

RESURRECTING THE STORY OF THE PASSENGER PIGEON IN PENNSYLVANIA

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The passenger pigeon was the most impressive species of bird that man has known. Elegant in form and color, swift and graceful of flight, it moved about and nested in such enormous numbers as to confound the senses.

—A. W. Schorger, *The Passenger Pigeon and Its Extinction* (1955)

Only a handful of centenarians can recall the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, but generations of schoolchildren know that the incident launched World War I. Two months later, in September of that year, another notable death occurred. Martha, the world's last remaining passenger pigeon, died at the Cincinnati Zoo. Martha's remains, accompanied by a sign reading "EXTINCT" in large block letters, graced the bird exhibits of the Smithsonian Institution for almost eighty years.

Martha's death received considerably less attention than the archduke's. Although the Smithsonian was prepared for her passing—officials arranged for the bird to be frozen in a three-hundred-pound block of ice and shipped to Washington, DC—the nation's major newspapers did not lament Martha's demise. Their silence was understandable. Her death may have marked the formal extinction of the passenger pigeon, but the critical years for the species were the 1860s to the 1880s, when Americans slaughtered them by the millions.

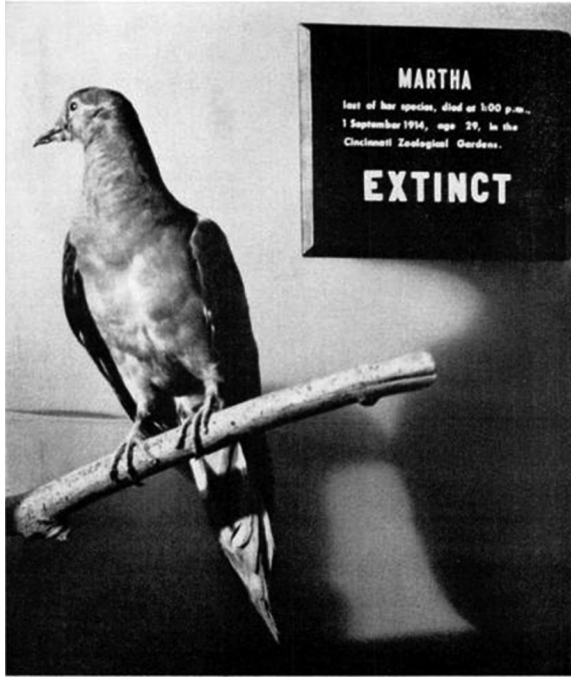


FIGURE 1: “Martha” on display in the newly opened “Bird Hall” at the Smithsonian Institute, circa 1956. (Originally from Smithsonian Institution Archives, available online at http://www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/featured_objects/martha2.html.)

America’s most famous bird expert, John James Audubon, estimated that an average flock contained more than a billion birds, and he described in vivid detail the transit of enormous flocks that blanketed the skies over Louisville, Kentucky, for three days in 1813.¹

A bird that had formed a staple of the national diet for centuries, and whose stupendous nestings (it was not uncommon for large flocks to settle over tens of thousands of acres of forest) were stamped indelibly on the memories of generations of Americans, seemingly disappeared overnight.² For a species whose essence was defined by the vast numbers in which it assembled, the death of its final living representative could only be described as anticlimactic.

The demise of the passenger pigeon is not a familiar story to the college students in my environmental history courses. Almost none of them learned



FIGURE 2: Painting of male and female passenger pigeons by Audubon. (John James Audubon, *Birds of America*, 1840.)

about the pigeon in high school. History textbooks in the United States—on both the high school and college levels—generally have room for only one story of animal extermination, and that’s the buffalo. Given the time constraints and the breadth of coverage that instructors are expected to provide, the exclusion of the pigeon is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the pigeon’s absence from the curriculum is unfortunate, particularly in Pennsylvania, a state the birds regularly visited and site of some of the last major nestings. There are at least four compelling reasons why instructors of Pennsylvania history should introduce their students to the story of the passenger pigeon.

The first reason is simply that the pigeons were an amazing physical phenomenon, unlike any today’s students are likely to have experienced.

