

Passenger Pigeons

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THE MOST ROMANTIC chapter in the history of bird-life on the American continent is that which treats of the Passenger pigeon, known popularly as the "wild pigeon," and in ornithological science as *Ectopistes migratorius*. The word *Ectopistes* is of Greek derivation and signifies "the Wanderers;" and no generic name has ever been more appropriately chosen or applied, for it was a characteristic habit of these birds to roam in immense flocks, apparently at random.

Although this species once existed in countless millions, it is now believed to be extinct. It was a woodland bird, nesting and roosting in trees and feeding on acorns and beech-mast, and also on wild rice; and, after the coming of the white man, it became very fond of the cultivated grains, especially rye and buckwheat.

Their breeding areas often covered ten or fifteen square miles. They did not carry in their beak the food they gathered for their young; they swallowed it, partially digested it, and then regurgitated the soft milky mass into the mouths of the squabs. Having soon exhausted the food supply in the immediate vicinity of their nests, they were forced to range afar, which they were well able to do, for they were powerful fliers. It seems to have been no hardship for these birds to range daily through an area, having a radius of a hundred miles.

There has recently been presented to the New Jersey State Historical Society for its museum a wild pigeon net. The donor is Mr. Joseph Budd Hunt, of Hunt's Lake, near the Yellow Frame Church in Sussex county. The net was made and used by Mr. John Roof, whose homestead was at Five Points, two or three miles north of Swartzwood Lake. Mr. Roof died in 1874; he was a life-long netter and was highly successful at it; he was the donor's maternal grandfather.

This net is in good condition; it is made of homespun linen thread, each mesh being one and a-half inches square. Originally it was rectangular, approximately nine feet by fifteen, but the efforts to escape made by the entrapped birds have caused the central part to bag, and hard jerks by the throw-rope have stretched the margins awry. Since the mesh-thread is not strong enough for a border, the sides are strengthened by ropes. The lighter rope is all of one piece, is half an inch in diameter and runs along the two ends and one side, and forms a loop at each of the two corners for convenient grasping. Along the other long side a much heavier rope is used; this heavier rope extends in each direction four feet beyond the net, being twenty-three feet in total length; and on the end of each extension is fastened a four-inch swivel of wrought-iron, hammered out by a blacksmith.

Mr. Roof caught thousands of pigeons each migration season; he took them from the net alive and turned them loose in an old, dilapidated building, which he had fitted up with perches and shelves and drinking pans expressly for the purpose. Here

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he kept them for weeks. Dealers in poultry and game came regularly from the city to buy them and had them crated as wanted and shipped to the city market alive. This was long before wild pigeons were used as victims in trap-shooting matches.

Oliver Roof, a son of John, enlisted in the Union army, and, when he returned from the War, lived on the homestead and operated the net for several years. As nearly as can be determined, the last use of the net was in 1872, and the pigeons then caught by Oliver were probably the last ones taken in a net in the Kittatinny valley.

Phoebe Roof, a daughter of John, married Joseph Budd Hunt, Sr., of Hunt's Lake, and, at the settlement of her father's estate, the net described above came into Phoebe's possession and has now been given to the Society by Phoebe's son.

Success in netting required one skilled operator and several large boys or girls as helpers. All these concealed themselves in a bush-house forty feet away. To attract the game within reach of the net, grain and chaff were used as bait. It was also necessary to employ two live pigeons as decoys; one of these was tied at the end of a long twine and was known as the "flier;" the other was fastened on a board that could be made to bob up and down; this was called a "stool-pigeon"; it was always blinded.

Sometimes a basket especially constructed for the purpose was used to carry the decoys to and from the field. It is the good fortune of the Bergen County Historical Society to own and have in its museum one of these rare relics of days gone by, having bought the same in 1915 with money from the W. O. Allison Fund. The basket is woven from splints. In general shape it is round; it is 24 inches long, 12 wide and 18 high and weighs three and a half pounds; and for convenience in carrying it has an arched handle over the top. It is two stories high. Access to the upper apartment is through a circular opening at the top, closed by a splint door five inches across, which is hinged with twine and fastened by a large peg at the end of a string; access to the lower floor is at the side through a square door, hinged and fastened as above. The area of each floor is less than two square feet; hence the whole basket could not well accommodate more than four decoys, two above and two below, but, since two birds together might injure each other, it is probable that only one decoy was carried in each apartment, a flier and a stool-pigeon. There is no communication between the two floors and no arrangement for food or drink. It is to the kindness of Mrs. Frances A. Westervelt of Hackensack, Curator of the Bergen County Historical Society, that I am indebted for the data concerning the basket above described.

In 1888 there was shot on the farm of Richard T. Armstrong, in Frelinghuysen township, Warren county, N.J., what was one of the last half-dozen specimens of this pigeon species taken in New Jersey. The skin was stuffed with cotton and dried, unmounted.

[NOTE. - What is said to have been the last passenger pigeon taken in Pennsylvania was in 1895; and the last known to be alive in the United States died in captivity in Cincinnati in 1914. See pictures and description in interesting article in the "Bucks Co. Hist. Soc. Papers," Vol. IV, p. 367. - EDITOR].