

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#3 THE PASSENGER PIGEON

Ectopistes migratorius



♂ PASSENGER PIGEON

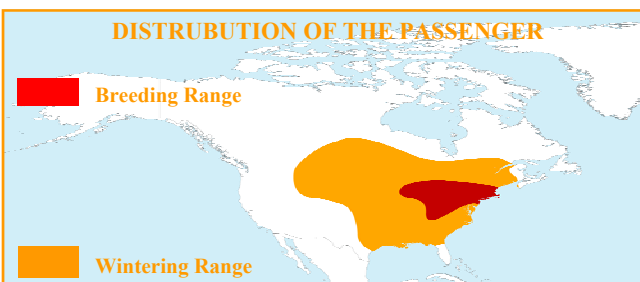
The Passenger Pigeon was once the most common bird in North America. It is estimated there were as many as five billion of these pigeons at the time Europeans colonized North America. They lived in enormous flocks, and during migration, it was possible to see flocks of them a mile (1.6km) wide and 300 miles (500km) long, taking several days to pass and containing up to a billion birds. During the 19th century, the species went from being one of the most abundant birds in the world to extinction. At the time, Passenger Pigeons had one of the largest flocks of any animal, second only to the Desert Locust.

Some reduction in numbers occurred as a result of loss of habitat, when the Europeans started settling further inland. However, the primary factor emerged when pigeon meat was commercialized as a cheap food for slaves and the poor in the 19th century, resulting in hunting on a massive scale. There was a slow decline in their numbers between about 1800 and 1870, followed by a catastrophic decline between 1870 and 1890. In 1896, the final flock of 250,000 were killed by so-called American sportsmen even though they knew it was the last flock of that size. Afterwards Passenger Pigeons became rare and passed beyond the point of recovery. "Martha", thought to be the world's last Passenger Pigeon, died on September 1st, 1914 in Cincinnati, Ohio, USA.



♀ PASSENGER PIGEON

The extinction of these birds is the result of multiple causes. Previously, the primary cause was held to be the commercial exploitation of pigeon meat on a massive scale. However, current examination focuses on the pigeon's loss of habitat. Even prior to colonization, native Americans occasionally used pigeons for meat. In the early 1800s, commercial hunters began netting



and shooting the birds to sell in the city markets as food, as live targets for trap_shooting and even as agricultural fertiliser and pig food.

Pigeons were shipped by the railway wagon-load to the Eastern cities. In New York, in 1805, a pair of pigeons sold for two cents. Slaves and servants in 18th and 19th century America often saw no other meat. By the 1850s, it was noticed that the numbers of birds seemed to be decreasing, but still the slaughter continued, accelerating to an even greater level as more railroads and telegraphs, both of which allowed the species to be tracked and hunted more easily, were set up after the American Civil War. Three million pigeons were shipped by a single hunter in the year 1878.

Another significant reasons for their extinction was deforestation. One of the bird's primary methods for the continuation of its species was to travel and reproduce in prodigious numbers. This resulted in predators being satiated before any substantial negative impact was made in the bird's population. As their numbers decreased along with their habitat, they could no longer use this survival mechanism. Many ecologists believe the birds required a high population density to continue as a species, once this was disturbed the birds could no longer survive as a species.

Possibly, the birds may have suffered from Newcastle Disease, an infectious bird disease that was introduced to North America; although the disease itself was not identified until 1926, it has been suggested as one of the factors leading to the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon.

Attempts to revive the species by breeding the surviving captive birds were not successful. The Passenger Pigeon was a colonial and gregarious bird practicing communal roosting and communal breeding, and needed large numbers for optimum breeding conditions. It was impossible to re-establish the species with just a few captive birds, and the small captive flocks weakened and died. Since no accurate data were recorded, it is only possible to give estimates on the size and population of these nesting areas. Each site may have covered many thousands of acres and the birds were so congested in these areas that hundreds of nests could be counted in each tree. One large nesting in Wisconsin was reported as covering 850 square miles, and the number of birds nesting there was estimated to be around 136,000,000. Their technique of survival had been based on mass tactics. There was safety in large flocks which often numbered hundreds of thousands of birds.

When a flock of this huge a size established itself in an area, the number of local animal predators (such as wolves, foxes, weasels and hawks) were

so small, compared to the total number of birds, that little damage would be inflicted on the flock as a whole. This colonial way of life and communal breeding became a very dangerous strategy when man became a predator of the flocks. When the Passenger Pigeons were massed together, especially at a huge nesting site, it was easy for man to slaughter them in such great numbers that there were not enough birds left to successfully reproduce the species. As the flocks dwindled in size there was a breakdown of social facilitation, which doomed them to disappear. The extinction of the Passenger Pigeon aroused public interest in the conservation movement and resulted in new laws and practices which have prevented many other species from becoming extinct.

The last fully authenticated record of a wild bird was near Sargents, Pike, County, Ohio on March 22nd, 1900, although many unconfirmed sightings were reported in the first decade of the 20th century. From 1909 to 1912, a reward was offered for a living specimen; the fact that the reward was never claimed indicates that they were more likely than not gone in the wild by that point. However, unconfirmed sightings continued up to about 1930. Reports of Passenger Pigeons sightings kept coming in from Arkansas and Louisiana, in groups of tens and twenties, until the first decade of the 20th century.

In 1857, a bill was tabled in the Ohio State Legislature seeking protection for the Passenger Pigeon. A Select Committee of the Senate filed a report stating "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".

Fifty-seven years later, on September 1st, 1914, "Martha", the last known Passenger Pigeon, died in the Cincinnati Zoo. She was frozen in a block of ice and sent to the Smithsonian Institution where she was skinned and mounted. Currently, Martha is in the museum's archived collection, and not on display. She was named after Martha Washington.



Mounted specimen of a male in the Boston Museum of Science
Photo: C. Horwitz

Reference: *Wikipedia*—the free encyclopaedia

DID YOU KNOW.....the American Turkey Vulture helps human engineers detect cracked or broken underground fuel pipes? The leaking fuel smells like their favourite food...carrion, and the clustered birds show the repair gangs where the leak is.