

COMMENTARY

Let's Not Be Complacent About The Obvious¹

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Last week in Alabama, I took my friend Andrew on a field trip. He wanted to catch a snake and other reptiles and amphibians, so we turned over logs in the forest, waded up streams, and slogged along the shorelines of lakes. Among our captures were Slimy Salamanders, Green Anoles, fence lizards, and cricket frogs. We even caught a large Yellow-bellied Watersnake. Anyone who spends time looking for these creatures in the Southeast would eventually find them also, as all are relatively common in many areas.

But I do not take these species for granted. Just because they are prevalent today gives no guarantee for the future. Now-extinct plants and animals have included some that were once very abundant. Revisiting the Passenger Pigeon saga is always a good way to make us realize we should appreciate and protect what we have.

Early in the 20th century the last surviving Passenger Pigeon — a species claimed by some to have occurred in greater numbers than any other bird or mammal for which we have records — died in captivity. Numbers offered little protection from extinction, and environmental protection laws came too late to help.

Passenger Pigeons looked similar to Mourning Doves, but one distinction, communal nesting, ultimately led to their downfall as a result of uncontrolled hunting by humans. The abundance of Passenger Pigeons was documented in many ways. John James Audubon reported an enormous migrating flock in Kentucky that was more than a mile wide, closely compact, and passed overhead during the daylight hours for three full days. He estimated that more than a billion birds were in the flock.

The largest known nesting site for Passenger Pigeons was Petoskey, Michigan, where almost every tree limb had at least one nest. Campsites were set up each year by hundreds of people who exploited the communal nesting area. In 1878, the nesting colony was 28 miles long and 4 miles wide. Thousands, maybe millions, of pigeons were sold during the late 1800s.

Most Passenger Pigeons were used for food, but people also found other uses for them. More than 20,000 of the docile and cooperative birds were used as shooting gallery targets on the Coney Island midway. Passenger Pigeons, despite their millions, dwindled away over the years as the onslaught continued. Everyone took the abundant and commonly seen birds for granted.

One way to capture pigeons was to lure them to a would-be feeding spot with a decoy, a tame pigeon sitting on a stool. Upon seeing the “stool pigeon,” passing flocks would land, only to be captured in a net trap. According to one authority, approx-



imately 10 nettings of about 1,200 Passenger Pigeons each were made in a day, more than 80,000 being captured in some weeks. The actual toll was even greater when trapping occurred during the nesting season, because countless nestlings lost their parents and starved in the nest as a result.

The extinction of the Passenger Pigeon is a commentary on a persistent and dangerous attitude of that era, the belief that we could exploit any natural system to the fullest, without regard for long-term sustainability. Unfortunately, the attitude exists even today. The approach of squeezing everything we can out of natural areas for fast financial gain may be the most costly feature of free enterprise. The final payment may be far more costly than anyone anticipated.

By the late 1800s, some people, including a few legislators, realized that Americans had overextended their exploitation of the Passenger Pigeon. By the 1900s, laws were being passed to prevent wholesale killing and trapping of the once most common of birds. But as is true with many of today's environmental laws, the rulings were passed too late, were not stringently enforced, and left too many loopholes. No one can be sure when and where the last Passenger Pigeon died in the wild. But the last known lonely Passenger Pigeon died in captivity on September 1, 1914, in the Cincinnati Zoo.

The next time you hear a Bullfrog, smell a Wax Myrtle, or see a Tiger Swallowtail Butterfly, stop and appreciate it. Although they are common today, let's not let them become the Passenger Pigeons of tomorrow. Let's support protection of natural habitats.

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