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WILLIAM BUTTS MERSHON — Lumberman, Sportsman, Conservationist

One day in the early 19th century, John James Audubon traveled the 55 miles from Henderson, Kentucky, to Louisville. Through the whole long day, he rode under a sky darkened from horizon to horizon by a cloud of passenger pigeons. He estimated that more than a billion birds had passed over him. Many years later, a cloud of pigeons that flew into southern Ontario was said to be a mile wide, 300 miles long, and took 14 hours to pass a single point. Estimates suggest that there were in excess of three billion birds in that flock.

The passenger pigeon was probably the most numerous bird species on the planet. Market hunters prospered. Adults were shot, and some were baited with grain soaked in alcohol. Some trees had as many as 500 nests, and squabs were knocked down with long poles. Some market hunters set

fires under trees to suffocate the squabs in their nests. Other trees were chopped down or set on fire to make the squabs jump from their nests. Captive birds, their eyes sewn shut, were set up as decoys on small perches called stools (hence the origin of the slang expression "stool-pigeon.") Shooters killed live birds by the thousands in sporting pigeon-shoots. Dressed birds destined for the table were shipped to the Eastern markets by the railroad carload, and others ended up as hog food.

Extinction came with stunning rapidity. Probably the most terrible example of mass slaughter in the history of wildlife was not the buffalo but the passenger pigeon! By the end of the 19th century, the passenger pigeon had disappeared from the earth. Their way of life contributed to their demise because they seemed unable to breed in small groups, and the remaining birds just faded away. The last known survivor, a 29-year-old female named Martha, died in 1914 at the Cincinnati Zoo.

William Mershon was born in 1856. He was a lumberman and businessman in Saginaw, Michigan. His company was one of the largest lumber firms in the state. He was an avid hunter and fisherman and lived during a golden age of sporting opportunities. Although

he participated in the huge bag limits of that era, he became more conservation-minded over the years. He deplored what happened with the extinction of the Michigan wild turkey, the grayling, and most of all, the passenger pigeon. Michigan was the passenger pigeon's last stronghold — yet about three million birds were shipped from there in 1878 by a single hunter!

Mershon was active in Michigan politics and in many conservation organizations, including the Boone and Crockett Club. Although he was a lumberman, he deplored wasteful cutting that resulted in the bank erosion and silt that destroyed some of the prime Michigan trout streams. He was also concerned with the destruction of Michigan's wildlife habitat. Yet he recognized that the doom of the passenger pigeon was inevitable. Vast increases in human population cut into the billion or so acres of primary forest that once covered North America east of the Rocky Mountains. These forests were essential to support the huge flocks that seemed to be a necessary part of the passenger pigeon's existence.

In addition to his book chronicling the demise of the passenger pigeon, William Mershon detailed his own sporting adventures in a second book, *Recollections of my Fifty Years Hunting and Fishing*. He died in 1943. ■

BOOKS BY WILLIAM B. MERSHON

- *The Passenger Pigeon* (1907)
- *Recollections of my Fifty Years in Hunting and Fishing* (1923)

Images from Mershon's two books — In the background is the Nichols deer hunting camp in Michigan (ca. 1886); the color frontispiece of two passenger pigeons; the game brought home by a party of nine for a two week hunting trip (ca. 1889); and Clark Ring playing the violin for the men at the portable house (ca. 1907).

