

# UNNATURAL DISASTERS:

## The Last of a Species 100 Years Ago



Article by **Robert T. McElroy**

**Y**ears ago my wife Jean inherited a small library of books from a now deceased elderly aunt. Most of the books were published in the mid to late 19th century and I tended to consider them wall decorations. Recently I began to go through them and found two that had accounts that I thought would be of interest to modern conservationists. Both stories are in general well known, but they carry the wonder and urgency of someone who was there when it happened. This first feature focuses on the Passenger Pigeon; the next edition of *PRAIRIE WINGS* will highlight the views of Col. Richard Irving Dodge on the American Bison. They speak for themselves with minimal commentary needed.

The first is *BIRDS: Illustrated Natural History* written by a Rev J. G. Wood of London, published in 1871. He wrote very long anthologies (700+ pages) each on BIRDS, MAMMALS, and FISH. Below is a partial account of his description of the Passenger Pigeon. He recounts the stories of Wilson and Audubon without giving them a reference or even their first names. He undoubtedly meant Alexander Wilson known as the “the father of American ornithology.” Wilson was the first American to spend much

of his life devoted to the discovery and description of American birds. He published a natural history of birds titled *American Ornithology* in 1808 to 1814. It predates the work of the better-known Audubon by two decades. John James Audubon, lived from 1785 to 1851, also sought to document much of American bird life and published a color-plate book entitled *The Birds of America* in 1827 to 1839. By the time Wood published his stories from Wilson and Audubon they were forty to sixty years out of date and the Passenger Pigeon was in serious decline.

Wood begins: “Among the most extraordinary of birds, the Passenger Pigeon may take a very high rank, not on account of its size or beauty but on account of the extraordinary multitudes in which it sometimes migrates from one place to another. The scenes which take place during these migrations are so strange, so wonderful, and so entirely unlike any events on this side of the Atlantic that could not be believed but for the trustworthy testimony by which they are corroborated.”

Wood used the account of two “well known naturalists” Wilson and Audubon, without specific references. Wilson proceeds to describe a breeding place seen by himself in

Painting by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. Juvenile (left), male (center), female (right)

Kentucky, "which was several miles in breadth, was said to be nearly forty miles in length, and in which every tree was absolutely loaded with nests. All the smaller branches were destroyed by the birds, many of the large limbs were broken off and thrown on the ground, while no few of the grand forest trees themselves were killed as surely as if the axe had been employed for their destruction. The Pigeons had arrived about the tenth of April, and left it by the end of May." He then describes the systematic "harvesting" of the pigeons better described by Audubon in the following paragraphs.

Wilson witnessed such vast flights of pigeons that are hard for the modern reader to comprehend even when compared to roosting flights of Sandhill Cranes on the Platte River in Nebraska or Snow Geese returning to a wetland preserve in the Rainwater Basin. "When about one o'clock, the pigeons which I had observed flying the greater part of the morning northerly began to return in such immense numbers as I never before had witnessed. They were flying with great steadiness and rapidity, at a height beyond gunshot, in several strata deep, and so close together that could shot have reached them, one discharge would not have failed of bringing down several individuals. From right to left, as far as the eye could reach, the breadth of this vast procession extended, seeming everywhere equally crowded." Wilson reported this vast torrent of birds to be over several miles in width and

continued for over four hours.

"Wilson observed a column eight or ten miles in length appearing from Kentucky, high in the air, steering over to Indiana. The leaders of this great body would sometimes gradually vary their course, until it formed a large bend of more than a mile in diameter, those behind tracing the exact route of their predecessors. This would continue sometimes long after both extremities were beyond the reach of sight; so that the whole with its glittering undulations marked a space on the face of the heavens resembling the winding of a vast

and majestic river. When this bend became very great the birds, as if sensible of the unnecessarily circuitous course they were taking, suddenly changed their direction, so that what was in column before became an immense front, straightening all its indentures until it swept the heavens in one vast and infinitely extended line. Sometimes a hawk would make a sweep on a particular part of the column, when, almost as quick as lightning, that part shot downward out of the common track; but soon rising again, continued advancing at the same rate as before. This reflection was continued by those behind, who on arriving at this point dived down almost perpendicularly to a great depth, and rising, followed the exact path of those before him."

Audubon has also commented on the same circumstance stating; "but I cannot describe to you the extreme beauty of their aerial evolutions when a hawk chanced to press up upon the rear of a flock. At once, like a torrent, and with a noise like thunder, they rushed into a compact mass, pressing upon each other towards the center. In these almost solid masses, they darted forward in undulating and angular lines, descended and swept close over the earth with inconceivable velocity, mounted perpendicularly so as to resemble a vast column, and when high, were seen wheeling and twisting within their continued lines, which resembled the coils of a gigantic serpent."

