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CONSERVATION

BY SHANE P. MAHONEY

In the Passenger Pigeon's Shadow

"I SEE, IN THE EVENING AIR, HOW DARKNESS COMES DOWN ON WHAT WE DO." – THEODORE ROETHKE

The Passenger Pigeon was likely, at one time, the most numerous bird on earth with a population estimated at five billion individuals. If accurate, that would have meant that perhaps one out of three wild birds in America belonged to this species. Their range extended throughout the primary forests of eastern North America and extended as far west as Montana and Texas, with breeding colonies as far north as Hudson Bay, Ontario, Canada. Handsome, with slate-blue rump and head and wine-colored breast, the Passenger Pigeon was somewhat larger than a mourning dove and possessed a streamlined body beautifully designed for fast and elegant flight.

Highly social, these birds did not disperse across the landscape as most species do, nor migrate from one local to another with the seasons. Rather, throughout the year they travelled in massive flocks, moving from one feeding location to another, feasting on "mast," such as seeds, acorns and beach nuts or the plantings of rye and wheat. Their food requirements were prodigious as their flying columns sometimes stretched for literally hundreds of miles, took days to pass overhead and contained hundreds of millions of individuals and even more. John James Audubon, America's great artist and hunter-naturalist, recorded a single flock in 1813 that he estimated contained more than one billion birds. But



even this pales alongside the flock that flew over Ontario in the spring of 1860. This incredible concentration of avian life was estimated to contain 3.7 billion individuals.

Audible long before they could be seen, these feathered hurricanes advanced as though "an army of horses laden with sleigh bells was approaching," and then darkening the sky as though an eclipse, driving a wind before them and deafening the air to all other sounds, while pelting the ground with a rain of guano that covered the earth. Little wonder that some first time observers fell to their knees in prayer, believing the spectacle heralded the end of existence.

One can only imagine the sight as these great approaching swarms suddenly swerved and poured from the heavens, choking deep valleys with their sheer numbers and roosting in enormous densities that broke not only the limbs of trees, but also the very trees themselves, over thousands of acres and even more. Their peculiar habit of piling on top of one another while roosting meant that barrel sized configurations of birds were everywhere upon the trees and their sheer weight could not be contained. Witnesses said the abandoned roosts resembled the work of a cyclone more than the efforts of birds. Their nesting concentrations were equally massive. One colony in Wisconsin was estimated in 1871 to cover almost 1,000 square miles and was estimated by a knowledgeable naturalist to contain nearly 136 million breeding adults. Nothing even close in proportion exists on our continent, or in the world, today.

Yet, despite this incredible abundance, we this year mark the 100th anniversary of the Passenger Pigeon's extinction. With remarkable swiftness, this once innumerable species declined in the course of 25 years to just a few straggling thousands by the late 1890s, with the last likely sightings in the wild occurring in Ohio in 1900 and in Ontario in 1902. Martha, a captive bred bird named after Martha Washington – George Washington's wife – died in her cage at the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914. At the age of 29 years, she was the very last of her kind. Alone and afflicted with palsy, she simply collapsed, fell from her roost, and died. There would be no more storms of birds to darken the skies; no more multitudes to sweep the forests down. There would never again be the glimpse of even a single bird. From billions to none in the blink of an eye: how could this happen?

Today, most would agree the Passenger Pigeon was hunted out of existence, but that other factors certainly contributed, most importantly the destruction of the great beech wood, pine and hemlock forests mowed down by settlers pursuing land for agriculture and entrepreneurs pursuing timber for an expanding construction industry. Loss of these forests deliberately through logging and inadvertently through increased forest fires as settlement expanded, deprived the birds of some of their primary foods and their vast flocks could only survive where great stores of mast could be found. When they turned to agriculture as a source of food, farmers naturally responded with a vengeance adding to the take of birds that occurred for food, fertilizer, and as a fattening crop for hogs which would sometimes be driven a hundred miles to feed at the roosting and nesting sites. Such efforts alone could not destroy the immense flocks, however.

In their superabundance, hunting the Passenger Pigeon was easy and could be accomplished by just waving a pole amidst low-flying birds. Guns, and baiting practices and especially the increased use of nets all increased the kill over time, though as long as enough of the birds' roosting and nesting locations remained free of exploitation, their numbers seemed to rebound. But once these critical areas could be pinpointed and tracked, a new era of market exploitation commenced and the curtain of extinction began to fall, slowly at first and then with an ever-quickening pace. Almost certainly it was the combined impact of two largely post-civil war technologies, the telegraph and the expansion of railways that launched an era of frenzied killing that outstripped the Passenger Pigeon's abilities to reproduce and survive. The commercial pigeon industry occurred on a scale that outstrips even that of the bison.

It gave rise to a cadre of professional market-hunters who could learn of new roosting or nesting concentrations and proceed quickly to them, essentially tracking the great flocks wherever they went. Along the telegraph wires clicked the doomsday intelligence that would eventually lead to Martha and her species' last vigil. Receiving the news, the pigeon market purveyors were quickly underway, their organization efficient and deadly. Reaching the birds, they unleashed a great killing machine comprised of nets, asphyxiating pots of burning sulfur, pine torches to set their roost trees alight, guns, rakes, pitchforks and whiskey-soaked corn that poisoned and impaired the birds. It was a slaughter of gross scale and unrelenting brutality. With an organized industry of coopers and packers at the ready, massive pigeon cargoes were sent to the market cities such as New York and Boston. The scale was incredible. Single shipments of 400,000 birds per week are well documented. One county in Michigan shipped 7,500,000 birds in one season. Audubon himself confused schooners on the Hudson River loaded high with Passenger pigeon carcasses as coal ships; he was astounded to eventually recognize the truth.

Little wonder then that the species could not sustain itself, or that today we are left to ponder what might have been done to prevent this tragic loss. In fact, attempts were made but the myth of inexhaustibility was too strong; too few would believe there was any limit to the Passenger Pigeon, just as they similarly thought the bison would always thunder cross the plains in abundance. Yet, there is one positive note that resounds from these sad and regrettable experiences. Both the demise of the Passenger Pigeon and the near extinction of the bison were two significant factors in finally awakening the conservation movement in Canada and the United States, and in establishing recreational hunting as a powerful voice for wildlife protection and sustainable use. We may take great pride that those animals we hunt have, virtually without exception, risen from imperiled numbers of a century ago to great abundance and security today.

Some say we never learn from our mistakes, but this is not altogether true. As hunters, we should lament the Passenger Pigeon's fate and remember just how progressive and worthwhile our new conservation ethic is. And we must commit ourselves... to never again! GT