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Passenger Pigeon

Extinct Species



Common name: Passenger Pigeon
Scientific name: Ectopistes migratorius
Order: Columbiformes
Family: Columbidae

The Passenger Pigeon is North America's best-known extinct species. It once flew in flocks of hundreds of thousands of individuals. About three to five billion Passenger Pigeons ranged across eastern North America; they may have been the most numerous bird species in history.

Description:

- Large pigeon
- long, pointed tail
- Male was bluish gray on head and upper back (with some scattered black marks)
- Orange, pink, tan to white on underparts
- Iridescence on neck
- Females duller and more brownish

Size: Large pigeon (male was about 16 inches, female smaller)

Similar species: [Mourning Dove](#) is smaller and duller. The adult Mourning Dove has a small comma shaped black spot below and behind its ear, while the Passenger Pigeon did not have this spot.

What did it eat? Beechnuts, acorns, chestnuts, seeds, berries, worms, caterpillars, and snails.

Where did it eat? Mostly on the ground. Sometimes fed on acorns, nuts, and berries from branches of trees and shrubs.

Who ate it? Humans. Other predators included mink, weasels, raccoons, opossums, martens, owls, hawks, falcons, eagles, wolves, foxes, bobcats, mountain lions, and bears.

Nesting: One egg; white, slightly glossy and no markings. Incubated for 12 – 13 days by both parents. Nested in huge colonies.

In 1895 S. Pokagon described the nesting grounds:

“I was startled by hearing a gurgling, rumbling sound, as though an army of horses laden with sleigh bells was advancing through the deep forest towards me. As I listened more intently I concluded that instead of the trampling of horses it was distant thunder; yet the morning was clear, calm and beautiful. Nearer and nearer came the strange comingling of sounds of sleigh bells, mixed with the rumbling of an approaching storm. While I gazed in astonishment, I beheld moving toward me in an unbroken front millions of pigeons, the first I had seen that season. They passed like a cloud through the branches of the high trees, through the underbrush and over the ground, apparently overturning every leaf . . . They fluttered all about me, lighting on my head and shoulders; gently I caught two in my hands . . . I now began to realize that they were mating, preparatory to nesting. . . . In the course of the day the great on-moving mass passed by me, but the trees were still filled with them sitting in pairs in convenient crotches of the limbs, now uttering to their mates those strange, bell-like wailing notes which I had mistaken for the ringing of bells in the distance. On the third day after, this chattering ceased and all were busy carrying sticks with which they were building nests in the same crotches of the limbs they had occupied in pairs the day before. On the morning of the fourth day their nests were finished and eggs laid.”

Range: Passenger Pigeons were 'wanderers'. They did not return to nesting and roosting areas from year to year. They were found throughout North America, east of Rocky Mountains, usually in deciduous forests.

Habitat: Forests; sometimes foraged in agricultural fields.

COOL FACTS

Eyewitness accounts of flocks or "rivers" of Passenger Pigeons that "blackened the sky" for days. Perhaps the most abundant bird in North America at one time.

While flying in flocks, pigeons would follow the movements of the birds in front. If the front of the flock had swerved to avoid a predator, the birds that followed swerved as well, even long after the predator was gone.



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