

The Last of the Passenger Pigeons

Summary:

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

Learning Objective:

Students will:

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

Activity 4

Materials: Background text, student notebooks

Location: Indoors

Time Required: 40 minutes – 2 classes



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



Background Information:

Passenger Pigeons were once the most numerous birds on earth. There may have been more of them than of 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 bird artist and naturalist John James Audubon was amazed by a continuous flock of pigeons with "no beginning and no end". That one flock took three days to pass overhead! Audubon described the arrival of one flock of pigeons, as hunters waited below:

"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:

Predict how the removal of a plant or animal population affects the rest of the community.

Relate habitat loss to the endangerment or extinction of plants and animals.

That must have been awesome! History gives us more eyewitness accounts of Passenger Pigeon flocks, such as that of a man named Alexander Wilson:

“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 absolutely no light in the room. When his friends saw how frightened he was, they told him it was only the pigeons flying overhead. Imagine a flock of birds that could block out the sun!” (David Gibson, 2001, Ch 5 Activity 3)

What happened to these billions of birds?

When Europeans started to settle in North America, the number of Passenger Pigeons began to decline. Some of their habitat disappeared as the vast deciduous forests were cleared for farms, but the biggest problem was hunting by humans. 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. One April day, 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 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, you will never share what John James Audubon or Alexander Wilson experienced. In fact, 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 species that have been extirpated from NB, are listed in the previous table.

Activity:

1. Review the terms species-at-risk and extinct, found in the background information.
2. Give examples of extinct species.
3. Ask students what their favourite animal is. How would they feel if it suddenly disappeared and they could never see it again?
4. Tell students that you will read them a true story about an animal that was once plentiful, but is now gone forever.
5. Read “The Last of the Passenger Pigeons”, as well as “What happened to these billions of birds?” to the class, or have students take turns reading parts of the text.

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6. Have students write their reactions to the story, answering the following questions in their notebooks:
- How did the story of the passing of the pigeons make you feel?
 - Can an extinct species be brought back?
 - What are some of the reasons that caused the Passenger Pigeon to become extinct?
 - What can you do to make sure that the species-at-risk in New Brunswick don't become extinct? (For ideas to answer this question, refer to the section the end of the kit, entitled "What can you do to protect wildlife and its habitats ")
7. When students have completed the questions discuss the following with the entire class:
- What does it mean to be "endangered"? "extinct"? "extirpated"?
 - Have a few students read aloud their reactions to the story.
 - What lessons can be learned from the extinction of a species? Give examples of species-at-risk in New Brunswick. How can NB species-at-risk be protected?
8. 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. The Helpful Habits section at the end of the kit provides some excellent ideas for helping wildlife.