100 Years without the Passenger Pigeon
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“Migratory Wanderer.” “Blue Meteor.” “Wood Pigeon.” All are names that describe the
passenger pigeon, a bird that once numbered an estimated five to nine billion individuals across
the eastern two-thirds of North America. During their famous migrations, flocks would take days
to pass overhead, darkening the skies with their bodies and deafening the ears with their
thunderous flapping roar. Today, there are none. On September 1, 1914, Martha, the last living
passenger pigeon, died at the Cincinnati Zoo, and with that the extinction of one of the nation’s
greatest natural phenomena occurred.

“A new and very interesting spectacle, presented itself, in the incredible quantities of wild
pigeons that were abroad; flocks of them many miles long came across the country, one flight
succeeding to another, obscuring the daylight, and in their swift motion creating a wind, and
producing a rushing and startling sound, that cataracts of the first class might be proud of.
These flights of wild pigeons constitute one of the most remarkable phenomena of the western
country . . . when such myriads of timid birds as the wild pigeon are on the wing, often wheeling
and performing evolutions almost as complicated as pyrotechnic movements, and creating
whirlwinds as they move, they present an image of the most fearful power.”

~ Featherstonhaugh, 1844

At one time the most abundant land bird in North America, their name “pigeons of passage”
references their wide-scale wanderings and long
migrations. At 17” long and with a 24” wingspan,
passerger pigeons were considerably larger than the
mourning dove. During flight, they could reach speeds of
up to 60 mph. Very social birds, passenger pigeons fed on
the ground, feasting on nuts, seeds, grains and insects, with
the rear of the flock rising and passing to the front, so that
the entire group was constantly wheeling across the land in
a loud raucous.

“We started for the pigeon roost a little after dark. Although three miles from the roost when we
started from home, we could hear the sullen roar of that myriad of birds, and the sound
increased in volume as we approached the roost, till it became as the roar of the breakers upon
the beach.” ~ Sullivan Cook
“Their roosting places are always in the woods, and sometimes occupy a large extent of forest. When they have frequented one of these places for some time, the ground is covered several inches deep with their dung; all the tender grass and underwood are destroyed; the surface is covered with large limbs of trees, broken down by the weight of the birds clustering one above another; and the trees themselves, for thousands of acres, killed as completely as if girdled with an axe. The marks of this desolation remain for many years on the spot; and numerous places can be pointed out, where, for several years afterwards, scarcely a single vegetable made its appearance.” ~ Hinton

Nesting was also a social affair. Passenger pigeons returned to Michiana by late March or early April. A platform nest made out of sticks would be built to house one white egg, with up to 90 nests per tree. Sometimes the branches were so weighed down that they would break from the weight of the birds. While some passenger pigeons would nest in small groups or singly, as a whole their entire reproductive strategy depended on mass-nesting in large colonies. An 1871 Wisconsin colony covered 850 square miles and contained 136 million birds! Two weeks after hatching, parents abandoned their fat chick, called a squab, which would fall to the ground to forage until able to fly.

*Niles Republican, April 29, 1843*: “Pigeons – Warm weather has brot (sic) innumerable quantities of pigeons. The air is filled with them, and in the morning so densely that they darken the sun. A continual firing of guns is kept up, and a graceless scamp was heard singing the following: ‘When I can shoot my rifle clear, to pigeons in the skies, I’ll bid farewell to pork and beans, and live on good pot pies.’”

How did a bird “as numerous as fish” go extinct in 40 years? A combination of their unique natural history and advances in technology lead to the extinction of the passenger pigeon. Overhunting was the leading cause of their disappearance. For generations, Native Americans and pioneers had hunted the birds at a sustainable level, but the mid-1800s brought growing demand for passenger pigeons for sale at market. Because they travelled and nested in huge flocks, multiple birds could be shot by anyone aiming a gun into the sky. Birds were pushed out of nesting and roosting trees with poles, whiskey-soaked wheat or salt and “stool pigeons” attached to stools were used to lure flocks into nets, and poisonous gases were released into the air to kill them.
“Pigeon pie” became a favored delicacy. Passenger pigeon meat was smoked or salted, and squab fat was processed into oil and butter. In Chicago and New York, birds sold for 50¢ a dozen dead or $1–$2 a dozen for live birds. A good hunter could make up to $40 a day, a large amount of money for the time. Birds also were hunted for their feathers to be used in featherbeds and women’s fashions. It took more than 1700 passenger pigeons to provide enough feathers to fill a single featherbed, and a prominent belief held that a person could not die on a bed of passenger pigeon feathers. Additionally, birds were trapped live for use as targets at shooting contests. In a three-day shoot in New Jersey in 1899, 20,000 birds were killed by participants.

