

Recollection of Wild Pigeons in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1864-1881

BY JOHN G. DILLIN

My earliest recollection of the Wild Pigeon dates back to an evening when I could not have been more than four or five years of age. A neighbor stopped with the news that Pigeons were roosting in Gibson's Pines about half a mile from our home. I well remember how my father led me by one hand through the dusk, while with the other he grasped the old family shot gun. I recall how cautiously we entered the woods and the great whir of wings that followed. There was a flash of fire and it was all over: a splendid opportunity for a pot-pie had been lost, and, all because a very small boy had blundered into a pile of dry brush, the snap shot at the disappearing flock had naturally been a failure as proven by a careful search the following morning. This incident occurred about the year 1864, in Tredyffrin township, Chester Co., Pennsylvania upon the very spot where now stands the village of Weadlytown. The surrounding country at that time was a series of chestnut ridges with an occasional bunch of oaks and the pines already alluded to—about four acres in extent and of the 'Jack' variety (*Pinus rigida*). There were three or four other small tracts of these pines in the same neighborhood and in each of these Pigeons would occasionally stop to roost. They seemed to have a preference for pines and in hunting Pigeons I recollect we always searched the pine woods carefully. In fact the last Pigeon I ever shot was perched upon a dead pine limb—this was in October about the year 1881.

In southeastern Pennsylvania the pigeons seldom made their appearance until September, but on two occasions I remember seeing them in August. Once a small flock late in the month from which my brother shot a fine female and another occasion

in 1878 when I shot a young bird with pin feathers—I think not later than the fifteenth, for I well recall my surprise at getting a Pigeon so early, and I still think that it must have been bred in one of our eastern counties.

The proper time to expect Pigeons in our locality was the first cool spell of weather in September, especially after a heavy storm if none had been seen before. The first clear cool morning after the fall equinox we could expect them with absolute certainty. I well recall our preparations on a clearing night. How carefully we loaded the old muzzle-loader with number six shot and planned for the coming morning; how eagerly we awaited the sunrise from a neighboring hill top, carefully scanning the horizon for a glimpse of the splendid birds! And when they appeared how all eyes would follow them with a view to locating their stopping place, for unless the feeding ground was located, the chance for a pot-pie was remote indeed.

The Pigeons' stay in these parts was a comparatively short one, and I might say that from September 10 to October 10 they could be looked for at any moment, while from the latter date up to and including the first week of November they were occasionally seen, but with rare exceptions only single birds. I recall three occasions when I shot single birds in November, and in each case they were feeding on the ground under oak and dogwood trees. I know of others shooting single birds under similar conditions, one in 1883 and another as late as 1886, and this I feel pretty certain was the last Pigeon ever taken in these parts. It was shot by John S. Murray with a twenty-two calibre rifle one mile north of Radnor Station on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

While as I have said it was the exception to see Pigeons as late as November, nevertheless the largest flock I ever saw was in early November 1877 or 1878, following a heavy rainstorm. The birds were flying along in a northerly direction, high in the air in extended order and probably numbered three hundred individuals. Occasionally in March we saw Pigeons also. In March 1867, when the ground was still white with snow and a heavy sleet covered the trees, a fine bunch of Pigeons settled upon a tall Buttonwood that stood close to our door. As a

matter of course they were promptly greeted with a charge of no. 6, from the old single-barrel and one bird was secured. This flock contained about fifty birds. Again in March 1872 or 1873 during a stormy period my brother rushed into the house with the ever-welcome information that a large flock of Pigeons had just passed down the ridge in the direction of the Letchworth Pines. Immediately two boys armed with shot guns were moving rapidly in that direction. It was a gloomy day and night was near at hand when we reached the spot. I think I shall never forget the sight that greeted our eyes. A giant Black Oak stood in the midst of a thicket of small pines and chestnuts, its huge form towering above the smaller trees, and its naked branches literally covered with Pigeons. A few hasty whispers and we moved cautiously through the pines until within thirty yards of the tree, but before our guns could be properly aimed there was a tremendous uproar, and they were off. Four shots followed them and three birds fell to the earth. This flock contained probably two hundred birds, and could our fire have been properly directed great slaughter would no doubt have followed. We had no flights of Pigeons within my recollection at all comparable to those credited to the upper part of the state, our flocks seldom exceeding fifteen birds. In the fifties, however, as I am informed by Messrs. John S. Murray and Wm. W. Morris, much larger flights occurred, and the wheat fields were regularly visited by the birds. Mr. Murray tells me also that when a boy attending the old Carr school a mile and a quarter north of the present town of Wayne, he remembers old Ben Wharton, continually shooting Pigeons from a great dead oak tree that stood in the eastern end of the playground. At every discharge, the scholars would persist in peeping out of windows to the great annoyance of the teacher. Wharton was quite a noted hunter, as was also Eli Roberts, a veteran of the war of 1812, whom I well remember, wearing a tall hat and doing his shooting with a flint-lock gun. He died about 1870. Wild Pigeons always impressed me as having two principal characteristics, timidity and stupidity. Usually they were very timid and the snapping of a twig or the mere glimpse of a person approaching, would start them in flight, and once when

I had a clear shot at a bunch of seven, the gun missed fire and at the snap of the cap they disappeared like a flash. Again I recall a flock of about twenty birds that my brother and I saw enter a piece of woodland about noon, on a hot September day, which was an unusual time, evidently in search of water from a stream; and we shot three birds in succession before the rest flew away. On another occasion, in the same woods I discovered a bunch of Pigeons sitting in the oaks. Being unarmed, I walked leisurely under the tree and counted the birds and watched them for about half an hour, during which time they exhibited not the slightest fear.

A dead tree-top or dead limb was always an attractive roosting spot, and I have known birds to sit on the same perch for hours at a time. On one occasion my father found three Pigeons sitting on a dead limb, and finding no ammunition in the house, saddled a horse, rode two miles and a half to the store and back, loaded the gun and shot them from the same limb on which he first saw them. Apparently they had not moved an inch. When a Pigeon was resting he invariably sat flat on the limb, his head drawn close to his body. On the approach of danger he generally stood up and stretched out his neck; if his head moved slowly about, you were safe in the belief that he was not alarmed; but if on the contrary a rapid motion of the head was observed, it was a case of shoot quickly, for he had decided to fly, and when he did fly he was off like a whirlwind.

When traveling leisurely over the country Pigeons flew in open order, but when frightened and going at full speed they flew in close rank. Their long tail and pointed wings were quite conspicuous, and there was some resemblance in wing action to a huge Chimney Swift flying dead away. A flock of Kildeers passing a quarter of a mile away at about one hundred and fifty feet elevation gives a good idea of the appearance of a flock of Pigeons.

In flight the female appeared most conspicuous with her whitish breast; the light pinkish breast of the male, however, showed to best advantage when roosting, especially when the light shone full upon it.