

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. VI.

OCTOBER, 1889.

No. 4

THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE WILD PIGEON (*ECTOPISTES MIGRATORIUS*) AS A BIRD OF THE UNITED STATES, WITH SOME NOTES ON ITS HABITS.

BY WILLIAM BREWSTER.

IN THE SPRING of 1888 my friend Captain Bendire wrote me that he had received news from a correspondent in central Michigan to the effect that Wild Pigeons had arrived there in large numbers and were preparing to nest. Acting on this information, I started at once, in company with Mr. Jonathan Dwight, Jr., to visit the expected 'nesting' and learn as much as possible about the habits of the breeding birds, as well as to secure specimens of their skins and eggs.

On reaching Cadillac, Michigan, May 8, we found that large flocks of Pigeons had passed there late in April, while there were reports of similar flights from almost every county in the southern part of the State. Although most of the birds had passed on before our arrival, the professional Pigeon netters, confident that they would finally breed somewhere in the southern peninsula, were busily engaged getting their nets and other apparatus in order for an extensive campaign against the poor birds.

We were assured that as soon as the breeding colony became established, the fact would be known all over the State, and there would be no difficulty in ascertaining its precise location. Accordingly we waited at Cadillac about two weeks during which

time we were in correspondence with netters in different parts of the region. No news came, however, and one by one the netters lost heart, until finally most of them agreed that the Pigeons had gone to the far North beyond the reach of mail and telegraphic communication. As a last hope, we went, on May 15, to Oden, in the northern part of the southern peninsula, about twenty miles south of the Straits of Mackinac. Here we found that there had been, as elsewhere in Michigan, a heavy flight of birds in the latter part of April, but that all had passed on. Thus our trip proved a failure as far as actually seeing a Pigeon 'nesting' was concerned; but, partly by observation, partly by talking with the netters, farmers, sportsmen, and lumbermen, we obtained much information regarding the flight of 1888 and the larger nestings that have occurred in Michigan within the past decade, as well as many interesting details, some of which appear to be new, about the habits of the birds.

Our principal informant was Mr. S. S. Stevens of Cadillac, a veteran Pigeon netter of large experience and, as we were assured by every one whom we asked concerning him, a man of high reputation for veracity and carefulness of statement. Mr. Stevens's testimony was as follows:

Pigeons appeared that year in numbers near Cadillac, about the 20th of April. He saw fully sixty in one day scattered about in beech woods near the head of Clam Lake, and, on another occasion, about one hundred drinking at the mouth of a brook, while a flock that covered at least eight acres was observed by a friend, a perfectly reliable man, flying in a northeasterly direction. Many other smaller flocks were reported.

The last nesting in Michigan of any importance was in 1881, a few miles west of Grand Traverse. It was of only moderate size,—perhaps eight miles long. Subsequently, in 1886, Mr. Stevens found about fifty dozen pairs nesting in a swamp near Lake City. He does not doubt that similiar small colonies occur every year, besides scattered pairs. In fact, he sees a few Pigeons about Cadillac every summer, and in the early autumn young birds barely able to fly are often met with singly or in small parties in the woods. Such stragglers attract little attention and no one attempts to net them, although many are shot.

The largest nesting he ever visited was in 1876 or 1877. It began near Petosky and extended northeast past Crooked Lake

for twenty-eight miles, averaging three or four miles wide. The birds arrived in two separate bodies, one directly from the south by land, the other following the east coast of Wisconsin and crossing at Manitou Island. He saw the latter body come in from the lake at about three o'clock in the afternoon. It was a compact mass of Pigeons, at least five miles long by one mile wide. The birds began building when the snow was twelve inches deep in the woods, although the fields were bare at the time. So rapidly did the colony extend its boundaries that it soon passed literally over and around the place where he was netting, although when he began, this point was several miles from the nearest nest. Nestings usually start in deciduous woods, but during their progress the Pigeons do not skip any kind of trees they encounter. The Petosky nesting extended eight miles through hard-wood timber, then crossed a river bottom wooded with arbor-vitæ, and thence stretched through white pine woods about twenty miles. For the entire distance of twenty-eight miles every tree of any size had more or less nests, and many trees were filled with them. None were lower than about fifteen feet above the ground. Pigeons are very noisy when building. They make a sound resembling the croaking of wood-frogs. Their combined clamor can be heard four or five miles away when the atmospheric conditions are favorable. Two eggs are usually laid, but many nests contain only one. Both birds incubate, the females between two o'clock P. M. and nine or ten o'clock the next morning; the males from nine or ten o'clock A. M. to two o'clock P. M. The males feed twice each day, namely, from daylight to about eight o'clock A. M., and again late in the afternoon. The females feed only during the forenoon. The change is made with great regularity as to time, all the males being on the nest by ten o'clock A. M. During the morning and evening no females are ever caught by the netters; during the forenoon no males. The sitting bird does not leave the nest until the bill of its incoming mate nearly touches its tail, the former slipping off as the latter takes its place. Thus the eggs are constantly covered, and but few are ever thrown out despite the fragile character of the nests and the swaying of the trees in high winds. The old birds never feed in or near the 'nesting,' leaving all the beech mast, etc., there for their young. Many of them go one hundred miles each day for food. Mr. Stevens is satisfied that Pigeons continue laying and hatching during the

