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Philip A. Du Mont
State University of Iowa

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THE PASSENGER PIGEON AS A FORMER IOWA BIRD

PHILIP A. DU MONT

The Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) is believed to have been the most abundant species of bird in the world. It formerly ranged, as a breeding bird, over all of the wooded areas east of the Rocky Mountains and from southern Canada to Kansas, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania. During the winter months the great hordes wandered as far south as the Gulf states in search of food.

It is improbable that the migratory flights of the Passenger Pigeon in Iowa ever approximated in size the stupendous flight of these birds as witnessed by Alexander Wilson near Shelbyville, Kentucky, about 1806. He estimated a flock that passed him to have been two hundred and forty miles long, a mile wide, and to contain about two and a quarter billion of these pigeons. The flight was nearly four hours in passing.

An indication of the number of these birds formerly found in Iowa is contained in an account by E. D. Nauman (1924). During the late '60's he observed the pigeons about an old cotton-wood tree on their farm, about 5 miles from the present site of Keota, Keokuk County. Concerning these observations he relates, "Upon this tree during migration time the passenger pigeon used to alight and roost by the thousands. So numerous were they that the upper branches occasionally gave way under their weight and for a few minutes confusion reigned, the beating of the birds' wings sounding not unlike the roll of distant thunder. Then the noise gradually died away as the pigeons found another resting place, smoothing their ruffled plumage, and settled down for the night.

"The number of these birds was almost incredible. For days at a time one could not look up at the sky without seeing some of them in flight and occasionally during the migration season there were so many that they obscured the sun and cast a shadow upon the earth like passing clouds."

R. M. Anderson (1907) related that his mother had told of immense flocks of pigeons which visited Winneshiek County in the '50's, alighting in the timber, where the boys killed large numbers at night by knocking them from the branches with sticks.

Another account of the abundance and final disappearance of the Passenger Pigeon in Iowa, is told by Prof. Herbert Osborn (1905) as follows: "The last great flight of this bird (*Ectopistes migratorius*) in Iowa was probably about the year 1868 or 1869. I remember the enormous clouds of pigeons that swept across the sky for many days during the spring of one year. Often a continuous flock of them would pass, the line extending as far as the eye could see in every direction and the numbers absolutely beyond calculation. A year or two later, I remember there was another flight of less proportion but from that time on their appearance was less and less frequent. I think no such flight has occurred in the last twenty-five years and even single birds have become quite unknown. This is true of much of the Mississippi valley outside of Iowa and the disappearance has been the occasion for much speculation. We must look for causes outside the state, for no conditions within could account for it. Evidently some wholesale interference with the large rookeries where the flocks were wont to gather must be credited with a disappearance so complete and widespread."

Another observation of the great flights mentioned by Osborn is found in the field note-books of John Williams, a former resident of Coralville, Johnson County. He noted that in the fall of 1870 thousands of the pigeons were seen at Coralville.

To the early settlers, who had seen these birds in such multitudes, it was inconceivable that their numbers could ever be diminished. At first people were wont to explain this disappearance by some mysterious catastrophe, as is suggested in this excerpt from the History of Buchanan County, Iowa, and Its People (Vol. 1, p. 35). "Early settlers tell of enormous flocks of wild pigeons that for several years visited this county and then for a strange unaccountable reason failed to return and have never revisited these haunts since and never could be traced. . . . In June, 1858, the sportsmen of Independence were having rare sport shooting them, thousands having congregated in the fields about town, the Cobb pasture just west of Independence being literally alive with them."

It is unnecessary to relate here the wholesale destruction of these birds by the use of nets in the roosts and on their breeding grounds. Such appalling figures of the quantity of pigeons shipped from the large nesting areas in Michigan are contained in the accounts by Mershon (1907) and Forbush (1927), that no doubt exists as to the causes of their extermination.

By 1880 this bird was sufficiently reduced in numbers in Iowa to

warrant a record of each subsequent occurrence. A number of these records have been taken from earlier published accounts. However, additional observations heretofore unrecorded, have been secured by the writer through correspondence and the examination of field notes recorded by early bird students.