In 1878, Petoskey, Michigan, hosted the last great nesting colony of passenger pigeons in North America, covering approximately 100,000 acres or 250 square miles. During the three-month stay of the flock, 1.5 million dead birds and more than 80,000 live birds were shipped by rail, with the same amount shipped by water, and a total of more than 10 million birds were killed at this one location. For the entire 1878 season in the Midwest, over one billion passenger pigeons were harvested from the wild.

Although populations had been declining since the late 1700s, by the late 1800s the introduction of new technology lead to the inevitable extinction of the passenger pigeon. Steamboats, railroads, and telegraphs were rapidly expanding into the new markets of the Midwest. Telegraphs allowed scouts to locate flocks and quickly inform hunters where to go, and the steamboats and railroads allowed for the transport of meat and feathers quickly to markets in large cities and back east. While the massive slaughter of birds was destructive in itself, passenger pigeons were very sensitive to disturbance at nesting sites, abandoning them if attacked by hunters, and with only one nesting a season this meant there was little to no reproduction year after year. Combine that with habitat loss as the eastern forests were cleared for farmland, lumber to build growing cities and railroad ties, and prospects were not good for this wondrous species.

“The passenger pigeon needs no protection. Wonderfully prolific, having the vast forests of the North as its breeding grounds, travelling hundreds of miles in search of food, it is here today and elsewhere tomorrow, and no ordinary destruction can lessen them, or be missed from the myriads that are yearly produced.”

~ 1857 Ohio Senate committee, in response to a bill to protect the passenger pigeon

“The passenger pigeon millions were destroyed so quickly, and so thoroughly en masse, that the American people utterly failed to comprehend it, and for 30 years obstinately refused to believe that the species had been suddenly wiped off the map of North America.”

~ William Hornaday, conservationist, early 1900s
As people became more aware of the decline in passenger pigeon populations, attempts were made to protect them. From American settlement in the 1600s to 1878, populations declined from five to nine billion to an estimated 50 million. Captive breeding attempts at zoos and universities were unsuccessful. A small flock was captured in Wisconsin in 1879 and taken to the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens, with one female being named Martha after President George Washington’s wife. 20 years later, by 1900, the passenger pigeon was extirpated from the wild. And in 1914, with the death of Martha at 1:00 pm, the passenger pigeon went extinct.

With no apparent impact on the environment with their disappearance, this event most importantly marks the loss of an amazing natural phenomenon that will never be seen again on earth, and can be considered the start of the conservation movement. At about the same time as the passenger pigeons were significantly declining in the late 1800s, the bison were overhunted on the prairies, reducing their populations from billions to just a handful of survivors. The National Park Service was established in 1872 to protect natural areas, with the creation of Yellowstone National Park. Because other bird species were declining from overharvest of their feathers for women’s fashions, the Migratory Bird Act was passed in 1918 to protect all native migratory bird species in the U.S. The last Carolina parakeet died in captivity in 1918 and it was declared extinct in 1939. And in 1973 the Endangered Species Act was passed. So while the loss of the passenger pigeon was tragic, we have learned and moved on to an understanding of the need to protect the environment and the role we humans have as stewards of nature.

“. . . one is imbued with the sense of the irreparable loss suffered by the naturalists of the country in the passing of the pigeon. Undoubtedly it was one of the most abundant birds – if not the most abundant – on the American continent in the early days. The unbelievably vast numbers in which it was wont to appear; the extent of its daily flights; the enormous are, the unusually density and in particular the shifting character, of its communal roosting and nesting places, were features of its life history that were unique. Here was a species so perfectly fitted to its environment and to existing conditions that, although a pair laid but one egg at a setting, or two at most, and although its enemies were legion, it had increased in the course of time to such an extent that it bade fair to overrun the continent by sheer force of numbers. The story of its passing is a shameful record of human cruelty, avarice and indifference – a story one wishes had never been told.” ~ W. E. Clyde Todd, Birds of Western Pennsylvania
Historically, passenger pigeons would have been found at Fernwood and throughout the Michiana area. As you walk the trails, imagine the roar of flights overhead as they darkened the sky, the crowds of nesting birds filling every tree, and take a moment to appreciate the nature and beauty that has been preserved on our grounds. To learn more about passenger pigeons, please attend our program on Sunday, September 7 or come to see our live-mounted specimens on display in the Nature Center.