entire summer. They do not, however, use the same nesting place a second time in one season, the entire colony always moving from twenty to one hundred miles after the appearance of each brood of young. Mr. Stevens, as well as many of the other netters, with whom we talked, believes that they breed during their absence in the South in the winter, asserting as proof of this that young birds in considerable numbers often accompany the earliest spring flights.

Pigeon netting in Michigan is conducted as follows: Each netter has three beds. At least two, and sometimes as many as ten 'strikes' are made on a single bed in one day, but the bed is often allowed to 'rest' for a day or two. Forty or fifty dozen birds are a good haul for one 'strike.' Often only ten or twelve dozen are taken. Mr. Stevens's highest 'catch' is eighty-six dozen, but once he saw one hundred and six dozen captured at a single 'strike.' If too large a number are on the bed, they will sometimes raise the net bodily and escape. Usually about one third are too quick for the net and fly out before it falls. Two kinds of beds are used, the 'mud' bed and the 'dry' bed. The former is the most killing in Michigan, but, for some unknown reason, it will not attract birds in Wisconsin. It is made of mud, kept in a moist condition and saturated with a mixture of saltpetre and anise seed. Pigeons are very fond of salt and resort to salt springs wherever they occur. The dry bed is simply a level space of ground carefully cleared of grass, weeds, etc., and baited with corn or other grain. Pigeons are peculiar, and their habits must be studied by the netter if he would be successful. When they are feeding on beech mast, they often will not touch grain of any kind, and the mast must then be used for bait. A stool bird is an essential part of the netter's outfit. It is tied on a box, and by an ingenious arrangement of cords by which it can be gently raised or lowered, is made to flap its wings at intervals. This attracts the attention of passing birds which alight on the nearest tree, or on a perch which is usually provided for that purpose. After a portion of the flock has descended to the bed, they are started up by 'raising' the stool bird, and fly back to the perch. When they fly down a second time all or nearly all the others follow or accompany them and the net is 'struck.' The usual method of killing Pigeons is to break their necks with a small pair of pinchers, the ends of which are bent so that they do not quite meet. Great care must be taken not to shed blood on the bed, for the Pigeons notice this at once and

are much alarmed by it. Young birds can be netted in wheat stubble in the autumn, but this is seldom attempted. When just able to fly, however, they are caught in enormous numbers near the 'nestings' in pens made of slats. A few dozen old Pigeons are confined in the pens as decoys, and a net is thrown over the mouth of the pen when a sufficient number of young birds have entered it. Mr. Stevens has known over four hundred dozen young Pigeons to be taken at once by this method. The first birds sent to market yield the netter about one dollar a dozen. At the height of the season the price sometimes falls as low as twelve cents a dozen. It averages about twenty-five cents.

Five weeks are consumed by a single nesting. Then the young are forced out of their nests by the old birds. Mr. Stevens has twice seen this done. One of the Pigeons, usually the male, pushes the young off the nest by force. The latter struggles and squeals precisely like a tame squab, but is finally crowded out along the branch and after further feeble resistance flutters down to the ground. Three or four days elapse before it is able to fly well. Upon leaving the nest it is often fatter and heavier than the old birds; but it quickly becomes much thinner and lighter, despite the enormous quantity of food that it consumes.

On one occasion an immense flock of young birds became bewildered in a fog while crossing Crooked Lake and descending struck the water and perished by thousands. The shore for miles was covered a foot or more deep with them. The old birds rose above the fog, and none were killed.

