

Was Theodore Roosevelt the Last to See Wild Passenger Pigeons?

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The State Legislature of Ohio declared in 1857, "The passenger pigeon needs no protection. Wonderfully prolific, . . . no ordinary destruction can lessen them from the myriads that are yearly produced." The last individual of this species, once the world's most abundant bird, died in that same state. A female named Martha, the last of a line started with four pairs captured near Petosky, Michigan, in 1878 (Pers. Comm. E.J. Maruska, 1976), died at age 29 in the Cincinnati zoo on September 1, 1914. The mounted skin is now in the U.S. National Museum. But of far more interest is what happened to the species in Nature.

The most informative contemporary account for the Midwest after Audubon's time was published by Chief Simon Pokagon in 1895. His article was reprinted in Mershon's supposedly definitive 1907 book (8) on the passenger pigeon and its extinction in the wild.

Of the latest four records Mershon cited for Indiana, three were from English Lake, a great spread of the Kankakee River now perpetuated only in the name of a village. One male pigeon was shot there in 1887, and the specimen preserved by Ruthven Deane. The latter shot a young female on Yellow River, Stark County, in September, 1888. In both cases the birds were alone. John Hazen shot eight individuals from a small flock at English Lake in 1887. The last Indiana record was in 1893, when C. B. Brown of Chicago collected a nest and two eggs, very close to the Hazen site at English Lake. He secured both parent birds, but preserved only the eggs. Governor Chase S. Osborn saw six birds in Michigan in 1890, and one in 1897.

Observations at Pine Knot, Virginia

From 1905 for the rest of his life, Theodore and Edith Roosevelt had a week-end cottage called "Pine Knot," now-forgotten although still standing, on ninety acres of woods near Charlottesville, Virginia. This simple hideaway (Fig. 1) was the locale of most of his natural history observing (except that done with Muir at Yosemite and with Burroughs at Yellowstone) during his 7.5 years in the White House. In late May of 1907 the president wrote the following letter to his friend C. Hart Merriam, director of the U.S. Biological Survey. (The paragraphs are lettered for ease of subsequent reference.)

(a) On May 18th near Keene, Albemarle County, Virginia, I saw a flock of a dozen passenger pigeons. I have not seen any for twenty-five years and never dreamed I should see any again; but I could not have been mistaken (tho I did not kill any for I did not have a gun, and in any event nothing could have persuaded me to shoot them.)

I saw them flying to and fro a couple of times and then they all lit in a tall dead pine by an old field. There were mourning doves in the field for me to compare them with, and I do not see how I could have been mistaken.

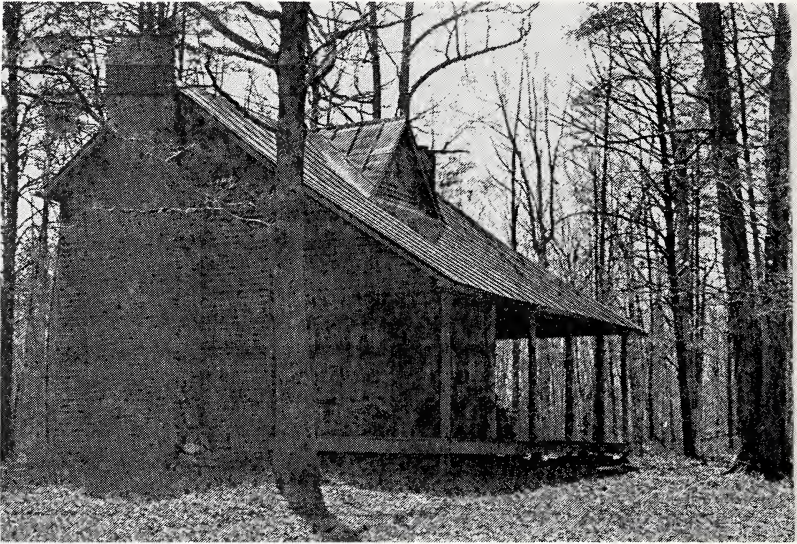


FIGURE 1. *Pine Knot in April, 1976; basically unchanged since 1905. "When I was president, we owned a little house in western Virginia; a delightful house, to us at least, although only a shell of rough boards." (11). The cottage and fifteen acres with a spring were given to Mrs. Roosevelt by family friends, and TR had two chimneys and fireplaces added. Later, Mrs. Roosevelt obtained 75 additional acres and owned it all until 1941. It is now privately owned, unoccupied, and unmarked.*

(b) In replying to a similar letter from TR, John Burroughs (2) wrote that he had been checking for several years on reports of the species, stressed how rare the bird had become, if indeed it still existed in the wild, and added, "I hope you are sure about those pigeons."

