Two Letters About the Alleged Passenger Pigeons of California

More About Wild Pigeons

Two more letters on the disappearance of the wild pigeon have come in and are published below. Before going further, however, it should be stated that it is not contended that there are no wild pigeons in the United States. The bird that has disappeared is the passenger pigeon. There are two varieties of pigeons on the Pacific Coast, of which one, the band-tailed, is not unlike the passenger. So much for the general situation. The letters follow:

Editor OUTING:

I have been interested in the discussion of the wild pigeons. As a boy of western central Indiana, too, saw the flights of the "billion feathered people of the woods." But I think it must have been several years prior to 1880 that I had my last sight of a wild pigeon in that locality; and it was not until the season of 1887-8 that I was again gladdened by the sight of these interesting creatures. This occurred in the northern part of San Luis Obispo County, California, in the valley of the Salinas River.

But before I take up this part of the narrative I will give my disappointing experience in an attempt, shrewd as I thought at the time, to obtain some pigeon meat. The year I cannot remember, except that it was prior to 1869 and yet after I had seen the phenomenal number of the birds on the wing. And it was only during this particular season that I ever saw the pigeons on the ground feeding upon the birch and acorn mast of the locality.

A flock, of anywhere from three to five thousand birds would occasionally alight under the trees near my home and eagerly search for food, moving in a forward course after alighting; those in the rear constantly rising and flying to the front of the procession.

In those days I was a squirrel hunter, using my father's long, single-barreled rifle, I suppose of the type known as the "Kentucky squirrel rifle," although, according to the lettering on a brass plate set into the barrel, the gun had been made the year I was born, and that, too, in a nearby village where it would naturally be supposed that no one would be provided with the means of performing such a feat.

Noticing this feeding habit of the pigeons, and especially their keen watchfulness and instantaneous flight at sight of a person near them, I conceived the idea of a quick sneak upon them when feeding, sheltering behind a tree near to them, and when arrived at the tree I would step out into full view, and, as they rose in mass, I would fire the rifle at random but in range with the rising multitude. I felt sure that it would be impossible for the bullet to pass through the flock without striking at least one and probably even a dozen birds, on which I could later feed with the satisfaction of a huntsman who knew his business.

I carried out the plan with complete success in every detail except the desired and expected result. If the bullet so much as cut a single feather I was unable to find the evidence of it upon a close search of several minutes, so confident had I been of securing at least one bird.

To return to the California birds, the Salinas River, in the locality mentioned, is about thirty miles from the Pacific, with the Coast Range of moun-
tains between. These mountains were quite heavily timbered with the white and live oak growth of that region. About once in every ten years, a long-time resident then told me, these trees bore a very prolific crop of acorns.

This season, after the mast had commenced to fall, my attention was attracted on different occasions by what appeared to me to be one or two or perhaps three or four wild pigeons high in the air. But on account of the common belief that pigeons were virtually extinct, I was incredulous. However, one day, accepting an invitation to accompany a gentleman on a quail hunt, we went over easterly on the adjoining ranch. (This, too, was the home of the "Maid of Isabel," a tree having a branch grown into the form of a human being.) There were scattering, but generally large, oak trees in that direction. After a time the gentleman said: "I believe that is a wild pigeon in the top of yon oak tree, and I am going to try for a shot at it." Circling until he obtained shelter of another tree, he slipped up in range and obtained his pot shot and down came the hapless bird, a sure enough wild pigeon—and probably the first of the newcomers to lose its life in seeking to save it.

As the days passed the birds became more and more numerous, and by the time the acorns were well ripened there were many thousands—possibly no less than a million of them—in the locality, and all the winter through there was pigeon shooting galore for all who cared to shoot. They were slaughtered in large numbers, yet, of course, still more survived and gradually disappeared with the oncoming spring. I have a faint impression that the next season I saw a few passing about, as if they might have been some of the survivors returned as if to spy out the land and ascertain whether it bore any food for them. But if I saw any at all they soon disappeared. Whether they have ever been seen there since I do not know; nor do I know the range of the birds in California during the heavy mast season mentioned. Reports upon both of these points would be interesting.

There is one thing, however, to which I desire to call attention. Although these birds were veritable wild pigeons, they were not of the same type as those mentioned by Mr. Martin. And your other contributors have spoken of "wild pigeons" evidently having in mind the same class of birds as those mentioned by him.

