

An Infinite Number of "Wood Pigeons"



by Geoff Hogan

In July, 1534, Jacques Cartier journeyed along the north shore of Prince Edward Island recording his observations of the natural features of land and shore. He was obviously impressed, judging by his glowing reports. On several occasions he and his men went ashore "to see the trees which are wonderfully beautiful and very fragrant . . . cedars, yew-trees,* pines, white elms, ash trees, willows and others. . . ." While on the Island, in the vicinity of Cape Orleans (Kildare), he also recorded an abundance of birdlife, among which he noted "wood pigeons"; an "infinite number of wood pigeons," according to one translation.** Little did Cartier realize the significance of this observation; it marked the first mention in recorded history of what one authority has called "the most impressive

species of bird that man has ever known."***

Cartier mistook the birds he saw for the wild pigeons he was familiar with in Europe. What he observed here, however, were not wood pigeons but Passenger Pigeons, a species restricted to North America. They were one of the wonders of the continent, in the same league as the buffalo and the endless forests, for they were reputedly the most numerous land bird that ever lived. In Cartier's time there were between three and five *billion* of them. By the year 1915 not a single one remained.

* Probably hemlock: the European yew does not grow on Prince Edward Island.

** The authority cited in these two quotes is A.W. Schorger, *The Passenger Pigeon. Its History and Extinction* (1955), pp. 3 and viii.

Life History

Cartier was primarily a navigator and spent little time on shore. Had he explored the land he so highly praised on July 1, 1534, he could very well have learned a good deal more about these "wood pigeons." He was to see them again at Hochelaga, modern Montreal, during his second voyage in 1536.

Passenger Pigeons were doves, similar to, but half again as large as, the Mourning Dove seen on the Island today. Elegant and graceful, both sexes possessed the long, tapered tail and small heads typical of many dove species. The males were resplendent with their metallic iridescence of bronze, green, and purple against a background of steely blue and brown. Even more dramatic was their gregarious behaviour. They travelled, roosted, and foraged in immense flocks and nested in colonies of frequently staggering proportions.

Prince Edward Island in the 1500s, and for a couple of hundred years thereafter, would have provided the Passenger Pigeon with suitable habitat indeed. They were birds of the hardwood forests, feeding upon a wide variety of seeds and nuts, particularly acorns from the red oak and beechmast, the seeds of beech trees. Both trees formed an important component of the Acadian forest that once dominated this island.

Nesting colonies were established in trees, frequently along valleys bordering streams. While they sometimes nested in small groupings, the largest nesting colonies occupied hundreds of square miles. More typical was a colony measuring three miles wide by 10 miles long, or approximately 30 square miles. As many as 90 nests have been counted in a single tree and large colonies contained millions of birds. Generally, only one egg was laid per pair and the chick was reared by both adults.

Prince Edward Island was on the eastern edge of the normal range of the Passenger Pigeon. Its center of distribution was in the Great Lakes region where the largest nesting concentrations were known to occur. The species was highly migratory, breeding in northern regions during spring and summer and spending the winter in the southern states. Although no records exist documenting their arrival and departure times from Prince Edward Island, information from New Brunswick indicates that Passenger Pigeons were found there between May 15 and October 30.

Their migratory flights were often

spectacular. Many observers likened the passing of great flocks to an eclipse of the sun darkening the sky for hours. The noise from their wings was like thunder, causing trees beneath them to sway as they hurtled past at 60 miles per hour. One continuous flock, nearly a mile in width and hundreds of miles long, required a whole day to pass over Fort Mississauga, Ontario.

Surprisingly little mention was made of these birds on Prince Edward Island following Cartier's initial description. Early naturalists such as Francis Bain and John MacSwain in the late 1800s noted that they had once been found here in great flocks. As is so often the case, natural resources were taken for granted with the assumption that they would last forever.

