

Summary:

Students use the Passenger Pigeon story to explore the concept of extinction and their feelings about it.

Learning Objective:

Students will:

1. understand that when an animal or plant is extinct, it is gone forever.
2. learn about the last of the Passenger Pigeons.
3. identify the Passenger Pigeon as an example of a species whose extinction is due to human causes.
4. identify that today's endangered species are at risk of extinction, but might still be saved through human awareness and action.

The Last of the Passenger Pigeons

Activity 6



Photo: J.C. Hubbard, Dept. of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History

Materials: Background text, student notebooks

Location: Indoors

Time: 40 minutes



Background Information:

Passenger Pigeons were once the most numerous birds on earth. There may have been more of them than all the other North American birds combined. In the middle of the 1800's, there were an estimated 2 to 5 billion Passenger Pigeons. They flew in huge flocks that filled the sky and sometimes stretched for miles. How big were the flocks? Famous naturalist and bird artist John James Audubon once described a continuous flock of pigeons with "no beginning and no end." Audubon was with a group of hunters when he witnessed the massive flock of Passenger Pigeons:

Everything was ready and all eyes were fixed on the clear sky that could be glimpsed amidst the tall tree tops. Suddenly a general cry burst forth: 'Here they come!' The noise they made, even though still distant, reminded me of a gale at sea. As the birds arrived and passed over me, I could feel a blast of air from their wings. Then I saw a magnificent, wonderful, terrifying sight. The pigeons, arriving by the thousands, landed everywhere, until solid masses were formed on the branches all around. Here and there perches gave way with a crack under the weight, and fell to the ground, destroying hundreds of birds underneath. The scene was one of uproar and confusion. The birds made so much noise that I found it quite useless to speak, or even shout, to the persons next to me. Even the sounds of the hunters' guns could not be heard. (David Gibson, 2001, Ch 5 Activity 3)



Curriculum Links:

Provide example of problems that arise in the environment that cannot be solved using scientific or technological knowledge.

Propose and defend a course of action to protect the local habitat of a particular organism.

That must have been awesome! Another eyewitness account also describes the massive size of the Passenger Pigeon flocks.

Alexander Wilson was visiting some friends in New England. While he was sitting in the kitchen in broad daylight, the sky suddenly became dark. There was no light in the room. When his friends saw how frightened he was, they told him: 'Oh, it's only the pigeons flying overhead.' (David Gibson, 2001, Ch 5 Activity 3)

Imagine a flock of birds that could block out the sun!

What happened to these billions of birds?

When Europeans started to settle in North America, the number of Passenger Pigeons began to decrease. Some habitat disappeared as the vast deciduous forests were cleared for farms, but the biggest reason for the decline was hunting. Many Passenger Pigeons were shot for their meat, but most were shot purely for sport. In one contest, a participant had to kill 30,000 pigeons just to be considered for a prize! Pigeons were shot, netted and blasted out of trees with an early type of machine gun. They were usually left to rot.

By 1896, there was only one flock left, containing 250,000 Passenger Pigeons. On a spring day in April, a group of hunters found the birds. At the end of the shooting, the carnage was complete: 200,000 carcasses, 40,000 birds injured, and thousands of chicks left to predators.

By 1910, the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens had the last living passenger pigeon on earth. The species was doomed. The last bird, a female, was affectionately called Martha, after the wife of the first president of the United States. On September 1, 1914, at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, Martha died at the age of 29. The passenger pigeon was extinct.

Today, no one can experience what John James Audubon or Alexander Wilson experienced. No matter how much you would like to see even one living Passenger Pigeon, you cannot.

The Passenger Pigeon is just one of 5 species that used to occur in NB and that are now extinct. These, as well as the species that have been extirpated from NB, are listed in the previous table.

Activity:

1. Ask students to identify their favourite animal. How would they feel if it suddenly disappeared and they could never see it again?
2. Tell them that you will read them a true story about an animal that was once plentiful, but is now gone forever.
3. Read the background information included with this activity to the class, or have

students take turns reading the italicized parts of the text.

4. Using information from previous sections, explain what it means to be at risk, extirpated or extinct.
5. Using examples from the background information table for this activity, provide examples of species that are either at risk, extirpated or extinct.
6. Have students **write** their reaction to the Passenger Pigeon story by answering the following questions in their notebooks:
 - a. How did the story about the Passenger Pigeons make you feel?
 - b. What are some of the reasons that caused the Passenger Pigeon to become extinct?
 - c. What can you do to make sure that the species-at-risk in the province of New Brunswick don't become extinct? For ideas to answer this question, refer to the section entitled "What can you do to protect wildlife and their habitat?".
7. Have students find similar examples of extinct or extirpated species in New Brunswick and share with the rest of the classroom.
8. When students have completed the questions, **discuss** the following questions with the entire class.
 - a. What does it mean to be Extinct? At risk? Extirpated?
 - b. Have a few students read their reactions to the story aloud to the class.
 - c. What lessons can we learn from the extinction of species? How can we protect species-at-risk in New Brunswick?
 - d. Finish on an optimistic note. Tell students that many species of wildlife are not endangered. Others are endangered, but can still be saved. Let them know that they will learn ways to help wildlife as they continue to progress through the NB Species-at-Risk Education Kit.