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Rick Wright

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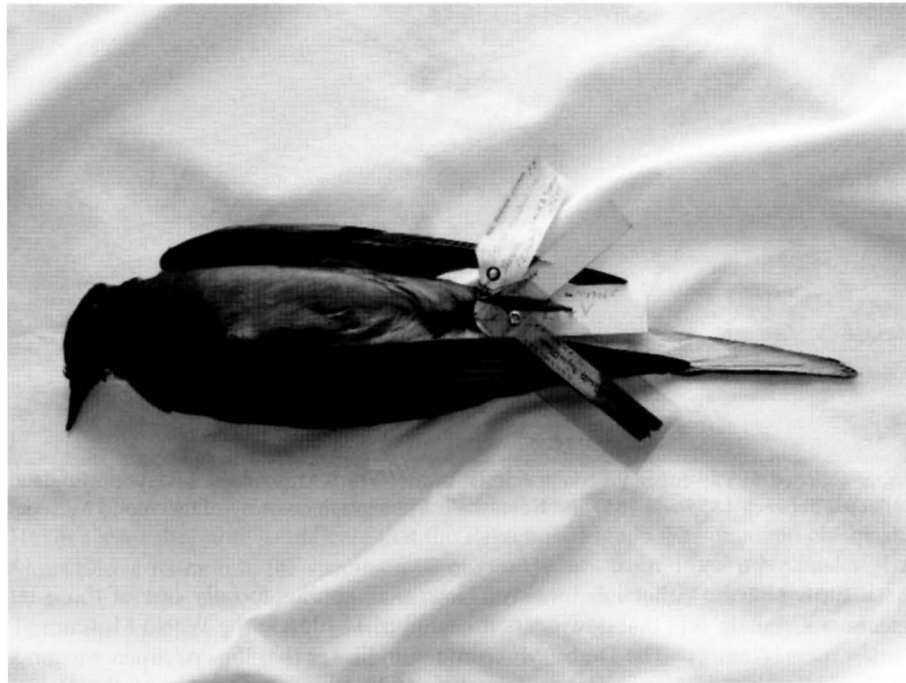
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Hayden, Tristram, and a Pigeon from "Nebraska"

Rick Wright
128 Evans Road
Bloomfield, NJ 07003
birdaz@gmail.com

Just as the Passenger Pigeon was in life the commonest land bird in North America, the species remains in extinction the most frequently encountered "vanished bird" in museum drawers and glass-faced cabinets around the world. Fifty years ago, Paul Hahn (1963) tallied just over 1,500 extant specimens; many others have come to light since then, and no doubt hundreds more still lurk in attics, on dusty shelves, and at internet auction sites.

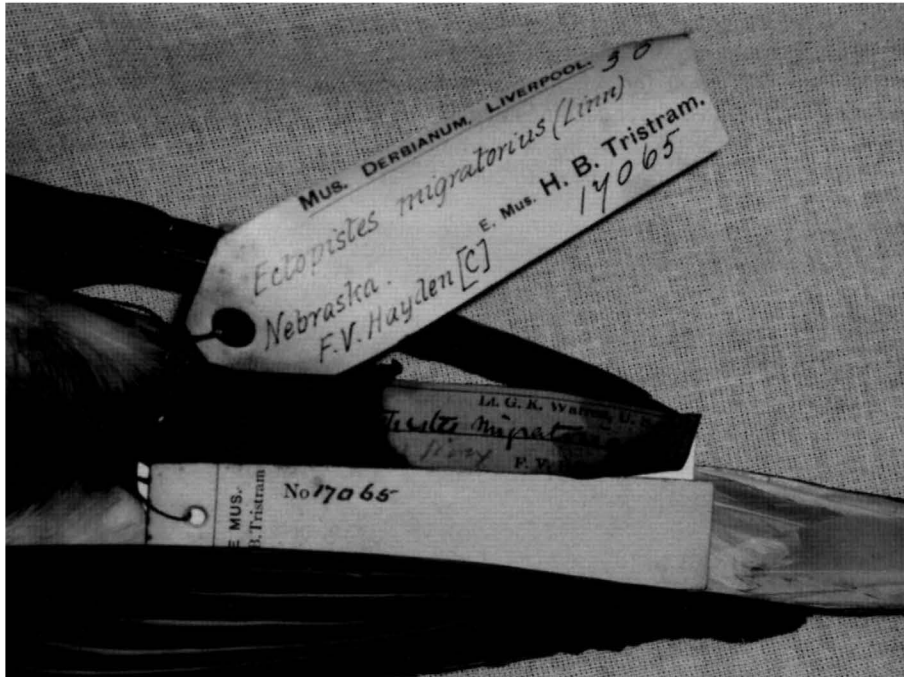
As abundant as the old skins and mounts are, however, the Passenger Pigeon's specimen record is less eloquent than it could be. Only relatively few were intentionally collected for scientific purposes, and those preserved as trophies or curiosities are almost never accompanied by any kind of useful data. That holds true especially for birds taken in the westernmost part of the pigeon's historic range, including Nebraska (see Sharpe et al. 2001).



Passenger Pigeon specimen in the World Museum in Liverpool, England, collected between 1855 and 1857 in "Nebraska". Photograph courtesy of the World Museum, Liverpool.

