

C.H.M.

THE EXTINCT PASSENGER PIGEON

The most striking example of the disappearance of a species in American natural history is that of the passenger pigeon. This bird was never a resident of the western part of the United States. Alexander Wilson in 1808 estimated that there were over two billion wild pigeons in a great flock near Frankfurt, Kentucky. Up to 1870 the passenger pigeons were so abundant east of the Mississippi that there could be no thought of any material decrease, let alone their entire disappearance. However, from this date on their numbers did decrease.

The most likely cause of the decrease in numbers of these birds was that they nested in big colonies. During the breeding season they were systematically slaughtered for market purposes. In 1869 from the town of Hartford, Michigan, three car-loads of pigeons were shipped to market each day for forty days. This makes a total of approximately 11,880,000 birds. This also occurred in another town in Michigan which marketed 15,840,000 birds in two years. Large numbers were netted in traps.

It was an old custom to use live passenger pigeons as targets in shooting tournaments. In places through the middle West where birds were breeding, men shook the squabs out of the trees in great numbers and used them to fatten hogs.

The passing of this remarkable bird has been a strong lesson for better conservation of wildlife in the United States. Its disappearance may be attributed to carelessness on the part of the American people. The realization of a tragedy of this kind in our outdoor life has not only already saved the band-tailed pigeon of the West, but is bringing it back to its former haunts.