

Band-tailed Pigeon: Wilderness Bird at Risk

By Worth Mathewson. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon. 2005. Hardcover. 183 pages, 20 colour photographs, 23 black-and-white figures, 4 tables. \$19.95 US.

Ward Mathewson has been studying the Band-tailed Pigeon for 48 years, first as one who hunted them and enjoyed eating pigeon pot-pie, and later as a conservationist trying to save the species. We learn much about the year-round habits and habitat of this beautiful bird. It breeds north to extreme southwestern British Columbia, but occasional individuals wander farther north and east, into the three prairie provinces. Mathewson has searched the literature carefully, and cites three Saskatchewan bandtail records in the *Blue Jay*. In keeping with other dove species, the bandtail builds a flimsy nest and the female generally lays a single egg. Favourite foods are berries of the cascara and elder; because of the extremely high potassium content of those berries, bandtails have a physiologic need to visit mineral springs with a compensatory high sodium (and calcium) content.

Initially, in the 1890s bandtails were subjected to netting and shooting over decoys for distant markets. As late as 1912, a train would bring 100 hunters to a choice habitat and they would shoot an average of 30 birds each. One hunter shipped 2000 bandtails to hotels in California during the winter of 1911-1912. Until farmers learned to drill seeds into the ground, this pigeon was persecuted for eating a high proportion of hand-sown seeds spread on the ground. Later, bandtails destroyed up to nine-tenths of cherries in a grove until the farmer invited 500 hunters to shoot the bandtails. In subsequent years, sport hunters often concentrated their efforts at mineral springs and in mountain passes through which bandtails migrated.

There were early warnings about declining numbers. Johnson Neff in California in 1932 and 1934 warned that as few as one in five bandtails mortally shot were actually retrieved by the hunter. Art Einarsen in 1946 reported that at one prime 10-acre bandtail hunting site near Crawfordsville, Oregon, 10 000 shells had been fired at a 10-acre shooting site. Gene Silovsky determined in 1969 that 52 of 74 males and 48 of 82 females shot in the fall hunting season were actively producing pigeon milk, hence were feeding squabs; young inevitably died if no parent returned to feed them. Government game departments simply ignored such research results.

In 1975, when the new Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission was formed, author Worth Mathewson began his campaign to have shooting stopped at the few

mineral springs where bandtails concentrated. He felt shooting here during the first two weeks of September led to unsporting slaughter, certainly not "fair chase," as waves of males and then females fell to the concentrated hunters' guns. As numbers declined, the daily bag limit was lowered from eight to five birds per day, without apparent effect. In 1980 and 1981, the opening day was delayed two weeks to 15 September, to a time when fewer squabs were being fed; there was a noticeable increase in the population index. But self-interest of the bandtail shooters persuaded the state to change the opening date back to September 1 for eight more destructive years. In 1989, the 15 September opening was restored, the season length was shortened to seven days and the bag limit reduced to two birds, yet despite these changes a federal Fish and Wildlife Service biologist observed that "We're going to 'do-nothing them' into extinction." By 1991, numbers had dropped so much that British Columbia and Washington closed their seasons. The bandtail had been a victim of stupidity, ignorance, misrepresentation, and inattention to research findings.

Meanwhile, forest companies which wanted a higher harvest of conifers, began large-scale aerial spraying of broad-leaved trees in the 1970s. The Nehalem Valley, a bandtail stronghold, became solid conifers, with the elderberry and cascara apparently gone forever.

This book is much more than the frustrating crusade by Mathewson on behalf of the Band-tailed Pigeon. It is also an example of investigative journalism at its best, well-documented and convincing. Mathewson shares with us the inside stories, and compares the bandtail situation with that of other doves and pigeons, including the extinct Passenger Pigeon, and the decreasing numbers of the White-crowned Pigeon, White-winged Dove, and Key West Quail-Dove. Meanwhile, in Argentina 210 shooters tallied 408 643 Eared Doves in one season, described by Mathewson as "mindless killing without justification." As late as 2003, an issue of *Gray's Sporting Journal* carried an advertisement picturing a shooter kneeling on 7696 Eared Dove carcasses!

The writing is both lyrical and descriptive, a pleasure to read. Sketches by David Hagerbaumer add to the attractiveness of this book.

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