

The Passanger or Wild Pigeon.

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DESCRIPTION.

Distinguishing Characters.—Size large, length 15 to 17 inches; tail long and pointed, length, 8.50 inches; resembling in general appearance the Mourning or Carolina Dove, but much larger, and flight said not to be accompanied by a whistling sound.

Adult Male.—Upper parts bluish slate color, middle of the back brown-er; sides of the head bluish slate-color of the same shade as the crown, chin somewhat paler; no black mark behind the ears; wing-coverts slaty-blue like the rump, the tertials and their coverts browner and with black spots; primaries blackish and externally margined with brownish; central pair of tail-feathers blackish, all the other white or pearly white at end half, becoming grayer toward the base, where they are marked with black and often chestnut; underparts rich brownish pink, becoming white on the lower abdomen and under tail-coverts; chin, upper throat and sides of the throat bluish slate-color, sides of the neck like breast but with iridescent reflections spreading to the hindneck; bill black, feet reddish.

Adult Female.—Differs from the male in having the middle of the back, crown and wings brownish (the rump, however, remaining bluish slate), more black marks in the wings, the chin much whiter, the underparts paler, brownish with little or no pinkish tinge, the iridescence at the side of the neck less pronounced, the central pair of tail-feathers brown-er, the others somewhat grayer.

Young.—Young birds of both sexes resemble in plumage the adult female, but the feathers of the crown, foreback, sides of the breast and sides of the neck, the wing-coverts and tertials are tipped with whitish or brownish, the primaries are broadly edged and tipped with rusty brown, the outer tail-feathers are grayer.

Remarks.—The only other member of the order Cloumbae for which Passanger Pigeon could be mistaken is the Mourning or Carolina Dove. The pigeon, however, is much larger, the adult male is much pinker below, and in both sexes of the pigeon the rump is bluish slate instead of brownish as in the dove's while the pigeon's outer tail-feathers are broadly tipped with white and the dove's more narrowly with gray. Furthermore, the small, black mark present behind the ear in the dove is wanting in the pigeon. (See Educational Leaflet No. 2, The Mourning Dove.)

Alexander Wilson, the "Father of American Ornithology," estimated that a flock of wild pigeons seen by him near Frankfort, Ken., about 1808, contained at least 2,230,272,000 individuals. Audubon writes that in 1805 he saw schooners at the wharves in New York City loaded in bulk with wild pigeons, caught up the Hudson River, which were sold at one cent each.

The late George N. Lawrence tells of the great flights of pigeons that annually passed over New York City as late as 1850. He says: "We could see flocks consisting of from twenty-five to over a hundred pigeons come sweeping down over the tree tops seemingly at a speed of seventy-five miles an hour. The flocks followed each other in quick succession. On the present site of General Grant's tomb was an old country-seat known as 'Claremont.' From the top of this house, during one of these great flights of pigeons, the owner killed a hundred or more one morning. The writer, during the past forty years has studied the birds of the vicinity of New York, and in all that period has seen only one live wild pigeon. The writer's father, who lived at Tarrytown, N. Y., in his boyhood, has often told of the enormous flocks of pigeons he saw there, so great that in passing overhead

the sun was darkened as by a rain-cloud and the noise of their wings was like thunder."

To-day the wild pigeon is so rare that the observation of a single individual is considered noteworthy.

The species continued abundant until about 1860, when, as a result of increasing slaughter for food, it began rapidly to diminish in numbers, and no large flocks has been recorded since 1888. Frank M. Chapman tells me that as late as July, 1881, he saw wild pigeons used in large numbers at a trap-shooting tournament held near New York City. The birds had been netted in the West and were often so helpless from their confinement in foul cages that they were unable to fly. William Brewster writes that in 1876 or 1877 there was a pigeon-nesting near Petosky, Mich., which was twenty-eight miles long and averaged four miles in width. The disappearance of so abundant a creature in so comparatively short time is a surprising illustration of man's power in the animal world, when, for any reason, his forces are directed toward a certain end.

Wild pigeons lived in flocks at all seasons, nesting, roosting and feeding in enormous bodies. Wilson mentions a nesting colony which was several miles in breadth and upwards of miles in extent! The birds chose preferably beech woods, and as many as ninety nests have been counted in a single tree. The flock previously mentioned, estimated to contain over two billion individuals, stretched from horizon to horizon, as far as the eye could reach in every direction, and was four hours in passing a given point. At all seasons, whether migrating, roosting or nesting, pigeons were subject to attack by man. Their migrations were governed largely by the food supply, acorns and beech-nuts constituting their chief fare, and when they appeared at a certain place their destruction became the object of the day. Many were shot, but by far the larger number were netted with the aid of live decoys. Wilson tells of thirty dozen birds being captured at one spring of the net. Audubon states that he knew a man who, in Pennsylvania, netted 500 dozen pigeons in one day.

When roosting, pigeons were attacked by men with guns, poles, clubs, and even pots of sulphur, the wagon-loads of birds were killed nightly. Similar methods of destruction were employed when the birds were nesting. At this season the squabs were especially desired, and the trees were shaken or felled to obtain them. When the wants of the hunters had been supplied, droves of hogs were released beneath the nesting trees to feed on the birds remaining. At one

of the last large known pigeons "nestings," near Petosky, Mich., in 1878, it is estimated that one billion birds were killed during the season.

This, in brief, is the story of the destruction of the wild pigeon, whose remarkably rapid extermination is paralleled only by that of the American bison. During the period of its abundance the wild pigeon was distributed throughout the greater part of eastern North America, from the Hudson Bay region southward to Florida, and casually westward to British Columbia. To-day an occasional individual is observed at intervals in the Atlantic States, and in the middle and upper Mississippi Valley they are seen more frequently. Reports of their presence in large numbers on the Pacific Coast or in various parts of the tropics prove to be based on other species of pigeons.

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