The flocks were so large that they literally blackened the skies. A Pennsylvania resident recalled one particularly abundant year:

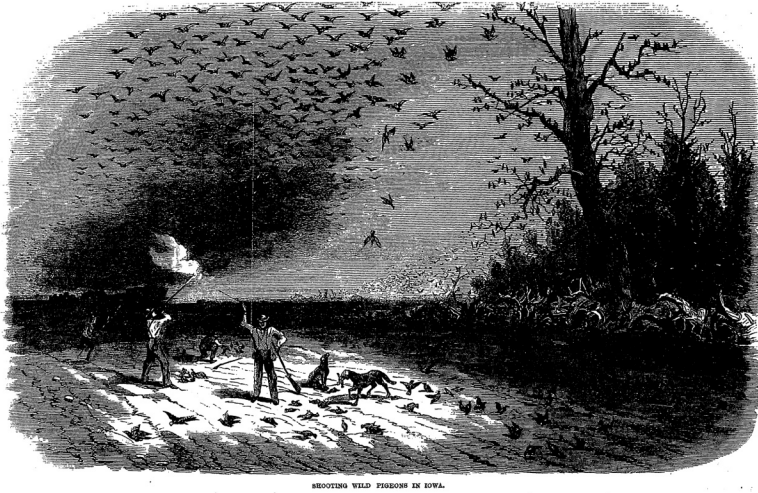
In the year 1856 this neighborhood was visited by Wild Pigeons in vast numbers. In the early morning they would fly eastward from the Laurel Hill mountains . . . alighting in cornfields to feed; and about the middle of the afternoon they would commence their return flight to their roosting place in the mountains. They would come sometimes in such immense flocks as to almost shut out the sky, like a cloud, and two or three hours would pass during each morning and evening migration.³

Two decades later, pigeons still ruled the Commonwealth's skies:

In the morning they would fly from their roosts and cover thousands of acres. When in flight, they made a noise like a passenger freight train. You could stand for an entire day on one spot and either shoot at those on the wing or at those which settled on the trees nearby.⁴

Few Pennsylvanians, indeed relatively few Americans, hunted or ever laid eyes on a live bison. Their connection to the beasts came entirely through the coats, rugs, and other goods produced directly or indirectly from bison parts. In sharp contrast, many Americans had a more visceral bond with passenger pigeons. While their urban counterparts in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and other cities marveled at the vibrating masses of pigeons as they passed overhead in search of food, most rural Americans living in the region from the Great Plains east to New York and south to Florida hunted the birds or visited their nesting sites. Pigeons roosted when a community's forests produced a bumper crop of nuts. In addition to nuts, which they preferred when nesting, pigeons ate insects and feasted on a variety of seeds. The historian Jennifer Price dubbed these occasions "pigeon years."⁵

Most instructors will want to provide their students with images to accompany the awe-inspiring recollections of the birds. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find an image that adequately conveys the scale of pigeon migration. An 1867 magazine illustration of farmers shooting pigeons in Iowa attempted to depict the swarming density typical of pigeon flocks, but it hardly does justice to the written descriptions (see fig. 3).



SHOOTING WILD PIGEONS IN IOWA.

FIGURE 3: Iowa farmers shooting pigeons in a vain attempt to protect their crops. (Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly*, September 1867.)

However, unlike retrospective accounts of the pigeon that are often long on sentiment and short on context, the article accompanying the illustration effectively captured the most vexing aspect of pigeon behavior: their propensity to devour grain from farmers' fields.

These flocks lit upon the fields of new-sown grain, and rolling over and over like the waves of the sea, picked up every kernal [*sic*] of grain in sight. It was impossible to drive them away; they being unmindful of the firing of guns, throwing of stones, shouting of men, or barking of dogs; and it was an easy task to kill any number of them with a pole.

The battle between farmers struggling to save their crops and pigeons desperate for food after a lengthy migration underscores the second reason for introducing students to the saga of the passenger pigeon: the intimate connection between generations of rural Americans and the enormous flocks that periodically descended on their communities.⁶

What characterized this relationship? Exposing students to sources that provide conflicting interpretations of pigeon years is an excellent means of sharpening their critical thinking skills. In his 1823 novel *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper portrayed pigeon shoots as vicious bloodlettings,

against which the hero Leatherstocking protests but is powerless to stop.⁷ Almost a quarter century later, in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Evangeline*, the migration of pigeons over Philadelphia augured the yellow fever epidemic that ravaged the city in 1793: "a pestilence fell on the city/ Presaged by wondrous signs, and mostly by flocks of wild pigeons/Darkening the sun in their flight, with naught in their craws but/an acorn."⁸ Jennifer Price, however, took a much more positive view, suggesting that the pigeons helped bind frontier communities together. During these abundant times it was common for an entire village to congregate at a nesting spot to harvest its protein for the next several weeks.