Audubon described a nesting site in Kentucky: "consisting of great trees with little underbrush and estimated to be three miles wide and forty miles long. He reported few pigeons were then to be seen, but a great number of persons with horses and wagons, gun, and ammunition, had already established



**Extinction is forever.** The greatest flights of birds, likely the most abundant species, recorded in historic times over American forests will never grace our skies again. Our mission is to ensure that a *culture of conservation* prevents this unnatural fate from being imposed on other species by not just needless extermination and habitat destruction, but by lethal neglect and inaction.

encampments on the borders. Two farmers from the vicinity of Russellville, distant more than a hundred miles, had driven upwards of three hundred hogs to be fattened on the pigeons that were to be slaughtered. Here and there the people employed in plucking and salting what had already been killed were seen sitting in the midst of large piles of these birds. Many trees two feet in diameter I observed were broken off at no great distance from the ground; and the branches of many of the largest and tallest had given way, as if the forest had been swept by a tornado. Everything proved to me that the number of birds resorting to this part of the forest must be immense beyond conception. Suddenly there burst forth a general cry of: "Here they come." The noise which they made, though yet distant, reminded me of a hard gale at sea, passing through the rigging of a close-reefed vessel. As the birds arrived and passed over me I felt a current of air that surprised me. Thousands were soon knocked down by the pole-men; the birds continued to pour in; the fires were lighted, and a most magnificent as well as wonderful and almost terrifying sight presented itself. The pigeons arriving by thousands alighted everywhere, one above another, until solid masses as large as hogsheads were formed on the branches all round. Here and there the perches gave way with a crash and falling on the ground destroyed hundreds of the birds beneath, forcing down the dense groups with which every stick was loaded.

"It was scene of uproar and confusion; no one dared venture within the line of devastation, the picking up of the dead and wounded being left for next morning's employment. The pigeons were constantly coming, and it was past midnight before I perceived a decrease in the number of those that arrived. Towards the approach of day the noise in some

measure subsided; and by dawn all the pigeons that were able to fly were gone, having flown in a different direction than whence they came. The howling of the wolves now reached our ears, and the foxes, lynxes, cougars, bears, raccoons, and opossums were seen sneaking off, whilst eagles and hawks of different species, accompanied by a crowd of vultures, came to supplant them, and enjoy their share of the spoil."

Thus ends the account by Rev Wood. Below is an obituary of the Passenger Pigeon provided by the Smithsonian.

"The notable decrease of passenger pigeons started when professional hunters began netting and shooting the birds to sell in the city markets. Although even the Indians always had used the birds as food to some extent, the real slaughter began in the 1800s.

"There were no laws restricting the number of pigeons killed or the way they were taken. Because the birds were communal in habit, they were easily netted by using baited traps and decoys. The birds were shot at the nesting sites, young squabs were knocked out of nests with long sticks, and pots of burning sulphur were placed under the roosting trees so the fumes would daze the birds and they would fall to the ground. Hundreds of thousands of passenger pigeons were killed for private consumption and for sale on the market, where they often sold for as little as fifty cents a dozen. By 1850 the destruction of the pigeons was in full force, and by 1860 it was noticed that the numbers of birds seemed to be decreasing, but still the slaughter continued.

"One of the last large nestings of passenger pigeons occurred at Petoskey, Michigan, in 1878. Here 50,000 birds per day were killed and this rate continued for nearly five months. When the adult birds that survived this

massacre attempted second nestings at new sites, they were soon located by the professional hunters and killed before they had a chance to raise any young. The passenger pigeon's technique of survival had been based on mass tactics. There had been safety in its large flocks, which often numbered hundreds of thousands of birds. When a flock of this size established itself in an area, the number of local animal predators (such as wolves, foxes, weasels, and hawks) was so small compared to the total number of birds that little damage could be inflicted on the flock as a whole.

"This colonial way of life became very dangerous when man became a predator on the flocks. When the birds were massed together, especially at a nesting site, it was easy for man to slaughter them in such huge numbers that there were not enough birds left to successfully reproduce the species."

The wanton slaughter of the birds devastated their numbers, and following that the removal of forests for farmland and timbering of much of what remained eliminated or so altered their habitat that prospects for recovery to even low numbers were rendered impossible, especially in a century when almost everything that could be shot was shot.

There were no organized, and few individual, efforts to save imperiled species. In fact, it wasn't until 102 years after Wood published this book on Birds that Congress passed the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

**Martha, the last known Passenger Pigeon, died in the Cincinnati Zoo in September 1914. In her last year of life 100 years ago, she was the last of a prominent North American species. Magnificent flocks filled the heavens with flights resembling "the winding of vast and majestic" rivers.**