

Passenger Pigeons extinct

By ALAN R. CAPON

So abundant were the passenger pigeons at one time in Prince Edward County and in many other parts of Ontario in the middle 1800's, that boys could stand on house tops and knock birds down with sticks as they flew over.

The wild pigeons were a source of food for the early settlers and they were slaughtered in immense numbers, and in 1914 when the last passenger pigeon toppled from its perch in a United States zoo, the bird became extinct.

The passenger pigeon visited Canada in the early spring months and in August in immense flocks, and Samuel Strickland wrote in his book "Twenty-seven years in Canada West" (1853) the following: "...in some parts of the province, early in Spring and directly after wheat harvest, their numbers are incredible. Some days they commence flying as soon as it is light in the morning, and continue, flock after flock, until sun-down. To calculate the sum total of birds passing even on one day, appears to be impossible. I think, the greatest masses fly near the shore of the great Canadian lakes, and sometimes so low that they may be easily killed with a horse-pistol, or even knocked down with a long pole."

Joseph Pickering wrote in "Inquiries of an Emigrant" (1831): "Pigeons, in great flocks, going out daily northward, some people with nets and decoy pigeons, will catch several hundred in a day, when they sometimes take only their breasts, and salt in barrels, and make beds of their feathers..."

John James Audubon, the naturalist related that in the autumn of 1813 he left his house on the banks of the Ohio to go to Louisville and he observed pigeons flying in great numbers from the north-east to the south-west. After they had been passing for an hour he dismounted and proceeded to make a dot with a pencil on paper for every flock that passed. He found in a short time that he was putting down dots at the rate of 163 in 21 minutes.

Audubon resumed his journey but still the pigeons came, the light of day darkened as if by a solar eclipse. For 55 miles Audubon travelled along with the pigeons flying overhead, the flight continuing for three days. He estimated the birds flew past in columns of about one mile wide and calculated the speed of flight at about 60 miles per hour. The birds, of course, consumed great quantities of grain.

One of the last great kills recorded was in 1878 when three hundred tons of dressed birds were shipped by hunters in Michigan. By the year 1899 the great flights of the passenger pigeon were over and only the odd pair could be found breeding in the province of Ontario, except for an area in the north-west where quite a few could still be found.

Fifteen years later the passenger pigeon has joined the dodo - just a name in record books with a few stuffed birds left in museum cases.