

PASSENGER PIGEONS, *Ectopistes migratorius* EXTINCT

And all men kill the thing they love,

By all let this be heard,

Some do it with a bitter look,

Some with a flattering word,

The coward does it with a kiss,

The brave man with a sword!

---Wilde

And some men kill for glory. So it was for many of our great-great-grandfathers of the last Century. And so came about the extinction of the species known as Passenger Pigeons.

As I reflect upon world, national, local and personal events of the past I often think how true these words of Wilde's are. As we look ahead to a new year let us all hope we can learn self betterment through examples of thoughtless blunders which our past so frequently illustrates.

This Century-old photograph pictured here from our county archives shows a trophy of the 1870's and illustrates a grandiose blunder for glory. The trophy was evidently the award for championship Passenger Pigeon shooting in New York State. Candidly however, this portrays a situation where nobody won. Scrutinizing the trophy closely you can see two men with guns at the bottom and innumerable Passenger Pigeons standing on a rail which encircles the cup.

Here are two anecdotes about Passenger Pigeons in Orleans County. My great grandfather was to have said that when a flock of these birds flew over, they would darken the sun because there were so many. My grandfather told that often large nets were used to catch them in, the birds later used at a pigeon shoot for which an award was given to the man who could shoot the most. On one occasion they has captured so many in the net the pigeons started to fly up with it when rails from a fence were quickly gathered to weight it down.

Passenger Pigeons were once extremely common throughout the U.S. but have been completely extinct since 1914 when the last one died in captivity. These birds were about 16½ inches long and were used for food, agriculture fertilizer and simply the sport of shooting them.

The male was slate gray, tinted with greenish brown, above, and was wine red on the breast and white on the abdomen. The female differed from the male in having a grayish-brown breast. Passenger pigeons nested in large colonies in trees; often as many as fifty nests were built in one tree. Since the extermination of these birds, laws against the killing of wild pigeons have been established in many states.

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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