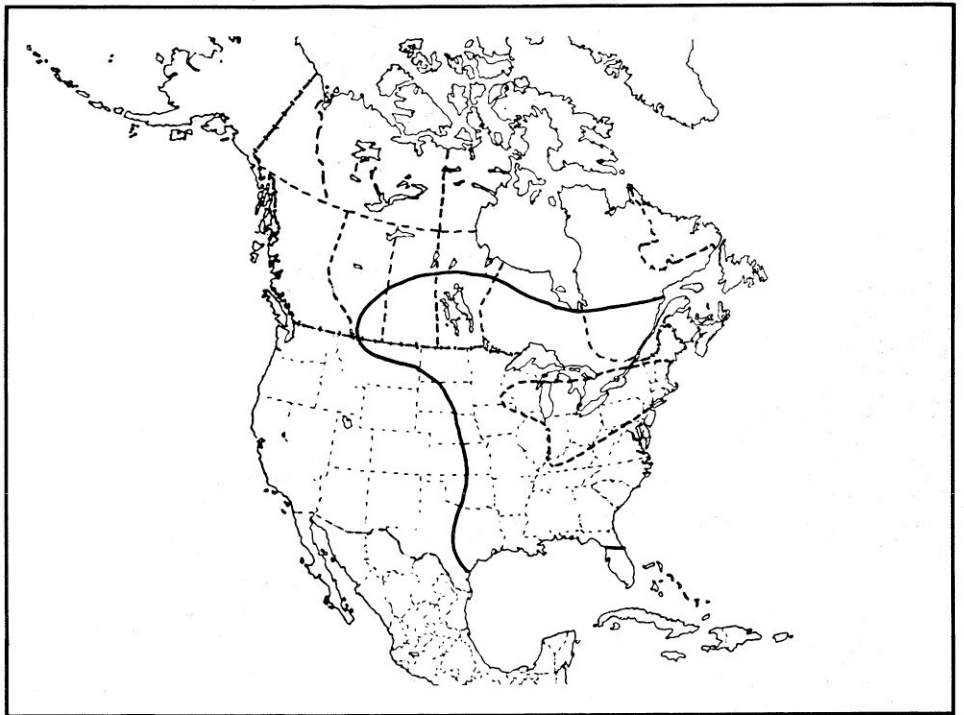
Decline and Fall

From the earliest times, Passenger Pigeons were exploited for food. They were important to Indian tribes wherever they were found. Cartier himself would no doubt have taken advantage of them had he and his men located a breeding colony. Some consumptive value was generally found for any wildlife species which occurred in abundance.

Yet it was not the opportunistic harvesting by Indians and explorers that was so devastating to the Passenger Pigeon, for the species was so numerous that it could easily absorb such losses. Rather it was the systematic, often complete, destruction of every major colony by professional gunners for the big city markets. In addition, the birds were shot, netted, trapped, and clubbed off the face of the earth by nearly every man and boy able to be ready when the migrating flocks passed by. When more were gathered than could possibly be used for human consumption, the surplus was often left to rot, or fed to hogs brought purposely to be fattened on the spoils.

In time, the relentless slaughter took its toll. The period from 1871 to 1880 was particularly devastating. So great were the numbers killed in this decade that the species was doomed.

The birds first disappeared from areas outside the principal center of distribution. No one knows for certain when they were finally extirpated from the Island. MacSwain, writing in 1908, put the date at 1857; however, Bain reported seeing rare stragglers as late as 1891. In New Brunswick it was 1899 and in Nova Scotia 1879. Bain believed that it was "the destructive propensity of



Distribution map of the passenger pigeon. Solid line encloses area of normal distribution. Dotted line encloses principal nesting area. (After Schorger, p. 257.)

humanity" which drove them away. No doubt the forest clearing on the Island would have deprived them of their habitat as well.

Except for a few visionary individuals, most people could scarcely believe the species was in danger of extinction until it was too late. The pigeons had been just too numerous for this to be possible. After 1900 rewards were offered to anyone who could locate a single nesting pair in the wild, but to no avail. Finally, on September 1, 1914, in the Cincinnati Zoo, a 29-year-old female named Martha died, and with her the species ended.

Epilogue

Theories abounded about what happened to cause the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon: a tremendous storm blew them all out to sea, forest fires destroyed their breeding colonies, epidemic diseases wiped them out, they were maladapted to adjust to changing conditions. In the end, the primary reason was man's greed. The persecution had been so constant that they were unable to raise sufficient young to perpetuate the race.

Few people living today have ever seen a Passenger Pigeon. Their extinction is one of the most terrible atrocities by man against nature. Sadly, other species have come to similar ends for similar reasons, but few from such a

spectacular beginning. First recorded by Jacques Cartier on our shores some 450 years ago, Prince Edward Island merits a special place in their story.

Sources

Numerous authors have written about the Passenger Pigeon. The most complete work is A.W. Schorger, *The Passenger Pigeon. Its Natural History and Extinction* (Wisconsin, 1955). I used this excellent book as the main source of information for the article.

References for local information included the following: Francis Bain, *Birds of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown, 1891); H.P. Biggar, *The Voyages of Jacques Cartier* (Ottawa, 1924); Earl W. Godfrey, *Birds of Prince Edward Island* (Nat. Mus. Can. Bull. 132, Ottawa, 1954); Earl W. Godfrey, *The Birds of Canada* (Nat. Mus. Can. Bull. 203, 1966); John MacSwain, *A Catalogue of the Birds of Prince Edward Island* (Proc. and Trans. Nova Scotian Institute of Science, 1908); Austin W. Squires, *The Birds of New Brunswick* (Saint John, 1976); Robie W. Tufts, *The Birds of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1973).