The rise of market hunting in the second half of the nineteenth century provides instructors a golden opportunity to explore the impact of new technologies and forms of economic organization on the relationship between humans and birds. Even after aggressive exploitation by generations of rural residents, passenger pigeons remained relatively abundant in the years immediately following the Civil War. But market hunters, who received word of roosts by telegraph and sent barrels of passenger pigeons to urban markets via railroad, began to decimate the species. Instead of waiting for the pigeons to come to their forests and villages, Americans traveled to the birds. Subsistence hunting for rural consumption quickly yielded to commercial hunting to satisfy urban demand. In 1878 market hunters in Petoskey, Michigan, shot and clubbed to death over 10,000 birds a day, every day, for nearly five months.⁹

The methodical extermination of passenger pigeons in the late nineteenth century illustrates the convergence of several historical developments. Instructors can use the pigeon story to highlight the increasing importance of technology, the growing sophistication of markets, and the rise of urban consumption. Price emphasized the role of urban consumption; city dwellers ate the birds in restaurants and in their homes, and sated their urge to hunt by using passenger pigeons for trap shooting.¹⁰

The assault on the passenger pigeon provides instructors an unrivaled opportunity to link production and consumption in nineteenth-century America, the third reason for incorporating the bird into our courses. The conventions of textbook publishing generally separate urbanization and the changes in consumption patterns that accompanied it from the world of production—the factories, farms, and forests that turned out raw materials and finished goods. As their name implies, the motivation of market hunters was straightforward: they sought to fulfill the increasing demand for

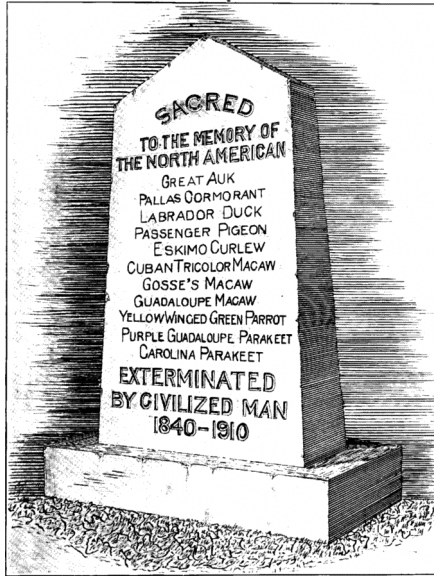


FIGURE 4: The passenger pigeon's extraordinary abundance made its demise notable, but it was one of many North American birds that went extinct during the expansion of industrial capitalism. (William T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, 1913.)

protein from urbanites. In some years, New York City absorbed 100 barrels of pigeons a day. At 500 birds a barrel, Gotham alone consumed over 18 million pigeons annually. Audubon recalled that in March of 1830, pigeons “were so abundant in the markets of New York, that piles of them met the eye in every direction.”¹¹

Today's students, raised in a culture whose buzzwords include “carbon footprint” and “sustainability,” will have little difficulty connecting consumption practices to the fate of the passenger pigeon. As Price underscored, the disconnection between consumers and the birds they were eating—restaurants frequently smothered the birds in elaborate sauces, and diners, often informed only that were consuming squab, maintained a blissful ignorance about the origin of their food—contributed to the pigeon's demise.¹²

The fourth and most important reason for bringing the story of the passenger pigeon into Pennsylvania classrooms is that the birds frequently

nested in the extensive beech and chestnut forests of the Keystone State. The north-central counties of Potter, Tioga, and McKean were the epicenter of pigeon roosts. Pigeons also frequented counties in the southwestern part of the state; the eyewitness accounts quoted previously both come from southwestern Pennsylvania.

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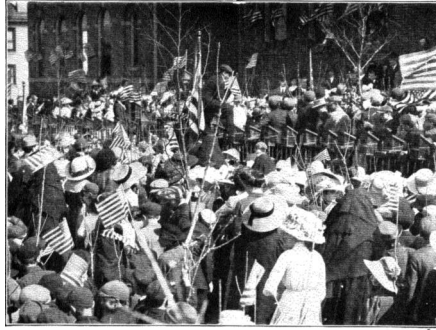


FIGURE 6: Pennsylvanians also sought to protect birds. In 1912, the state game commissioner organized a bird day rally in Carrick, PA, during which he donated hundreds of bird boxes and trees to area children. (Reproduced in William T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, 1913.)

death marked the formal extinction of the species, J. G. Bohn, of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, lamented the departure of the pigeons from the state's forests: "In regard to Wild Pigeons, they are birds of the past in our regions. Years ago our woods were full of them; in the fall you could count them by the thousands, and here and there you could find them raising young. Our section of country is stripped of its massive forests and these birds are gone. I have not seen one in my hunts in fifteen years. I even cannot as much as get a specimen to mount." Residents from Pennsylvania's northern counties echoed these observations, noting, "Rare: A few breed here," and "A rare visitor."¹³

I have included a list of sources that instructors can use to learn more about the rise and fall of passenger pigeons. Several items listed function as both secondary and primary sources because they include first-hand accounts of pigeon roosts and behavior. These sources (some of which are available online) often indicate the locations and dates of large pigeon nestings. Instructors can use this information to find newspaper articles about these events for their area. Tracking press coverage of the pigeons during the second half of the nineteenth century will help students understand how Pennsylvanians thought about pigeon years and the disappearance of this once hyperabundant bird.