(c) Roosevelt wrote Burroughs on June 2 (9), "Dear Oom John: I have written down to see if I can get information about those passenger pigeons. It doesn't seem to me possible that I was mistaken. Nevertheless, I have had one or two curious experiences of the fallibility of human vision." He went on to tell an incident when he and a cowboy had mistaken the color of prairie dogs because of "the peculiar angle at which the sunlight struck them." He invited Burroughs to be their guest at Pine Knot (1), holding out some possibility of seeing the pigeons; meanwhile, he would follow up a remark that the colored foreman at a neighbor's farm had made (11) about seeing "wild carrier pigeons." That neighbor and friend, Wilmer, questioned Dick McDaniel and wrote Roosevelt what the latter considered confirmation, since TR believed that Dick's practical knowledge of birds was absolutely trustworthy.

(d) On May 12th last Dick saw a flock of about thirty wild pigeons, followed at a short distance by about half as many, flying in a circle very rapidly, between the Plain Dealing house and the woods, where they disappeared. They had pointed tails and resembled somewhat large doves—the breasts and sides rather a brownish red. He had seen them before, but many years ago. I think it is unquestionably the passenger pigeon—*Ectopistes migratoria*—described on page 25 of the 5th volume of Audubon. I remember the pigeon roosts as he describes them, on a smaller scale. . . .

In his lead article in the next October's *Scribners*, in which TR discussed the bird life at Pine Knot in some detail, the first printed account of his pigeon sighting is worded as follows.

(e) On May 18th, 1907, I saw a small party of a dozen or so passenger pigeons, birds I had not seen for a quarter of a century and never expected to see again. I saw them two or three times flying hither and thither with great rapidity, and once they perched in a tall dead pine on the edge of an old field. They were unmistakable; yet the sight was so unexpected that I almost doubted my eyes, and I welcomed a bit of corroborative evidence coming from Dick, the colored foreman at Plain Dealing. Dick is a frequent companion of mine in rambles around the country, and he is an unusually close and accurate observer of birds, and of wild things generally. Dick had mentioned to me having seen some "wild carrier pigeons," as he called them; and, thinking over this remark of his, after I had returned to Washington, I began to wonder whether he too might not have seen passenger pigeons.

(f) John Burroughs was a guest at Pine Knot (1) for four days in late May, 1907. The two naturalists on excursions together identified 75 species of birds, Burroughs pointing out two that were new to TR, and the latter teaching John O'Birds two species new to him and showing him another that the old essayist had not seen for thirty years (3). Burroughs wrote after TR's death that the president had known the warblers in the trees overhead that spring as well as he did himself. No pigeons were seen this time, but the two men questioned Dick McDaniel face to face about all aspects of his sighting. In Burroughs 1921 book, he wrote (3), "His description agreed with Roosevelt's, and he had seen wild pigeons in his youth; still I had my doubts." But Burroughs (2) had reported very differently in print on July 13, 1907—"He [TR] would have the matter looked into by a friend at Pine Knot upon whom he could depend. He did so, and convinced himself *and me also* (emphasis added) that he had really seen wild pigeons.

(g) Also, in his 1921 chapter on the Pine Knot visit, Burroughs (3) wrote the following.

In the course of that walk he showed me a place where he had seen what he had thought at the time to be a flock of wild pigeons. He described how they flew, the swoop of their circling movements, and the tree where they alighted. I was skeptical, for *it had long been thought that wild pigeons were extinct* (emphasis added), but that thought had not impressed itself upon his mind.

Behavioral Evidence for the Identification

The only other birds with pointed tails that a bird student of Roosevelt's high capability might conceivably have confused with passenger pigeons are mourning (Carolina) doves. McDaniel stressed the size element; TR implied it by his comparison with nearby doves since size is the most obvious difference. Eaton (5) wrote, "The mourning dove is much smaller than the wild pigeon." He gave lengths as 11-13" *versus* 15-17.5" and wingspread, the distinction most apparent in flight, as 17-19" for the dove and 23-25.5 for the pigeon. The latter has a much longer tail.

