

The Passenger Pigeon

By Errol Fuller. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 184 pages, 29.95 USD, Cloth.

As we all know by now, 2014 included the 100th anniversary of the death of the last Passenger Pigeon. This morbid centennial was celebrated in many ways: displays of stuffed specimens, TED talks on de-extinction, retrospectives in conservation bulletins and websites, peer reviewed papers in diverse journals and, not least, several books for children and adults to remind us of what we lost. I have read two of these, Joel Greenberg's excellent and detailed history (*Feathered River Across the Sky*), and Errol Fuller's much slimmer, but equally captivating, *The Passenger Pigeon*. For those who haven't the time to wade through the Greenberg tome, Fuller's book is where you should revel in a celebration of this fabulous extinct bird. This book offers a marvelous compendium of photos, drawings, engravings, paintings and woodcuts, a veritable visual cornucopia, supplemented by a clear, modest text. All in a compact format suitable for a small coffee table. I really enjoyed this book and have repeatedly leafed through it for the sheer pleasure of the diversity of the lavish visual depictions of this bird and its chroniclers. The text covers the essential points of the Passenger Pigeon's biology, abundance, decline and its causes, and the bird's impact not only on the physical landscape and its human occupants, but on the latter's imagination.

Fuller has written other books on extinct animals, especially birds, using a similar format of including a generous number of diverse and striking illustrations. He opens *The Passenger Pigeon* with a colourful montage of six other North American birds that have gone extinct greatly assisted by our own species. Indeed, Fuller's description of the end of the Great Auk is if anything, more depressing than the end of the Passenger Pigeon, and a surly reminder of what a murderous, destructive, and ultimately merciless ape we really can be.

In Chapter 2, titled "Imagine," Fuller uses paintings and engaging text to create an almost lyrical, legendary picture of the extinct bird. The text is to me the most strikingly real depiction of anything I have read on this lost species. Fuller creates a fictional farm family in the

early 19th century as they experience the rolling thunder of a spring super flock that settles on the farm for a rest and to dine out. The text is accompanied by a truly spectacular painting of a huge, falling, broken tree limb covered in hundreds of pigeons whose combined weight has caused it to break, and the story and illustration conjure up an apocalyptic vision of the Passenger Pigeon's huge flocks rather than the usual romanticizing pictures of today. One can now imagine that, although the billions could elicit awe and provide lunch, they could have a disastrous impact on farm communities with total destruction of crops and orchards, and contamination of water and soil, with severe consequences for years to come.

Fuller sums up that we and the pigeons were incompatible, much like say, large flocks of Canada Geese or starlings today, but on a truly horrific scale well beyond some droppings on a golf course, or noise in a genteel suburb. This conflict led to an unplanned asymmetry of our relationship, and the razing of vast tracts of forest, the technological development of an efficient market hunting industry, and a complete lack of protection or conservation initiatives, combined with the irresponsible parental behaviour of the species, led to its accidental and inevitable decline.

The next chapter, "The Bird", recounts the widely known, though limited, physical and numerical properties of Passenger Pigeons, again accompanied by photos, paintings, and maps. A rare photo of the sloppy nest typical of pigeons and doves is rather sad with its single white egg. Like all photos of living birds, this was in an aviary and black and white. The chapter also includes a depiction of the pigeon's vocalizations in formal musical notation (from *The Auk* 28 (4): 1911), with the different sounds being shown with a brief description of the accompanying behaviour. Most quaint are the sounds made as the male moves "masterfully toward female." Despite this heroic effort to leave us with the sounds of pigeons cooing in our ears, I found, as in Greenberg's book, that I still had no idea of how they really sounded, except that they appear to have been

much more diverse vocally than the monotonous cooing of modern Rock and Mourning Doves. Perhaps naturalists of the 1800's had better imaginations than the modern Sibley and Peterson guides. Suffice it to say, that imagination plays a big part in the sights and sounds presented in this lovely book.

A chapter on "The Downward Spiral" dutifully describes the collapse of the vast hordes. The lessons are there too. As populations decline and people begin to notice and they report their suspicions, they are accused of scare mongering, lying, and trying to take cheap food from the bellies of the poor. Alternative explanations abound, mainly that the birds have moved "somewhere." This pattern often occurs as species decline, even when there is good scientific evidence of decline as, for example, with the Atlantic Cod and Polar Bear today. Defenders of the status quo argue to allow exploitation to continue. A recent paper (*Biological Conservation* 180: 11-20) concludes that if the Passenger Pigeon had been assessed by modern IUCN/COSEWIC criteria it would have been listed as Threatened decades before its demise. As it was, that sort of protection only occurred after it was literally extinct in the wild.

"Extinction" continues from the theme of decline and tries to illustrate how apparently inevitable it was in the face of inexorable anthropogenic pressures. This line of thought is certainly open to debate, and I wonder how many of our current species at risk – for example, the Sage Grouse, Woodland Caribou, or many species of turtles – are in that sinking boat. I don't hear this debate going on given the optimistic self-congratulatory pleas for funds from many conservation organizations and our so-called recovery plans trumpeted by governments. Sadly, the dystopian views of doomsayers seem right on target when we see, for example, how the Ontario government has gutted its much ballyhooed 'Endangered Species Act' (the "best in the world"), creating almost unlimited exceptions to allow industry to "kill, harass, disturb" species at risk. But I digress.

The chapter on the last captive individuals, including Martha, is illustrated largely by black and white photos of captive birds and shows that right to the end there

was no real push to save the species. It was still inconceivable that it would disappear. This is eerily similar to our inability to believe that climate change will destroy modern civilization.

"Art and Book" is, in many ways, the star chapter of the book. From the detailed reproduction of a giant mural on the side of a downtown Cincinnati building showing the noble Martha (21 feet from head to tail), to a wealth of artwork and literature, we are treated to an incomparable picture of this haunting tale. Fuller is blunt in his comments on some of the artwork, most notably on the pedantic criticisms of Audubon's famous watercolour of a pair of Passenger Pigeons. He casually notes that art experts often sneer at "wildlife art," and I have heard these sneers since my youth. It seems to me that this elitist attitude arises at least partly from the fact that most academic art experts are uninterested in nature and see depictions of it as banal copies. That is their loss. Academic scientists on the other hand prefer 'accurate' copies, and Fuller has teased those experts with some quite unconventional renditions of the birds, my favourite still being the broken limb referred to earlier. The chapter is filled with pictures of a diversity of art, artists, and writers (Louis Agassiz Fuertes, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Knight, Fred Bodsworth, Allen Eckert, and more) who have depicted the tragedy of species' extinction in word, paint, and song.

The book concludes with quotations and pictures of several luminaries who saw and commented on Passenger Pigeons. There is an appendix too with paleontologist Julian Pender Hume comparing the extant (barely) Pink Pigeon of Mauritius, the ubiquitous Rock Dove and the Passenger Pigeon. This comparison is more technical than the rest of the book, and illustrates in words, drawings and photos that the Passenger Pigeon was indeed a flying machine built for speed, the Avro Arrow of Columbiformes.

In summary, this is a beautiful book and bound to fascinate any person concerned about conservation, evolution, art, and/or birds.

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