- 1880—Johnson county. "September 7th. Quite plenty here now." (Note-book of John Williams).
- 1881—Poweshiek county. "I saw two flocks and killed six birds about 1881 (Lynds Jones)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).
- 1882—Johnson county. "February 11th. Some flocks seen here." (Note-book of John Williams). [This is an exceptionally early date.]
- 1883—Lee county. "Last year common (in fall) at Keokuk (Curren)." Widmann (Birds of Missouri, 1907).
- 1884—Johnson county. "March 22nd. First seen here; May 2nd. A big flock in the timber; May 7th. One collected near Coralville, and mounted by my wife." (Note-book of John Williams).
- Chickasaw county. "In the fall of 1884 the bulk of the Passenger Pigeons departed from Williamstown, Iowa, September 15, and the last was seen there September 27." Cooke (Bird Migration in the Mississippi Valley, 1888).
- 1885—Johnson county. "May 3rd. I saw a solitary bird." (Note-book of John Williams.)
- 1887—Polk county. "In a letter of August 5, 1931. Charles R. Keyes stated that the last wild pigeon was killed at Des Moines in 1887." Du Mont (Birds of Polk County, Iowa, 1931).
- [1888]—Blackhawk county. "Our latest record is eighteen years old (Peck)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).
- 1888—Clark county, Missouri. "October 31. Mr. Jasper Blines of Alexandria, Clark Co., Mo., writes in *Forest and Stream*, vol. 31, p. 343: 'During the whole year I have seen but few passenger pigeons. They were in former years very numerous here and could be seen in flocks composed of millions every spring and fall.'" Widmann (Birds of Missouri, 1907). [This locality is near the southern Iowa state line.]
- 1891—Des Moines county. "Last record, a flock of about twenty on Mississippi between Burlington and Dallas in fall of 1891 (Bartsch, Iowa Orn., ii, 4, 1895, 1-2)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).
- 1893—Jackson county. "March 23. Saw one small flock and two single birds." Letter from H. J. Giddings of Sabula, October 11, 1932.
- Franklin county. "A flock of about twenty birds was seen frequently in Mayne's Grove during the spring of 1893 and one was found dead; this is my only record (Shoemaker)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).
- 1894—Jackson county. "March 24. Small flock. None in 1895." Letter from H. J. Giddings of Sabula, October 11, 1932.
- Lee county. "April 15. Mr. E. S. Currier sees ten pigeons at Keokuk, his first since 1888." Widmann (Birds of Missouri, 1907).
- 1895—Winneshiek county. "I have never seen this species. It was very common 15-20 years ago. A farmer tells me of seeing a small flock in April, 1895. He told me that it used to be seen in immense flocks in

- April and in the fall, remaining about two weeks. A few remained to breed (Smith)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).
- 1896—Jackson county. "April 18. A small flock, the last seen." Letter from H. J. Giddings of Sabula, October 11, 1932.
- Lee county. "May 19. The same [E. S. Currier] sees one among doves, and again one October 18 of the same year." Widmann (Birds of Missouri, 1907).
- Lee county. "Saw a single female May 19, 1896, and shot a single young male Sept. 7, same year. They are said to have been common in 1884 (Praeger)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907); "September 17. Mr. W. Praeger shoots a male near Keokuk." Widmann (Birds of Missouri, 1907); "Iowa, Lee County, September 7, William G. Praeger shot an immature male near Keokuk (R. M. Anderson, 'Birds of Iowa,' 1907, p. 239) (See also Charles B. Cory, 'Birds of Illinois and Wisconsin,' 1909, p. 446, where the date is given as September 17)." Forbush (Birds of Massachusetts, 1927).
- 1897—Johnson county, Nebraska. "August 17. A flock of 75-100 is seen twenty-five miles west of our state line in Johnson Co., Neb." Widmann (Birds of Missouri, 1907). [This locality is a short distance from the southwestern corner of Iowa.]
- Floyd county. "The last authentic record is by [Clement L.] Webster, in 1897. The species probably had disappeared from the county by 1900." Fenton (Birds of Floyd County, Iowa, 1923-24).
- 1899—Lee county. "Last ones seen May 14, 1899 (Currier)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).
- Polk county. "I saw a flock of twenty-five or thirty, the fall of 1899, feeding on the berries of some hawthorne trees, in a pasture . . . in northwest Des Moines. I was very near them for an hour or more. They finally flew into the heavy timber north of the pasture." Letter from Lester P. Fagen of Des Moines.¹
- 1901—Linn county. "Two seen in May, 1901, a couple miles below Cedar Rapids, the only ones I ever saw in Iowa, (Berry)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).¹
- 1903—Kossuth county. "Three were seen April 6, 1903 (Bingaman)." Anderson (Birds of Iowa, 1907).

The few published records relative to their former breeding in Iowa, indicate that the Passenger Pigeon bred only in the northern third of the state and principally in the northeastern portion.