Once “quite abundant” along the Missouri River (Ducey 2000), Nebraska’s Passenger Pigeons are now represented by specimens in the collections of the Hastings Municipal Museum (Johnson County; Sharpe et al. 2001) and the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (Lincoln County, 1887; Arctos). Nebraska material may be held, too, in a more surprising institution, the World Museum in Liverpool, England.

Henry O. Forbes, director of what was then still called the Derby Museum, catalogued the museum’s columbids in the *Bulletin* for 1900 (Forbes and Robinson 1900). He listed ten specimens of the Passenger Pigeon in the collections; the only locality information provided is the cryptic “United States (Columbia, Old Soldiers’ Home, October; Nebraska).”



Label attached to Passenger Pigeon specimen in the World Museum in Liverpool, England, collected between 1855 and 1857 in “Nebraska”. Photograph courtesy of the World Museum, Liverpool.

As it turns out, the collection locality “Nebraska” applies to only one of those ten specimens, a male skin that now bears the number T17065 in the World Museum (T. Parker, pers. comm.). The Derby Museum tag indicates that the specimen was once in the collection of Henry Baker Tristram (1822-1906), a founder of the British Ornithologists’ Union and one of the most famous naturalists of his day (see Sclater 1908). Tristram’s more than 17,000 bird skins (Tristram 1889) were purchased by the Liverpool Museum in 1896 (World Museum); as there is only a single Passenger Pigeon listed in Tristram’s catalogue, it must be the bird now in the World Museum.

Still attached to this pigeon's tarsus is its original label, now torn and grease-stained, identifying it as specimen number 4857 collected during one of the expeditions to Nebraska and Dakota led by Gouverneur K. Warren between 1855 and 1857 (see Warren 1875). Specimens of no fewer than 186 bird species—as then classified—were secured on those journeys and later catalogued by the geologist and naturalist, Ferdinand V. Hayden; among them were three skins of the Passenger Pigeon (Hayden 1875).

In the introduction to his catalogue, Hayden notes that Warren's expeditions discovered "a number of rare or entirely new species ... in all departments of natural history. The specimens are now deposited in the museum of the Smithsonian Institution" (Hayden 1875). The Liverpool pigeon did enter the Smithsonian collections (Baird 1858), but it was obviously not among the expedition's cimelia, and was sold or otherwise disposed of as surplus sometime after 1858, to make its way, directly or through other hands, into Tristram's cabinet. The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History now houses no specimens of the species taken by Hayden or other members of Warren's staff (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History).

Hayden (1875) gives no locality information for the three passenger pigeons he collected, contenting himself with a general statement of the species' range in "North America to high central plains"; Tristram (1889), even less eloquently, simply allocates the species to "North America." Both the modern label and the catalogue of the World Museum (T. Parker, pers. comm.), however, confidently assign the skin to the present-day state of Nebraska. It is important to recall that when this Passenger Pigeon was collected in the mid-1850s, Nebraska Territory still included vast areas to the north and west of the state's current boundaries, and a number of the extant specimens from Warren's Nebraska journeys are known to have been collected in what is now South Dakota or Iowa (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History).

Though the original specimen label of the Passenger Pigeon now in Liverpool does not include a date of collection, Baird (1858) informs us that this and a second male were collected by Hayden on May 3, 1856, near the beginning of the first expedition on which the geologist accompanied Warren. Hayden's label also records a locality. Apparently in the collector's own hand, in faded pencil much obscured by grease staining, the tag reads "Above the Mouth of Big Sioux" (abbreviated by Baird [1858] to "Mouth of Big Sioux").

The Big Sioux River flows through South Dakota and Iowa, joining the Missouri where those two states and Nebraska meet. If we are to understand Hayden's locality note to indicate that the Passenger Pigeon was obtained on the Big Sioux above its mouth, the specimen is, obviously, not from modern Nebraska. But if, as seems the more likely construction, the naturalist meant to describe a place above the mouth of the Big Sioux on the Missouri River, then it remains unclear from the specimen label alone which present-day state—Nebraska or South Dakota—can claim the record.

Unfortunately, nothing in the published accounts of the two expeditions on which Hayden accompanied Warren to the Nebraska Territory helps answer the question. Hayden, one of the nineteenth century's most important American geologists, naturally devoted more space and more detail to the fossil organisms than

to the extant animals in his catalogue; no actual locality is given for any of the birds collected on Warren's explorations (Hayden 1875), and in his "Geology and Natural History of the Upper Missouri", Hayden (1862) contents himself with giving only a general statement of the Passenger Pigeon's range in the West.

Neither does Warren's narrative of the 1856 expedition provide the sort of detail that might allow us to trace the naturalist's movements on May 3. The expedition's steamboat had left St. Louis in mid-April of that year, and reached the mouth of the James River about May 13 (Warren 1875). Warren describes the party's progress up to that point as having been "quite rapid," and so it is obvious that the expedition members devoted considerable time to collecting and other scientific work in the ten days it took to cover the approximately 72 river miles between the mouth of the Big Sioux and that of the James.

Bird skins have their own fates, and we will never be able to retrace every point in the history of this Passenger Pigeon from "Nebraska." But in this year of the sad commemoration of the death of the last Passenger Pigeon (on September 1, 1914, in the Cincinnati Zoo), a single, now little-known specimen of a species extinct for a hundred years links institutions, scientists, and events that we might otherwise never think of as connected.

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