



Wild Phenomena

Wildlife Resources for Educators

HISTORIC OBSERVATIONS OF PASSENGER PIGEONS



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Historic Observations of Passenger Pigeons

In his book *A Description of the English Province of Carolina*, by the Spaniards called Florida, and by the French La Louisiane, 1732, Daniel Cole wrote:
 "These come, many flocks successively, much the same course, roost upon trees in such number that they often break the boughs and leave prodigious heaps of dung behind them."

From a poem by Thomas Makin, 1729:
 "Here in the fall, large flocks of pigeons fly,
 So numerous, that they darken all the sky!"

In his book *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, 1748, William Byrd writes:
 "The flocks of these birds of passage are so amazingly great, sometimes, that they darken the sky, nor is it uncommon for them to light in such numbers in the larger limbs of mulberry trees and oaks as to break them down. In their travels they make vast havoc amongst the acorns and berries of all sorts, that they waste whole forests in a short time, and leave a famine behind them for most other creatures, and under some covered three inches thick with their dung!"

In his 1758 publication *The History of Louisiana*, M. LePage wrote:
 "The Wood-pigeons are seen in such prodigious numbers, that I do not fear to exaggerate, when I affirm that they sometimes cloud the sun!"

Famous naturalist John James Audubon described an experience he had in 1813:
 "In passing over Barrens a few miles beyond Hendersonburgh, I observed the pigeons flying from north-east to south-west, in greater numbers than I thought I had ever seen them before, and feeling an inclination to count the flocks that might pass within the reach of my eye in one hour, I dismounted, seated myself on an eminence, and began to mark with my pencil, making a dot for every flock that passed. In a short time finding the task which I had undertaken impracticable, as the birds poured in in countless multitudes, I rose, and counting the odds then put down, found that 183 had been made in twenty-one minutes. I travelled on, and still met more the farther I proceeded. The air was literally filled with pigeons, the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse, the dung fell in spots, not unlike melting flakes of snow, and the continued buzz of wings had a tendency to lull my senses to repose!"

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From a letter written by C.B. Johnson, 1819:
 "Wild pigeons commonly visit this place in the spring and autumn, when their numbers are truly astonishing. Flocks of them are sometimes seen, so large as to contain millions, their flesh is dark, and, when fat, very good!"

In his 1820 *Letters from America*, James Flint wrote:
 "The woods abound in pigeons, a small species of fowls which migrates to the southward in winter, and return to the north in spring. Their numbers are so immense that they sometimes move in clouds, upwards of a mile in length. At the time when they are passing, the people have good sport in shooting them, as one flock frequently succeeds another before the gun can be reloaded. The parts of the woods where they roost, are distinguished by the trees having their branches broken off, and many of them deadened by the pressure of the myriads that alight upon them!"



Passenger pigeon flock being hunted in Louisiana from The Illustrated Phoenix and America's News, July 3, 1877.

In 1900, while giving a speech in support of the first ever wildlife-protection law on the floor of the United States Congress, Representative John Lacey from Iowa said:
 "The wild pigeon, formerly in flocks of millions, has entirely disappeared from the face of the earth!"

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Description

A collection of quotes from books, speeches and other sources that show just how large the flocks of passenger pigeons were in the United States.

Link

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OAePhziBz7hCytFc34SHHLWTJi2yUdtr/view>

Classroom Application

This phenomena can be used to look at the impacts of human actions on biodiversity. The reading includes real quotes that look at the population of passenger pigeons through history as seen through the eyes of real people. After reading, the students should share their thoughts and any questions, specifically related to how the change in passenger pigeon population size.

Potential Grades and Standards

FOURTH: Science 4.L4U1.11; **FIFTH:** Science 5.L4U3.11; **SIXTH:** Science 6.L2U3.11; **SEVENTH:** Science 7.L1U1.11; **HIGH SCHOOL:** Science HS.L2U3.18, HS+B.L4U1.2

Additional Background

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4071161.pdf>
<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/may-june-2014/why-passenger-pigeon-went-extinct>

Contributor

Eric Proctor, AZ Game and Fish Department