

Recollections of the Passenger Pigeon ¹

BY HERMAN BEHR

In Sullivan and Wyoming counties of Pennsylvania the Loyalsock and Mehoopany Creeks, one flowing to the west and the other to the north branch of the Susquehanna River, make their headwaters almost together. Near the divide was situated my home and here I enjoyed some memorable experiences with the Wild Pigeon, the name by which we then knew it. In all directions from twelve to thirty miles in radius stretched a dense wilderness, thickly grown with hemlock, spruce, birch, maple, and beech trees, the last being the most abundant. Under favorable weather conditions the beech-nut crop was very large and, as it provided the principal food for the Wild Pigeons in this section, its size conditioned their appearance and numbers. The spring following a fine crop of beech-nuts would invariably witness a notable flight of Pigeons and the abundance of their special delicacy would tempt them to stay through the summer months.

It was in April more than in any month of the spring that their arrival could be expected. Then, when the last white of winter had vanished before the warm breath of a southwest wind, the flying host of wings would be seen coming on with the wind at terrific speed. In flocks of a hundred or of thousands they would gradually overspread the sky, flying at different altitudes, but all of them coursing in the same direction. Those, which expected to alight in the vicinity, flew low just above the tree-tops, while others, whose goal was farther on, passed over at high altitude, some four to six hundred feet

¹“This description,” Mr. Behr writes, “is given from memory, and the different years when they (the Passenger Pigeons) appeared were taken from a record which I kept of the different game I shot.” He adds: “I tried to give only what I am sure to be correct.”

above the ground. One particular spring in the forepart of the seventies I remember standing on an elevated spot near our barn whence an extensive view could be had for miles in all directions. Flock after flock followed each other across the sky, each pursuing the same northeasterly course. Not only above my head, but on all sides as far as the eye could reach, I could see nothing but pigeons! The sky was full of them, a perfect maze of beating wings, cut here and there by rifts of blue. It reminded me of an oncoming storm, of black, angry clouds, hurtling up at tremendous velocity and with that rushing sweep of sound, ominous of what is to come. For the combined beat of wings overhead was plainly audible and sounded like the hissing of some immense sky-rocket. I do not remember how long it took for this flight to pass or settle, but I do know that after this the birds were plentiful everywhere.

Not all the Pigeons remained for the summer, but those that did, fed on the beech-nuts while they lasted, and then retired to the wet alder marshes to spend the balance of their stay. On several occasions they nested in our neighborhood in great numbers, but at that time I was too small to observe them myself. My father told me that the last time they homed here, he had counted forty-two nests in one beech tree, and old hunters claimed that the nesting-place (possibly the roost) occupied a space seven miles long by two miles wide. All I personally remember is, that those Pigeons, which stayed with us, remained more or less constantly in the alder marshes, frequenting them for food. Here they pried under the old leaves, searching for worms or insects, scratching and digging with great energy. Throughout these operations I do not recall them using their feet once, but always they pried and scratched and dug with their bills. Towards evening they sought out thick clumps of hemlock or spruce trees, ten to twenty-five feet high, and spent their nights there.

My memory of the Wild Pigeon portrays it as a very peaceable and sociable bird. Its friendly nature was particularly noticeable when one flock passed another. Birds on the ground, despite their interest in feeding operations, would always take

time to hail newcomers with a call, peculiar to the occasion. It was a long-drawn and moderately loud repetition of one note, which sounded like "treet," and this would cause the flying birds to alight in nearby trees, giving in their turn a low call, "tret, tret, tret." To me these seemed to be notes of greeting, while other sounds were indicative of sex. For instance, the female call-note is similar to the "treet" above, but the male response is a low "oorn," which cannot be heard farther than two or three hundred feet. My knowledge of these notes is due to the fact that I learned to imitate them perfectly, in order to call the birds up within good shooting distance. Pigeon shooting was almost a daily occurrence, because these birds formed the bulk of our meat supply. To secure enough for our table my father seldom went farther than fifty feet from the house.

The most interesting observation I have to make on the Wild Pigeon is one fixed in my memory during a stroll along a beech ridge back of our house. Being considered too small to carry a gun, I armed myself with a number of light clubs, which I had learned to throw with considerable force. Searching for Pigeons through the woods, I soon heard them ahead of me in great numbers, and working cautiously forwards I quickly caught sight of them massed on the ground and feeding on beech-nuts. They were moving directly toward me, so I concealed myself and waited. Nearly an acre of ground was thickly covered with the birds, all of them greedily busy in the search for food, turning over the leaves to expose the desired nuts. A portion of the flock was constantly in the air, for as soon as one group of birds found itself in the rear, it flew up and over the others, thus securing the front position. Then the next lot of birds in the rear would fly beyond these, and so on, so that the whole flock seemed to be rolling towards me like an ocean wave. Their progress in my direction was once interrupted by some cause of alarm, I know not what, which startled the whole flock into the air at the same instant. The noise of the frightened wings was tremendous, and the disturbance created on the wood-floor resembled the effects of a small hurricane. Leaves and dead twigs were sucked into their wake and whirled haphazard in all directions. The birds alighted on the trees directly above

where they had been feeding so quietly a moment before, and a confused scramble ensued for standing room. Gradually tense attitudes relaxed, the moment of terror passed, and one by one they dropped to the ground again, the whole phalanx rolling toward me as before. Soon they were within thirty-five feet of me, at which distance I terminated our acquaintance by throwing one of my clubs, an action which scattered the birds but failed to kill.

This flock seemed to represent the climax of abundance of the Wild Pigeons in our neighborhood, for after this they were never so plentiful again. The April of 1882 brought them in small flocks, containing from a half dozen to a hundred and after a month's sojourn with us the majority passed on. The few that remained reared young and stayed the greater part of the summer. During the years 1883, 1884 and 1885, there was a noticeable decrease, in fact they were very scarce, here and there a quiet pair and more often single males, hurtling alone across the once crowded skies. The final passing of the Passenger Pigeons occurred for me in 1886 and was made memorable by their appearance once more in unmistakable numbers. Again the hiss of crowding wings was heard overhead and the chatter of greeting flocks; again that bewildering charge of swiftly-coursing wings was offered to our eyes, but it was destined to be the last pageant, the final review foreshadowing dissolution. They, too, seemed to have premonitions, for before the buds had burst to joyous life, palpitating to the touch of a glorious spring, the fated host had passed, vanishing once and for all over the hills and far away.