



SAFARITALK

THEULTIMATESAFARI.COM

No More Marthas, Please

In a bathroom at the Bronx Zoo there is an inscription on the wall: ***The World's Most Dangerous Creature***. Below it hangs a mirror.

Surely the millions upon millions of men, women and children who succumbed in pogroms, genocides and wars since Biblical times prove the point beyond any doubt. But man's destructiveness does not stop at killing his own kind.

The dramatic demise of the Passenger Pigeon shows just how thorough *Homo sapiens* can be in obliterating a whole species regardless of their number. It is estimated that there were between 3 and 5 billion of these birds in the United States when Europeans arrived in the seventeenth century. Yet, this abundant avian species became totally extinct on 1 September 1914 when Martha, the last known Passenger Pigeon, died in the Cincinnati Zoo.

Early explorers and settlers frequently mentioned Passenger Pigeons in their writings. Samuel de Champlain in 1605 reported "countless numbers," Gabriel Sagard-Theodat wrote about "infinite multitudes," and Cotton Mather described a flight as being about a mile in width and taking several hours to pass overhead.

However, the most significant first-hand observations were those recorded by the French-American ornithologist, naturalist, and painter Jean-Jacques (a.k.a. John James) Audubon. His color-plate book, *The Birds of America* (1827–1839), is considered one of the finest ornithological works ever published.

Following is Audubon's eyewitness account of an event in Kentucky where hunters with guns and poles were joined by farmers who came from more than a hundred miles with three hundred hogs to be fattened on the pigeons they hoped to slaughter.

"Suddenly a general cry burst forth, 'Here they come!' The noise they made, even though still distant, reminded me of a hard gale at sea, passing



Passenger Pigeons depicted by Audubon

through the rigging of a close-reefed vessel. As the birds arrived and passed over me, I felt a current of air that surprised me. Thousands of the Pigeons were soon knocked down by the polemen, while more continued to pour in. The fires were lighted, then a magnificent, wonderful, and almost terrifying sight presented itself. The Pigeons arriving by the thousands, alighted everywhere, one above another, until solid masses were formed on the branches all around. Here and there the perches gave way with a crash of birds beneath, and forcing down the dense groups of them with which every stick was loaded. The scene was one of uproar and confusion. I found it quite useless to speak, or even to shout, to those persons nearest to me. Even the gun reports were seldom heard, and I was made aware of the firing only by seeing the shooters reloading."

“Towards the approach of day,” Audubon wrote, “the noise somewhat subsided. Long before I could distinguish them plainly, the Pigeons began to move off in a direction quite different from the one in which they flew when they arrived the evening before. By sunrise all that were able to fly had disappeared. The howling of the wolves now reached our ears, and the foxes, lynxes, cougars, bears, raccoons, opossums and polecats were sneaking off. Eagles and Hawks, accompanied by a crowd of Vultures took their place and enjoyed their share of the spoils. Then the authors of all this devastation began to move among the dead, the dying, and the mangled, picking up the Pigeons and piling them in heaps. When each man had as many as he could dispose of, the hogs were let loose to feed on the remainder.”

Somewhat naively Audubon noted at the time that even though these pigeons were killed “in immense numbers...no apparent diminution comes of it.” While conceding that “persons unacquainted with these birds might naturally conclude that

such dreadful havoc would soon put an end to the species” the famous ornithologist “satisfied [himself] by long observation that nothing but the gradual diminution of our forests can accomplish their decrease.” After all they not infrequently quadruple their number yearly, Audubon noted.

Yet, barely sixty three years after Audubon’s death in 1851 there was not a single Passenger Pigeon left. Even the three hundred and fifty birds that he bought on the New York market and took to England to spread around to noblemen and the Zoological Society had disappeared from the face of the earth together with their off-spring.

The expression “As dead as a Dodo” refers to a distant cousin of the pigeon that also became extinct as a result of its contact with the human race. This flightless turkey-like bird flourished on the island of Mauritius until the arrival of Portuguese sailors in 1507. They and the pigs that they introduced to the island feasted on the unsuspecting creatures while the rats that followed devoured the eggs. The last credible sighting of Dodo was by a Dutch

Shooting Passenger Pigeons





sailor in 1662. Unfortunately there are no precise pictorial records of live Dodos and, understandably, paintings done after its demise vary.

Fortunately, timely intervention by various non-profit and organizations as well as governmental conservation and wildlife agencies in Africa saved the Ground Hornbill from the extinction. Today it is a familiar sight in most of Southern and East Africa.

But the lesson of the Passenger Pigeon does not only relate to birds. It pertains to every living creature. Numbers, regardless of whether it is hundreds, thousands or millions are hardly an assurance that a species will survive the onslaught and intrusion of the **World's Most Dangerous Creature**.

Currently the focus is on rhinos whose hairy outgrowths on their noses were declared an aphrodisiac by clever quasi-pharmacists in the Far East and then, when Viagra, Levitra and other pills flooded the market, became a cure for cancer. With their horns worth more than gold it is not surprising that these unfortunate animals are slaughtered by poachers who hack off their horns and ship them through criminal cartels to ready markets in the Far East.

There are some, who like Audubon, try to reassure us that the rhinos are not really in danger of extinction. They point to an increasing number in parks and in private conservatories and even take comfort in hearing about entrepreneurs breeding rhinos to harvest their horns for the market.

Let's not forget what happened to the Passenger Pigeon. Remember there were between 3 and 5 billion of them at one time and today the very last survivor, Martha, is a mere specimen in the Smithsonian.

Martha (named after Martha Washington) was donated to the Smithsonian Institution, where her body was once mounted in a display case with this notation:

MARTHA

***Last of her species, died at 1 p.m.,
1 September 1914, age 29, in the
Cincinnati Zoological Garden.***

EXTINCT

Let there be no more Martha's in museums, regardless of the species.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Les de Villiers', is written in a cursive style.

Les de Villiers