

The story of how DDT demolished the eastern populations of American Peregrines has been well-documented and publicized. The following are the major points in the case of the Peregrines of Massachusetts, as documented in the Massachusetts Audubon Newsletter, Vol. 15, No. 2, October, 1975. There were once 14 active eyries in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts and in the Connecticut River Valley. In 1947 the first decrease in productivity was noted. By the late 50s, all reproduction had ceased, and only some unproductive adults remained. By 1964 no Peregrines were found in Massachusetts, or anywhere else east of the Rockies. The falcon, at the top of a long food chain, fell victim to rising DDT concentrations. As the amount of DDT rose in the birds, the thickness of their eggshells decreased. An 18.8% decline in eggshell thickness from 1947 to 1952 was sufficient to cause the fragile eggs to break from the normal movements made by the adults in their nests.

Dr. Cade believes that if he can produce a more sedentary population of Peregrines from the Arctic race, he can eliminate the DDT problem that these birds now confront on their wintering grounds in South America. Since the first released group did not migrate to these dangerous latitudes, there is great hope that the project will be a complete success. But much work remains to be done before Peregrines will have been reestablished in the numbers and at the localities of our original Duck Hawk.

Dale Zimmerman's Audubon article cited above describes the Peregrine as a "boldly handsome and dramatic bird, an agile predator that strikes down its prey in high speed dives and kills with its powerful taloned feet." He says that "observers who are fortunate enough to have seen its hunting stoop, or the male's rolling, diving mating display, are struck by the magnificence of the peregrine's flight."

Zimmerman reminds us that the falcon has been exploited by man for centuries at the hands of falconers. But it is precisely the falconer's expertise and techniques that have allowed the Cornell laboratory to work so rapidly and so successfully in their efforts to teach a domestically-bred falcon to revert to nature. If the project succeeds, the pilgrim hawk, the age-old wanderer, will once again reign over our skies and remain with us not only in myth but in reality.

Passenger Pigeon Story

A Passing in Cincinnati is a U.S. Government Printing Office booklet (stock number 024-000-00824-0), which recounts vividly the history of our continent's Passenger Pigeon, from the early settler days until more recent times, when this graceful and once plentiful bird became extinct.

This publication, the last of three historical vignettes published by the Department of the Interior, costs 65 cents and is well worth purchasing. The pamphlet is packed with detailed descriptions of the handsome birds, which flocked together in astounding numbers and ranged from Quebec to Florida. By 1914 there was only a single bird alive, and it was captive in the Cincinnati Zoo. When she died, these gentle birds were no more.

The Passenger Pigeon was "...bluish gray, and its under parts in the male were reddish and gray in the female. Its sparkling, red eyes were bold and unflinching. It usually laid only one egg on a flimsy platform of sticks placed in a tree with a hundred pair or more nesting in the same tree. Its food consisted mainly of nuts (especially beech-nuts), acorns, berries and seeds. Because of its speed (a mile a minute), grace, and maneuverability, it earned the title of 'blue meteor'."

Because it moved about and nested in such enormous numbers, it was quite vulnerable as a species. Between 1871 and 1880, it was hunted and netted so intensively that the populations underwent a precipitous decline. The number killed in this decade alone was enough to doom the species. In 1874, for example, over a four week period an estimated 25,000 pigeons per day were shipped to market from a single nesting site in Michigan.

Not only was the bird taken for food and for use in target shooting, but terrible numbers were wasted. Nesting areas were invaded needlessly, and small birds and unhatched eggs were left to die. Hunters often killed too many birds to carry away and so left many to rot on the ground. Squabs were a glut on the market and were even sold by size. Thousands of spoiled squabs were buried near Kilbourne, Wisconsin, and several tons had to be thrown into the Wisconsin River for the same reason.

The skin of the last Passenger Pigeon was mounted and has been on display in the Smithsonian Institution for the past 62 years. In Cincinnati, A Passenger Pigeon Memorial Fund was begun recently to finance an education program on endangered species.

This booklet tells a story from which we must draw serious conclusions. Man must learn from his past misdeeds, if he is to prevent future losses such as that of the Passenger Pigeon.

G.M.



Is the bird in the lower portion of the picture a Hoary Redpoll? Note the streaking on the sides, the darkish appearance relative to the Common at top left, but also the white rump contrasting with the back. A glimpse of the undertail coverts indicated that it was. Photograph by the author in March, 1976, at the feeders of James Mountz in Weston. Incidentally, this station yielded better-marked birds as well. In a letter to the author, William C. Drummond wrote: "Of the two Hoarys that I saw on February 29, one ... was very pale, had a conspicuous white rump and was noticeably larger ... It also seemed more fierce than the Commons, driving the others off and staying there to feed when the man came out of the house."

