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100 Years Ago in The American Ornithologists' Union



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The year 1911 will go down in ornithological history as the year when people realized that the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) was extinct in the wild. The year began with guarded optimism that the species was still extant, and with the ludicrous assertion by the famous geologist and anthropologist M J [sic] McGee (1910) that Passenger Pigeons were making their last stronghold in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona, but ended with the stark reality that no birds had been seen that year. This tragedy was played out in the pages of *The Auk*.

In the first issue of the year, C. F. Hodge brought everyone up-to-date on the progress for evidence of breeding by Passenger Pigeons (Auk 28:49–53). Although he had received 43 reports of nesting in 1909 and 1910, none could be verified and none were from "reputable naturalists or ornithologists, American or Canadian." Hodge was willing to continue for one more breeding season, although he had already spent the $100 he had proposed as a reward on correspondence and trips to verify sightings. However, he cautioned that "It now looks as if the worst fears of American naturalists were about to be confirmed and that we are 'in at the death' of the finest race of pigeons the world has produced."

In 1910, Albert Hazen Wright (1879–1970), later a noted herpetologist at Cornell University, wrote the first of three articles on the early records of Passenger Pigeons (27:428–443). In that article, he mentioned that Peter Kalm (1716–1779) said in one of his writings that he would discuss Passenger Pigeons further "in another place," but Wright was unable to determine where that "place" was. Kalm, a Swedish naturalist and student of Linnaeus (who described the Passenger Pigeon in 1766), had spent 3 years (1747–1750) traveling in what is today Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, primarily collecting plants that might grow well in Sweden. Upon his return to Sweden, he published a series of papers on his travels, all in Swedish. Theodore Gill (1837–1914), the famous ichthyologist, was able to obtain a copy of the work in which Kalm discussed Passenger Pigeons and had it translated by S. M. Gronberger at the Smithsonian Institution (28:110–111). Apparently, he submitted the translation to the editor of *The Auk*, and it was published in its entirety (28:53–66), under the title "A description of the wild pigeons which visit the southern English Colonies in North America, during certain years, in incredible multitudes."

In his second article on early records, Wright stated that "we should strive to assemble all the material extant concerning this extinct or near-extinct species." He presented accounts of pigeons from early travelers in Canada, New England, and New York (28:346–366). In his third article, he concluded his accounts of early travelers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware; Virginia and Maryland; the Carolinas; the Gulf states; central states east of the Mississippi River; and west of the Mississippi Valley (28:427–449).

Several notes were published about early recollections of pigeons in Missouri (28:259–261) and Iowa (28:261). The famous sportsman and conservationist George H. Mackay (1843–1937) also published a note concerning the records of a pigeon netter who lived in Townsend, Massachusetts, during 1847 and 1848 (28:261–262). The nets were baited with buckwheat and wheat, and 5,028 birds were netted in September of 1847 and 1,926 in 1848. The biggest single-day catch was 738 birds on 2 September 1847.

Wallace Craig (1876–1954), the great ethologist, published on the Passenger Pigeons (28:408–427) as part of his series of papers on expressions of emotion in pigeons. Craig himself had only seen Passenger Pigeons in the wild once in 1891, but he was able to study captive birds in the aviaries of Charles O. Whitman at the University of Chicago. Craig went into great detail about the behaviors of the Passenger Pigeon and the large repertory of sounds made by them, presented as musical clefts. The second part of the work dealt with mating behavior and the nesting season. In a major change in editorial policy, works discussed in the text were listed at the end under "References" and were not imbedded in the text as footnotes.

In 1909, Ruthven Deane published an article entitled "The Passenger Pigeon—Only one pair left" (26:429) in which he reported that there were now just a single male and female at the Cincinnati Zoo. In 1911, he published an article entitled "The Passenger Pigeon—Only one bird left" (28:262), reporting "with deep regret" that the male had died of old age on 10 July 1910. Martha, the last surviving pigeon, would die on 1 September 1914.

Other interesting papers appearing in *The Auk* that year included the description of Fuertes's Oriole from Mexico by Frank Chapman, accompanied by a beautiful painting of the new species by Louis Agassiz Fuertes himself (28:1–4). This bird is now generally considered to be a subspecies of the Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius fuertesi*). John H. Thayer recounted (28:153–155) the extensive search along the east coast of Russia for the first eggs of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (*Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*), a critically endangered species on the verge of extinction today (Pitches 2010), primarily because of hunting on the wintering grounds (Zöckler et al. 2010). In a lengthy work (28:237–253) examining 114 specimens of endemic yellowthroats from the Bahamas, W. E. Clyde Todd attempted to unravel what had become a taxonomic nightmare, with as many as seven species proposed for the islands. Todd's conclusion was that there were only two species on the islands, although we consider all the endemic birds today as one species (*Geothlypis rostrata*). For some unknown reason, the editor determined that another translation from Swedish by

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S. M. Gronberger was important, so Anton Rolandson Martin's 1759 description of finding the Northern Fulmer (*Fulmarus glacialis*) at the North Pole appeared in its entirety (28:300–304). Martin (1729–1786) was also a student of Linnaeus, who sent him to Spitsbergen, Norway, to examine the natural history of animals there.

Abbot Thayer's book, *Concealing Coloration*, continued to spark controversy, and Thomas Barbour and John C. Phillips weighed in with a long diatribe (28:179–188) contending that Thayer "has gone too far and claimed too much." Probably overstating Thayer's argument, they mentioned, "That gentleman seems to be of opinion that all animals are cryptically, or, as he calls it, concealingly or obliteratively colored." They go on to discuss a variety of animals that do not seem to be concealed, such as flamingoes. Up for a good fight, Thayer answered back with a paper (28:460–464) entitled "Concealing-coloration: A demand for investigation of my tests of the effective power of patterns." Thayer stated that

> It begins to seem necessary to try once more to convince those naturalists who oppose me that they are acting on a misunderstanding, reiterating statements that I have never contradicted, and refusing either to notice what I do state, or to study optics itself, which is purely and simply the thing I am communicating to them.

As for Barbour and Phillips, Thayer wrote: "These men have committed toward us many offenses. They have tried to write down a book which they prove that they have never read with any thoroughness." Thayer then went on to attack their flamingo example, pointing out that the book makes at least seven references to refute their argument. As discussed earlier in this column, Thayer is considered the father of camouflage and was an accomplished painter, particularly of angels.—Kimberly G. Smith, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701, USA. E-mail: kgsmith@uark.edu*

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