Elliott Coues (Birds of the Northwest, 1877) says that, "Excepting along the Missouri and the principal tributaries of that great river, the wild pigeon does not ordinarily exceed the general line of the *wooded* country to pass out upon the bare plains beyond. I found one setting June 7, [1856-Dakota] and heard that many build farther south near Sioux City."

John Krider related in his "Forty Years' Notes of a Field Ornithologist" (1879), that he had found the Passenger Pigeon in Iowa in 1875, breeding in Benson Grove, near the present site of

¹ Either the date or authenticity may be questionable.

Leland, Winnebago County. He found them at Clear Lake, Cerro Gordo County, as well, where they were more numerous.

Keyes and Williams (*Birds of Iowa*, 1889) stated that large flocks occasionally appeared in different parts of the state. A few were usually seen each spring, and a few pairs sometimes bred within the limits of the state. A nest with one egg was taken at Charles City, Floyd County, June 14, 1879.

J. A. Spurrell (*Wilson Bull.*, XXIX, 1917, p. 157) related as follows concerning the Passenger Pigeon in Sac County: "Mr. Tiberghien said that he had seen flocks of five hundred in buckwheat fields in the fall. The last one he shot was in September, 1879. My father saw one near the 'Goosepond' in the summer of 1875, and a flock of about twenty nested in the young grove about the home place one mile north of Wall Lake one spring between 1880 and 1885."

During a recent conversation with H. J. Giddings, a pioneer resident of Sabula, he informed the writer that one nest of this pigeon was found by him at Sabula, Jackson County, before 1880. Mr. Giddings said that the last great flight through Iowa was in 1869, when the sky was filled with continuous flocks, the long lines of birds extending at right angles to the line of flight. He related seeing the pigeons alight in a tree in such numbers to break the branches. The principal food of these birds in Iowa appeared to be the acorns of the black oak.

In an article by T. Martin Trippe, "Notes on the Birds of Southern Iowa." (*Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History*, XV, 1872-73) he observed that the Passenger Pigeon occurred regularly in Decatur and Mahaska counties, chiefly in the spring and fall, sometimes in large flocks. They were not observed to breed.

J. A. Allen, in his "Notes on the Birds Observed in Western Iowa in the Months of July, August, and September" (*Memoirs of the Boston Natural History*, I, Part IV, 1868) does not mention the Passenger Pigeon, thereby adding strength to the belief that these birds nested only in the extreme northern part of the state.

Exceedingly few Iowa-taken specimens of this pigeon are preserved. The writer has recently examined practically all collections containing Iowa birds, and, while a number of specimens without data, or from areas outside the state, were found, only the thirteen specimens listed below are known to have been taken in the state.

Elliott Coues (1877) listed two males, Nos. 4857 and 4856, as contained in the collection of the U. S. National Museum, Wash-

ington, D. C. These specimens were secured at the "Mouth of Big Sioux" River, Woodbury County, Iowa, May 3, 1856, by Dr. F. V. Hayden, a member of Lieutenant Warren's Expedition.²

The Davenport Public Museum has two mounted specimens, Nos. 10334 and 10333, taken by Dr. W. L. Allen in Scott County. No date is recorded.

There are three Passenger Pigeons in the Shaffer collection of birds, contained in the Jefferson County Library, Fairfield. These specimens were probably all secured by Dr. J. M. Shaffer in Jefferson county before 1880. One is a juvenal, a plumage seldom seen in mounted groups.

Dr. Witmer Stone of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, wrote me recently that there are two specimens in their collections taken by Dr. W. L. Abbott, one September 7, 1879, in Mitchell County, the other, June, 1881, in Palo Alto County.³

In a recent communication from O. M. Greenwood of Manchester, Iowa, he informed me that he has a specimen taken by his father, Dr. Wm. H. B. Greenwood, in Delaware County, on May 10, 1881. It is a male, and, according to Greenwood, in beautiful plumage. A second specimen, taken by the elder Greenwood in the same locality, was disposed of some years ago to Dr. Frank Chapman, Curator of Birds, American Museum of Natural History, New York City.³

The Museum of Natural History, University of Iowa, has in its collection of mounted birds, the specimen mentioned above secured by John Williams, near Coralville, Johnson County, on May 7, 1884.

The specimen secured by W. E. Praeger, September 17, 1896, in Lee County, is now contained in the Museum of Zoology, Ann Arbor, Michigan.³

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² Specimens not examined by the writer.

³ Specimen not examined by the writer.

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STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA,
IOWA CITY, IOWA.