Roberts (10) wrote, "The whistling of the wings of the dove in flight, a sound never heard from the wild pigeons, is a safe and easily noted distinction." Neither observer reported this, even though a person close enough to have seen the red breasts would probably have heard this sound had it been made. Sound or song was what most interested Roosevelt about birds, as stressed in his writings; he was considered an expert on bird sounds, and if he had heard the distinctive whistling he would not have been likely to have believed the birds were passenger pigeons.

Almost as strong a point of difference was flocking behavior; the passenger pigeon was probably the most gregarious of all birds. Until it reached its last extremity, this species was always seen in flocks. It fed, roosted, wintered, migrated, mated, nested and stayed in flocks. In contrast, mourning doves are primarily oriented to the pair-bond. Reports of flocks are unusual, and they are for fall and winter. Even in an abnormally cool year, doves are paired and nesting in Virginia long before mid-May. The only imaginable flock of mourning doves on May 18 might be young of the year, but they lack the red breasts, and would be unlikely in such numbers as seen by McDaniel, about forty-five. It is also very questionable that they would be such skillful fliers by mid-May as to go as rapidly as reported.

Forbush (6) wrote of passenger pigeons, "In searching for food in a country where it was plentiful, the birds flew low, and, upon reaching good feeding ground, swung in large circles while examining the place." Circling or swooping, flying back and forth, was the most striking behavioral feature in both men's descriptions. They were in the open, their views unobstructed by trees. On my visit to Pine Knot (finally located by a search of early deed records at the County seat) in April of 1976, I found woods completely surrounds the Roosevelt's cottage, now unoccupied but in fair condition. But a photograph taken by TR from the front porch in 1907 (11) enables us to see far off over sloping terrain rather recently cut over and being invaded by very scattered young pines. Perhaps this open ground was the "field" he referred to.

Reports and Records in and near 1907

Mershon's book (8), in press in 1907, reported that a passenger pigeon was shot in 1900, in Wisconsin. A later authority on this species records was J. H. Fleming, a vice-president of the American Ornithologists Union. The last collected specimen for which he determined

the date was authentic was a single bird shot in August of 1906 in Fairfield County, Connecticut (14) and now a mounted specimen in the Museum of History, Science and Art at Los Angeles.

During roughly the last twenty years of the bird's wild existence, ornithologists discounted the plethora of sightings claimed by untrained persons and unsubstantiated by a specimen, because so many laymen's reports were obviously based on mourning doves, or on distant flocks of other birds, e.g., curlews. In New York state (5), two claims of flocks were made in 1904, and two in 1905. Another 1905 claim, for a sighting of six birds, was from Michigan (7). John Burroughs, who never made a museum skin and was a literary naturalist rather than a scientific one, started about 1905 to check some of the popular announcements in newspapers (2, 5). He reported (5) that someone claimed a large flock at Prattsburgh, New York, in mid-April, 1906, and one a mile long at Kingston, N. Y., on May 15, 1906. Finally, Burroughs interviewed a farmer in Sullivan County, N. Y., who claimed to have seen a flock of 1,000 pigeons on May 23, 1907, or five days after Roosevelt's sighting. Burroughs indicated in *Forest and Stream* and in letters (8) that he was convinced of the validity of these three sightings.

Unreliability of Burroughs Last Account

John Burroughs essay on the Pine Knot visit (3) was published after his death at age 84, or 14 years after the event. "Wild pigeons" were clearly extinct by that time, and Burroughs' tone had completely changed from that in the 1907 letters and publications (f). This seems to reflect either carelessness, senility, or disingenuousness. How could he, in 1907, have "long thought the bird extinct" while he himself was still publishing (2, 8) and crediting reports of purported flocks by laymen in 1906 and 1907?

Burroughs was clearly wrong in two incidental statements in his 1921 chapter (3), which suggests faulty memory—the events of the White House dinner the night before the Pine Knot visit (they happened in 1903 instead), and his stating that the party left the train at Charlottesville, instead of North Garden.

It appears that a more important 1921 comment was likewise untrue—"Subsequently Roosevelt wrote me that he had come to the conclusion that they had been mistaken about their being pigeons." The closest TR came to retracting his pigeon report was his letter (c) saying, in effect, that while he was still certain in his own mind, of course he did not think himself infallible. This letter was written *before* receiving the corroborating letter from Wilmer (d). In response to Burroughs stringent cautionings, TR volunteered that certain lighting conditions make perception of colors difficult. But, so far as he wrote, his own identification was not based on color, but on size, the pointed tails, the circling behavior, speed of flight, and best, on direct comparison with mourning doves.