At least five hundred men were engaged in netting Pigeons during the great Petosky 'nesting' of 1881. Mr. Stevens thought that they may have captured on the average 20,000 birds apiece during the season. Sometimes two car loads were shipped south on the railroad each day. Nevertheless he believed that not one bird in a thousand was taken. Hawks and Owls often abound near the 'nesting.' Owls can be heard hooting there all night long. The Cooper's Hawk often catches the stool Pigeon. During the Petosky season Mr. Stevens lost twelve stool birds in this way.

There has been much dispute among writers and observers, beginning with Audubon and Wilson and extending down to the present day, as to whether the Wild Pigeon lays one or two eggs. I questioned Mr. Stevens closely on this point. He assured me

that he had frequently found two eggs or two young in the same nest, but that fully half the nests which he had examined contained only one.

Our personal experience with the Pigeon in Michigan was as follows:

During our stay at Cadillac we saw them daily, sometimes singly, usually in pairs, never more than two together. Nearly every large tract of old growth mixed woods seemed to contain at least one pair. They appeared to be settled for the season, and we were convinced that they were preparing to breed. In fact, the oviduct of a female killed May 10 contained an egg nearly ready for the shell.

At Oden we had a similar experience, although there were perhaps fewer Pigeons there than about Cadillac. On May 24 Mr. Dwight settled any possible question as to their breeding in scattered pairs by finding a nest on which he distinctly saw a bird sitting. The following day I accompanied him to this nest which was at least fifty feet above the ground, on the horizontal branch of a large hemlock, about twenty feet out from the trunk. As we approached the spot an adult male Pigeon started from a tree near that on which the nest was placed and a moment later a young bird, with stub tail and barely able to fly, fluttered feebly after it. This young Pigeon was probably the bird seen the previous day on the nest, for, on climbing to the latter, Mr. Dwight found it empty, but fouled with excrement, some of which was perfectly fresh. A thorough investigation of the surrounding woods, which were a hundred acres or more in extent, and composed chiefly of beeches with a mixture of white pines and hemlocks of the largest size, convinced us that no other Pigeons were nesting in them.

All the netters with whom we talked believe firmly that there are just as many Pigeons in the West as there ever were. They say the birds have been driven from Michigan and the adjoining States partly by persecution, and partly by the destruction of the forests, and have retreated to uninhabited regions, perhaps north of the Great Lakes in British North America. Doubtless there is some truth in this theory; for, that the Pigeon is not, as has been asserted so often recently, on the verge of extinction, is shown by the flight which passed through Michigan in the spring of 1888. This flight, according to the testimony of many reliable observers,

was a large one, and the birds must have formed a nesting of considerable extent in some region so remote that no news of its presence reached the ears of the vigilant netters. Thus it is probable that enough Pigeons are left to re-stock the West, provided that laws, sufficiently stringent to give them fair protection, be at once enacted. The present laws of Michigan and Wisconsin are simply worse than useless, for, while they prohibit disturbing the birds *within* the nesting, they allow unlimited netting only a few miles beyond its outskirts *during the entire breeding season*. The theory is that the birds are so infinitely numerous that their ranks are not seriously thinned by catching a few million of breeding birds in a summer, and that the only danger to be guarded against is that of frightening them away by the use of guns or nets in the woods where their nests are placed. The absurdity of such reasoning is self-evident but, singularly enough, the netters, many of whom struck me as intelligent and honest men, seem really to believe in it. As they have more or less local influence, and, in addition, the powerful backing of the large game dealers in the cities, it is not likely that any really effectual laws can be passed until the last of our Passenger Pigeons are preparing to follow the Great Auk and the American Bison.

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE BIRDS OF SOUTHERN GREENLAND, FROM THE MSS. OF A. HAGERUP.

EDITED BY MONTAGUE CHAMBERLAIN.

(Concluded from p. 218.)

Halæëtus albicilla. GRAY SEA EAGLE.—A common resident; breeds. It is most numerous in the vicinity of Ivigtut in winter. On November 24, 1886, some ten or twelve examples were seen, and on December 18, fourteen were counted. It is probable that some migrate here from farther north, and when the weather is bad by the open sea they retire up the fjord, for on both the occasions just noted, their appearance had been preceded by heavy storms of wind accompanied by snow.