

Passenger Pigeon *Ectopistes migratorius*

Folk Name: Wild Pigeon

Status: Extinct

The Passenger Pigeon is widely recognized as a stark symbol of the importance of bird conservation in the United States. This “wild pigeon” was once one of the most abundant birds in the east and was said to be present in “uncountable millions.” Tragically, it was hunted to extinction by the end of the nineteenth century. The last living Passenger Pigeon, named “Martha” in honor of Martha Washington, died in 1914 after 18 years of captivity in the Cincinnati Zoo. “Clouds” of thousands and thousands of Passenger Pigeons once passed through the Carolinas during migration each year. Several historical accounts of Passenger Pigeons passing through this region are presented below.

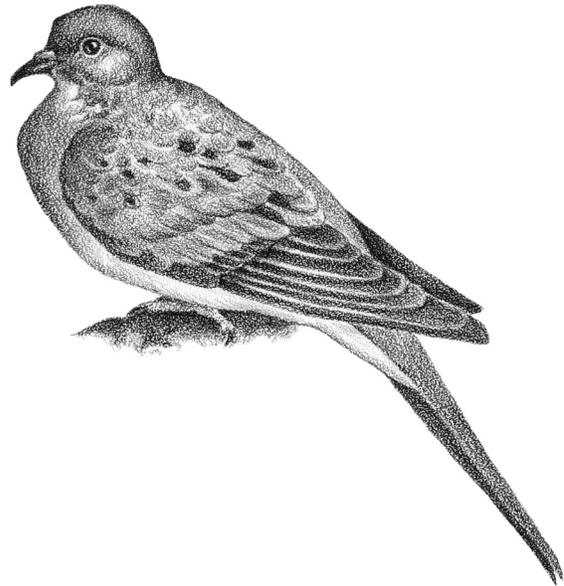
Ornithologist W.L. McAtee provided this interpretation of a diary account written by the English explorer John Lawson and recorded in Catawba Indian country on or about February 5, 1701:

[I]n these Parts, that you might see many millions in a Flock; they sometimes split off the Limbs of stout Oaks, and other Trees, upon which they roost o’Nights. You may find several Indian Towns, of not above 17 Houses, that have more than 100 Gallons of Pigeons Oil, or Fat; they using it with Pulse, or Bread, as we do Butter, and making the ground as white as a sheet with their Dung. The Indians take a Light, and go among them in the Night, and bring away some thousands, killing them with long Poles, as they roost in Trees. At this time of the Year, the Flocks, as they pass by, in great measure, obstruct the Light of the Day.

In October 1854, the *Salem Press* reported a roost of Wild Pigeons was present in the mountains about 60 miles west of Winston-Salem. The observers estimated the roosting flock to be 6 miles long and 1 mile wide.

Phillip Russell, related this account shared by his mother from her time living on campus at Davidson College in the Town of Davidson. She watched “Wild Pigeons” flying over campus in great numbers late in the afternoon on a spring day in 1870:

The birds came in a great cloud from the south, making a noise “like the roar of an approaching train.” There seemed to be millions of them. They settled in a grove of oaks breaking limbs with their weight. Men and boys killed them with sticks, filling bags and baskets with them, or tying them in long strings.



Leverett Loomis described the Passenger Pigeon as “very abundant during the latter part of the winter and spring of 1874” in the town of Chester.

On May 12, 1874, *The Charlotte Observer* reported: “A large drove of wild pigeons passed over this city yesterday.” The birds were heading north. Later that year on 13 November, the *Observer* reported: “Quite a number of droves of wild pigeons passed over the city yesterday, going southward. They were passing at intervals, all day long.”

C.M. Carson killed three Passenger Pigeons in Charlotte in October 1875 near what is now the intersection of Independence Boulevard and East Morehead Street. He added these specimens to an impressive collection of bird skins from Mecklenburg County that he maintained and displayed for many years. This is the last known record from Mecklenburg County.

In 1908, Dr. J.B. Alexander published his recollections of Passenger Pigeons in Mecklenburg County during his youth:

In the autumn of 1845 was the time of the greatest flight of pigeons that ever occurred in America; or rather, I should say, has ever been seen or recorded. The droves were at times so large as to take a half hour to pass over a given point, and either end, from east to west, reached the horizon. The sunshine was cut off as if a cloud intervened between the heavens and the earth. They continued to pass in smaller droves or flocks for several weeks. In the forest, where they would roost, much timber was broken

down with the weight of the birds, and many of them were killed and vast quantities were gathered up and eaten by the people. The pigeons were hunting acorns, and I presume they were going to the vast forests of the northwest. They appeared in small coveys for several years and would stay in our forest until the mast was used up. But very few have been seen in this section since the war.

The authors of the 1942 edition of *Birds of North Carolina* record the Passenger Pigeon as having occurred

in the state “apparently only during the migrations;” however, *Birds of North America*, the comprehensive online reference hosted by Cornell University, indicates the Passenger Pigeon was believed to have been both a breeding and wintering bird in both Carolinas.

A number of nineteenth century newspaper articles support the conclusion that it was both a breeding and wintering bird here. One example from winter was printed in *The North State*, Greensboro’s newspaper, on February 21, 1878, that noted: “The woods around Concord [Cabarrus County] are full of wild pigeons.”