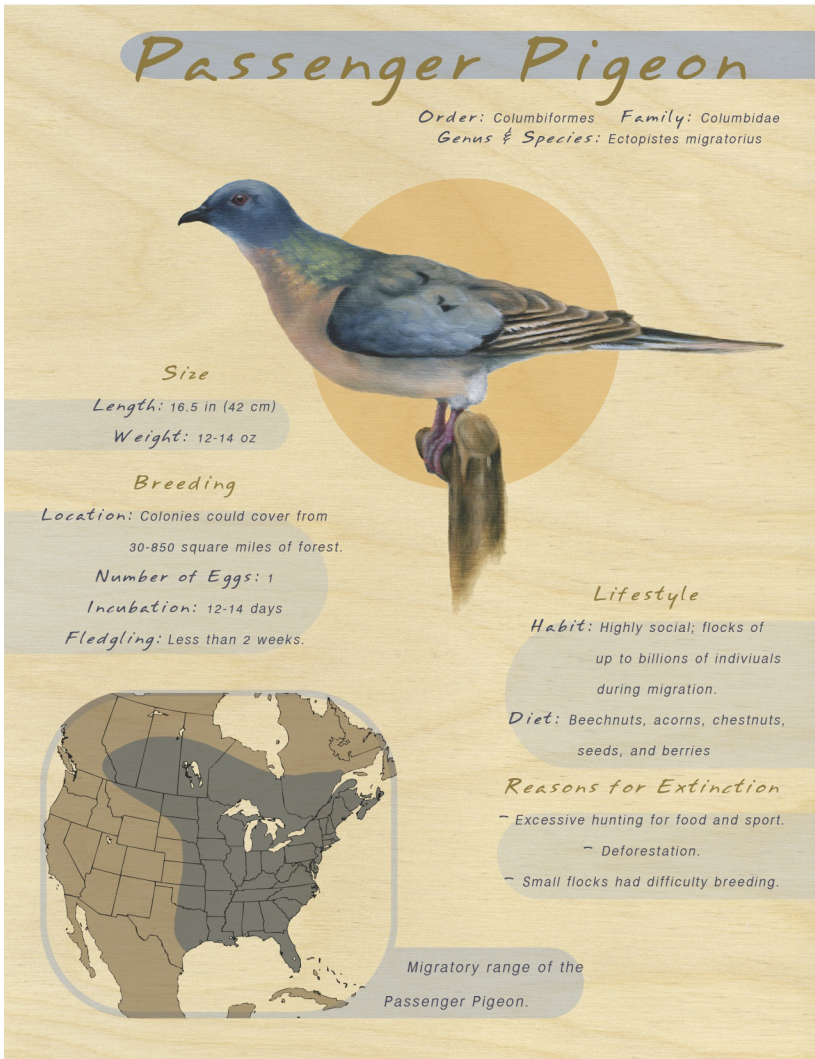


FIGURE 7: This skillful summary of the passenger pigeon would make an excellent hand-out. (Source: Erica Lyn Schmidt.)

In particular, instructors would do well to consult the website for Project Passenger Pigeon, a multipronged effort to raise awareness of the story of the passenger pigeon. In order to coincide with the centennial of the extinction, the organizers are planning a range of events and publications, including a new book on the history of the bird and a high school

curriculum. They are also working on a full-length documentary film; currently, a ten-minute clip provides a useful introduction to the story of the passenger pigeon.¹⁴ The Web also contains many images of the bird. Instructors within driving distance of the Potter County Historical Society in Coudersport can provide their students an intimate glimpse into the world of pigeon hunting. The society has a net that was used to catch pigeons and a stool on which blinded pigeons would perch. When a flock of pigeons passed over, a hunter would attempt to lure the wild birds to descend to a level where they could be caught by tugging on a thread, which caused the stool to move and the bird to flutter. This is the origin of the term “stool pigeon.”

