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The Palimpsest

Volume 16 | Number 6

Article 2

6-1-1935

Vanished Hosts

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Recommended Citation

Nauman, E D. "Vanished Hosts." *The Palimpsest* 16 (1935), 169-173.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol16/iss6/2>

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THE PALIMPSEST

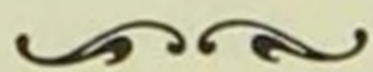
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVI

ISSUED IN JUNE 1935

No. 6

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Vanished Hosts

John Bradbury, an English naturalist who accompanied Wilson P. Hunt's expedition up the Missouri River in 1811, observed large numbers of passenger pigeons near the mouth of the Nodaway River. In a few hours he shot two hundred and seventy-one.

"This species of pigeon associates in prodigious flocks," he wrote. "One of these flocks, when on the ground, will cover an area of several acres in extent, and the birds are so close to each other that the ground can scarcely be seen. This phalanx moves through the woods with considerable celerity, picking up, as it passes along, everything that will serve as food. It is evident that the foremost ranks must be the most successful, and nothing will remain for the hindermost. But that all may have an equal chance, the instant that any rank becomes the last, it rises, and flying over the whole flock, alights exactly ahead of the foremost. They succeed each other with so much rapidity,

that there is a continued stream of them in the air; and a side view of them exhibits the appearance of the segment of a large circle, moving through the woods. I observed that they cease to look for food a considerable time before they become the last rank, but strictly adhere to their regulations, and never rise until there is none behind them."

The migrations of the passenger pigeons were determined by food supply instead of seasonal changes. Although they seem to have been most numerous in the forests of the Ohio Valley, huge flocks visited the wooded portions of Iowa. E. D. Nauman, writing in *Iowa Bird Life*, has described these vanished hosts as he observed them in Keokuk County many years ago.

A well known ornithologist said, "The passenger pigeon was in some respects the finest pigeon the world has seen." Many careful observers have considered it, in its day, as the most numerous bird in the world. Now it is extinct. The writer of these lines has the fortunate distinction of having seen hundreds of thousands of these birds with his own eyes. And this was in our own State of Iowa.

The passenger pigeon was about the size of our domestic pigeon, but it was longer and very graceful in form, and was most handsome in coloration.

In the sunshine the feathers of its head, neck, and back showed about all the colors of the rainbow. The specimens in museums give but a meager impression of the appearance of the live bird.

These pigeons inhabited the timbered area of eastern North America. However, when nuts, acorns, and the seeds of trees, which constituted their natural food, became scarce, they made excursions into fields of grain; and, by reason of their immense numbers, they did considerable damage to farm crops. At the time of the earliest settlements, and for many years thereafter, the great multitudes of wild pigeons, as they were commonly called, made such an impression upon the minds of men that the extinction of the species seemed an impossibility. Nevertheless, it occurred. They lived, migrated, and nested in and over these great forests in enormous colonies. Their roosts and nesting areas were anywhere from a few miles to fifty miles in extent and located mostly in the larger hardwood forests of the Middle West. Single trees have been found supporting over a hundred nests. The rule with the wild pigeons was to lay only two eggs at a nesting, but to nest three or four times a year.

I have examined the writings of about fifty observers, and they all agree in statements declaring that the numbers of the wild pigeons were vast

beyond the comprehension of man. Some careful observers have placed estimates of single flocks or colonies at from twenty million to two billion birds. When destruction came, however, it came by the hand of the white man, and in a hundred different ways. The great forests were mostly destroyed; the pigeons were enticed into open fields by proffered food and were netted by thousands; their nests were robbed; they were shot, clubbed, and trapped in every conceivable way. Their nesting colonies were broken up by squab hunters, and when the pigeons moved a hundred miles or more to try again, they were immediately set upon by other hunters. Any bird thus systematically prevented from raising its young will soon become extinct from that cause alone.

My own observations of the passenger pigeon were confined to southeastern Iowa. This being mostly a prairie State, I do not know that the pigeons ever found enough forest area here to establish a nesting colony. We saw them in their migrations. These were largely irregular. In some seasons we would see them flying northward for two or three days in April or May. Perhaps the next year they would not be seen in the spring at all, but in October or November instead.

As a rule, during the migration, flocks would pass over all day long. They would form in great

"windrows" of pigeons across the sky from horizon to horizon, sometimes in lines not so long, but always at right angles with the direction in which they were flying. Between these windrows of pigeons a strip of the sky could usually be seen. The flocks were frequently so dense they obscured the sun like passing clouds. When the weather was calm, the pigeons maintained a very nearly level and uniform elevation throughout their lines, but in windy weather the lines would twist and writhe like huge serpents in the sky. At such times one could best see their remarkable colors scintillating in the sunshine. At night they settled down in the trees along the streams to roost.

A tract of forest several hundred yards south of our cabin home was a favorite roosting place for the pigeons. In this timber stood an immense red oak tree that had weathered the storms of four centuries. This gigantic tree, the patriarch of all the surrounding forest, was the center of the roosting place, and many of its great limbs were broken down by the weight of the pigeons.

At every migration their numbers became smaller, until about 1880 we saw the last of them. The final known survivor died in the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens in 1914. No one will ever again see a live passenger pigeon.

E. D. NAUMAN