That Burroughs was wrong in claiming that TR had changed his mind (3) is clear from TR's having published his passenger pigeon sighting in *Scribners Magazine* in October, 1907, and having allowed

this claim to be reprinted in the various editions of his book *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter*, of which the last edition came out in 1926 (12).

Burroughs' tardiness in printing the essay was not for lack of encouragement from Roosevelt, for he wrote (3), ". . . in fact, for years after the visit, whenever we would meet, almost the first thing he would say was, 'Have you written up our Pine Knot trip yet, Oom John?' And his disappointment at my failure to do so was always unmistakable." The evidence shows that TR held to his original statements, of which the weakest expression was "I do not see how I could have been mistaken." In contrast, Burroughs' writings (f,g) about Roosevelt's sighting were clearly inconsistent.

Credibility of Observer Roosevelt

At age 13 or younger, Theodore Roosevelt (13) took lessons in taxidermy from an old Mr. Bell who had traveled as Audubon's assistant, and the boy began a collection of bird skins that Cutright (4) judged to be the best of any young naturalist in North America. At age 14, TR went on a 1,200 mile houseboat trip on the Nile, and reported (13) that intensive bird collecting was the most interesting thing he did there and in Palestine. A couple of hundred of his boyhood museum skins are still in museums; 46 were given to his friend David Starr Jordan for Indiana University. TR's phenomenal memory enabled him to name the Nile birds on sight in the field 37 years later, when he spent a year in Africa collecting thousands of bird and big game specimens for the two great eastern museums.

Young Roosevelt majored in biology at Harvard (13), fully intending to go into a career as a field naturalist. His first printed work was a study of Adirondacks bird life, done during undergraduate days with a fellow student, Minot. The first letter he wrote in his life, and the last one, dealt with birds. C. Hart Merriam stated in *Science* in 1932 that TR was ". . . a writer of the best accounts we have ever had of the habits of our larger mammals." He wrote the most reasonable early account on the theory of protective resemblance. With a Smithsonian naturalist, he authored the then-definitive book on African mammals, writing the life history and behavioral parts himself. He was the first to suggest the idea of naturalists living with their subjects for long periods, a method that has proved so fruitful in Africa recently, beginning with Shaller's work with the mountain gorilla. Theodore Roosevelt was a naturalist from first to last. Rather than being a dilettante, he was an amateur of high professional caliber as a field naturalist. As a literary naturalist however, the success of his western nature and hunting books made him a part-time professional.

After birding with TR at the White House Grounds, Pine Knot, Yellowstone Park, and Sagamore Hill, Burroughs (2) wrote:

I refer to his keenness and enthusiasm as a student of animal life, and his extraordinary powers of observation. He sees quickly and surely, not less so with the corporeal eye than with the mental. . . . The chief qualification of a born observer is an alert, sensitive, objective type of

mind and this he has in preeminent degree. . . . His mind moves with wonderful celerity, and yet as an observer he is very cautious, jumps to no hasty conclusions.

Roosevelt's wide experience in hunting and collecting brought him a reputation as one of the best marksmen of his day. His first wild turkey was brought down cleanly from the air, a forty-yards side-shot, on the third day of a strenuous hunt at Pine Knot with Dick McDaniel. No one is as well qualified as a crack wing-shot to estimate the rapidity of bird flight. Both TR and Dick McDaniel reported the wild pigeons were flying rapidly.

Ornithologists at the American Museum of Natural History, because they were familiar with his expertise on birds and since he had seen mourning doves for comparison, accepted his passenger pigeon sighting as authentic.

Conclusions

Roosevelt did not claim to have seen the last wild passenger pigeons; he was too busy in 1907 to be following what others were doing on the question, and did not push Burroughs or others to accept his sighting. He wrote (9) that he could not afford to get into a natural history controversy at that time. He meant *another* controversy, for he was under press attack for allowing the presidency to become embroiled in the "Nature faker" controversy. Still, he stuck to his story in every published reference to it afterward.

"Was Theodore Roosevelt the last *person* to see wild passenger pigeons?" The question in that form can never be answered with assurance. He may have been, but we will never know whether any farmers or hunters saw some after his sighting without getting it into print.

What I have investigated was whether TR was the last trained, qualified naturalist to see a flock of wild passenger pigeons. This is an answerable question because naturalists report their observations. The evidence strongly indicates that he identified his flock correctly. Granting that, a president of the United States, on his own property, was definitely the last naturalist to see the species in nature. Roosevelt's distaste for going back for his shotgun and killing any of them should not deprive him of his most dramatic bird record.

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