Although the passenger pigeon cannot be brought back to life, its story is ripe for resurrection. Students of Pennsylvania history, whatever their age, will learn about the fecundity of nature, the mutually dependent relationships that humans have with nature, and the connection between production and consumption in the nineteenth century by studying the bird that once ruled the roost in the state’s extensive forests.

Passenger Pigeon Sources

Primary Sources

John J. Audubon, *Birds of America* (New York: J. J. Audubon, 1840). Available at http://web4.audubon.org/bird/boa/boa_index.html. This is Audubon’s classic work on the birds of North America. It includes many extinct species, which are contained in a separate link in the online version available from the National Audubon Society.

John C. French, *The Passenger Pigeon in Pennsylvania* (Altoona, PA: Altoona Tribune Company, 1919). Available at http://www.archive.org/stream/passengerpigeon10ofren/passengerpigeon10ofren_djvu.txt. This is the most comprehensive source on pigeons in the Keystone State. However, not all the contents relate to Pennsylvania.

W. B. Mershon, *The Passenger Pigeon* (New York: Outing Publishing Company, 1907). Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/passengerpigeon00mersh>. This useful book includes selections on various topics relating to the birds, including selections from Audubon’s writings and magazine articles.

- W. E. Clyde Todd and George Sutton, *Birds of Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1940), 266–72. This reference work is available at many libraries in Pennsylvania.
- B. H. Warren, *Report on the Birds of Pennsylvania, With Special Reference to the Food Habits, Based on over Four Thousand Stomach Observations*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg: E. K. Meyers State Printer, 1890), 111–13. Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/commercialpoultr11>. This reference work contains short but useful firsthand descriptions of the disappearance of the passenger pigeon.

Secondary Sources

- Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 1–55. Price provides an exceptionally readable overview of the history of the passenger pigeon with an emphasis on the role of urban consumers in the bird's demise. Her clear and engaging style will appeal to high school and college students alike.
- A.W. Schorger, *The Passenger Pigeon: Its Natural History and Extinction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955; reissued in paperback in 2004). Schorger offers a detailed study of the bird's behavior and its encounters with humans, from native peoples to market hunters.

Additional Sources

- Project Passenger Pigeon, <http://www.passengerpigeon.org/>, is a website devoted to commemorating the centennial of the extinction of the passenger pigeon. The organizers of Project Passenger Pigeon plan to add more materials over time.
- The Passenger Pigeon in Art and Museum Sources, http://www.ulala.org/P_Pigeon/Pigeon_Picts.html, includes numerous links to paintings, drawings, and interesting objects (including stamps and an effigy pipe) related to the pigeon.
- Video on passenger pigeons, <http://vimeo.com/24968154>. This ten-minute video (which may in the future be expanded into a full-length documentary) includes interviews with experts and dramatic readings of passenger pigeon descriptions.

NOTES

1. A brief overview of population estimates and basic information about the pigeon is contained in W. B. Mershon, *The Passenger Pigeon* (New York: Outing Publishing Company, 1907), ix–xii; John James Audubon, “Ornithological Biography,” in Mershon, *Passenger Pigeon*, 28–29.
2. The famous Petoskey, Michigan, nesting of 1878 spanned an estimated 100,000 acres. Charles Bendire, “Life Histories of North American Birds,” in Mershon, *Passenger Pigeon*, 70.
3. B. H. Warren, *Report on the Birds of Pennsylvania, With Special Reference to the Food-Habits, Based on Over Four Thousand Stomach Examinations*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: E. K. Meyers, State Printer, 1890), 112.
4. John C. French, *The Passenger Pigeon in Pennsylvania: Its Remarkable History, Habits and Extinction, with Interesting Side Lights on the Folk and Forest Lore of the Alleghenian Region of the Old Keystone State* (Altoona, PA: Altoona Tribune Company, 1919), 15.
5. Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 1–55.
6. “Shooting Wild Pigeons in Iowa,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, September 21, 1867, 8.
7. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers, or, The Sources of the Susquehanna: A Descriptive Tale* (New York: Charles Wiley, 1823).
8. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline*, Maynard’s English Classic Series 125–26 (New York: Maynard, Merrill, and Co., 1893), 104. Available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/LonEvan.html>.
9. H. B. Roney, “Efforts to Check the Slaughter,” in Mershon, *Passenger Pigeon*, 91.
10. Price, *Flight Maps*, 25–27.
11. Audubon, “Ornithological Biography,” 36.
12. Price, *Flight Maps*, 36–41.
13. Warren, *Report on the Birds of Pennsylvania*, 112, 111.
14. Available at <http://passengerpigeon.org/>