon

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The passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) was a swift, graceful bird found in the deciduous forests of eastern North America. Once considered the most abundant bird species in the world,\(^1\) it was estimated to make up 25% to 40% of the total bird population of the United States.\(^2\) Although not all flocks were gargantuan in size,\(^3\) up to 2 billion birds were estimated in some groups.\(^1\)

The passenger pigeon migrated in the spring and fall. During other times of the year, it moved about frequently to select the most favorable environment for feeding. Passenger pigeons foraged for beech-nuts, acorns, chestnuts, seeds, and berries. This diet was supplemented with worms and insects during the warm-weather months.

The passenger pigeon was similar in appearance to its closest living relative, the mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*). It had a small head and neck, a long, wedge-shaped tail, long, pointed wings, and extensive breast musculature, which sustained prolonged flight. The passenger pigeon was larger than the mourning dove, measuring 15 to 16 inches (38–40 cm) in length.\(^2\)

The range of the passenger pigeon extended from Canada down into the northern regions of the Gulf Coast states. Birds were only rarely reported as far west as the Dakotas. Nesting sites were found in the Great Lakes region east to New York.\(^2,3\)

A single nesting site could cover up to thousands of acres. Birds were so congested in some areas that up to 100 nests could be counted in a single tree. Branches frequently broke secondary to the combined weight of the birds. A large nesting site in Wisconsin covered 850 square miles and constituted up to 136 million birds.\(^1,2\)

The decline of the passenger pigeon has actually been linked with the growth of the lumber industry in the eastern United States.\(^3\) The large flocks required large tracts of forest for nesting and foraging.

When the early settlers cleared the eastern forests for farmland, birds were forced to shift their nesting and roosting sites to the remaining forests.\(^2\) As the food supply within the forest was depleted, passenger pigeons began feeding on farmed grain fields, often causing serious damage to crops. Farmers retaliated by shooting or netting the birds for meat; however, this practice did not appear to seriously affect the total numbers of birds.\(^2,3\) Most certainly the loss of America’s forests to farmland would have eventually doomed the passenger pigeon; however, the practice of market hunting during the 1800s accelerated this process.\(^1\)

Professional hunters began netting and shooting passenger pigeons in the 1820s. Birds were then shipped by rail to city markets and sold as a popular source of meat.\(^1–3\) Although the existence of the large passenger pigeon flocks had protected the species from any serious impact by predators, these large collections of birds also made them easy pickings during pigeon shoots or communal netting.\(^2\)

By 1860 the numbers of passenger pigeons seemed to be decreasing; however, hunting practices were not changed. One of the last large nesting sites of passenger pigeons was hunted at Petroskey, MI, in 1878. It is estimated that 50,000 birds were killed daily over a 5-month period.\(^2\)

Efforts to save the passenger pigeon came too late. A bill introduced in 1897 instituted a 10-year closed season on passenger pigeon hunting. However, this effort was completely in vain because the number of birds remaining were too few to reestablish the species.\(^2\) The passenger pigeon required large numbers for optimum breeding conditions.\(^1\) It could not adapt to living in small numbers.\(^1,2\)

By the early 1890s, the passenger pigeon had almost completely disappeared. A 14-year old boy in Sargents, OH, reportedly captured the last free-ranging bird on March 24, 1900. During the early years of the 20th century, rewards were offered for the capture of free-ranging passenger pigeons. The American Ornithologists’ Union offered $1,500 to

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