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100 Years Ago in The Auk



Excerpts from "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 (1889, *Auk* 6: 285-291)

[In 1889 Brewster went to Michigan in what turned out to be an unsuccessful attempt to find nesting birds. A flock "that covered at least eight acres" was reported, but not actually seen. In this article he discusses some other reports of birds in the area including that "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." Larger nesting events which extended "for twenty-eight miles, averaging three or four miles wide," were reported in the 1870s.

After discussing nesting behavior, all of which was acquired secondhand, he discusses the clutch size. They did manage to find a nest or two on this trip. He concludes:]

"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."