A resident of the Salinas Valley for many years, who when young had seen the pigeons of the Ohio Valley, gave it as his opinion that these California birds were descendants of the English pigeon, individuals of which must at some time have been transported to the west coast and there, from either choice or necessity, becoming wild inhabitants of the woods. Whether he was right or not I, of course, do not know. I do know, however, that the birds were a different type of pigeon from the Ohio Valley birds, although the difference was so slight that the casual observer would not notice it. I presume that the birds of Oregon mentioned by Mr. Russell were of this California class, and, possibly, even descendants of the survivors of the flock I saw in 1887-8. And even those mentioned by your other contributors may not have been specimens of the class mentioned by Mr. Martin; yet those of which I have spoken were of the same habits. For, although I did not see them in continuous flight, they must have been so passing in other parts of the country, both as they were coming in and afterwards as the survivors were leaving.

In size, markings and points they were between the interior wild pigeons and the domestic birds, yet they were markedly different from the latter and only very slightly so from the former. They were not so dark, scarcely, if at all, showed the brown tinge and had yellow legs, with no doubt whiter body skin.

Of course, you have seen mention of the recent death at Cincinnati of the last positively known representative of the passenger and of the failure to perpetuate the species because of the alleged inability to obtain "new stock" for breeding purposes. I cannot see why the Western birds would not have served for that purpose. It is incredible to me.
that there would have been hybridization of the issue.

After all, why shouldn't the pigeons be as native to the West as to the Mississippi Valley, and the differences between them be due merely to environmental influences? The bluejays of the West are indisputably bluejays, yet they are markedly different from the jays of the interior, and I should think this difference solely due to environment. Are there no naturalists qualified to give us light on these points?

St. Paul, Minn. W. R. Stokes.

Editor OUTING:

I have just read the articles of E. N. Moulton and F. J. Russell in the October OUTING in regard to "What Became of All the Wild Pigeons." Neither of the writers specifies the "passenger pigeons," which are the ones which have disappeared. There are several varieties of "wild pigeons," both east and west of the Rocky Mountains, which are not migratory, as were the passenger pigeons. The ones mentioned by Mr. Moulton were, no doubt, passenger pigeons which were once so plentiful all over the eastern portions of the United States and Canada, and which seem to have entirely disappeared from their old haunts in North America. Mr. Russell's pigeons may have been the nonmigratory pigeons of the Pacific Coast.

Mr. Moulton's idea that the passenger pigeons all perished in a great autumnal storm is, of course, untenable, as millions of them mated and bred in great "roosts" in the mountains of New York and Pennsylvania, and never were north of the Great Lakes. Another reason why they could not all have perished in that way is that their fall and spring migrations always continued through several weeks and extended over a large extent of country from east to west. It is also a well-known fact that their disappearance was not sudden, but gradual over a period of several years. Several flocks were seen in the mountains around Bedford in 1895 and 1896. The last great pigeon roost in Pennsylvania of which I have positive knowledge was in the Alleghany Mountains, about twenty-five miles northwest of Bedford, where they congregated by millions in the summer of 1885. From that time on they appeared in gradually decreasing numbers until they finally disappeared after 1896.

If Mr. Russell saw genuine passenger pigeons in Oregon in July of the present year he has made a most important find, as the general impression among our scientific ornithologists is that the species is undoubtedly extinct. I am reluctant to accept their dictum, however, as hard facts have frequently upset the theories of our most distinguished scientists. I, as a plain observer of facts, am not yet ready to believe that of all the hundreds of millions of these pigeons which were in the eastern portion of the United States only twenty years ago have perished in that brief space of time. Wild geese, swans, ducks and numerous other varieties of migratory birds which never were a tenth part as numerous as the pigeons we still have with us in goodly numbers, though they were as pitilessly pursued by hunters and equally subject to disease and in equal peril from storms. Reasoning from analogy, there seems to be no good reason why the pigeons may not still exist in reasonable numbers somewhere in the vast untraversed forests that are still found in North, Central and South America.

Professional ornithologists have investigated a good many supposed discoveries of flocks of the last passenger pigeons which proved to be some other species, but did not prove that there were no longer any passenger pigeons. If Mr. Russell or the editor of OUTING will write a description of the pigeons he saw in Oregon and their locality and send it either to A. B. Baker, director of the Zoological Park, Boston, Mass., or to Professor Bangs, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge, Mass., he will probably be able to learn whether or not those Oregon birds are real passenger pigeons. If they should prove to be the genuine article there will be little trouble about securing funds to have some of them caught and bred and an intelligent and earnest effort made to restore those splendid birds to our list of game birds of North America.

Bedford, Pa.

John Lutz.