

Passenger Pigeon Walk 2008
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Mississippi River Revival invites you this Earth Day to remember one wildlife species already gone and to witness others amid critical habitat.

Flocks of millions of passenger pigeons once blotted the sun above the Mississippi, stretching from bluff-line to bluff-line, funneling like dark cyclones down to islands. Flocks turned trees slate-blue for miles.

One settler thought the massive flights sounded like a thousand venting steamboats, threshing machines and locomotives inside tunnels at once. Another sat quietly amid a nest colony and found the doves uncannily fearless, their din resembling “a mixture of sleigh bells and the rumble of an approaching storm.” Males cooed “bell-like wooing notes,” sidling against females, and both parents produced a milk-like curd inside their crops to feed one chick, which grew faster than any nestling today.

If passenger pigeons still existed, the wild doves might breed during late April at Aghaming Park and Preserve, so we'll meet Saturday at the Wisconsin end of the Wagon Bridge for 90-minute walks at 10 AM and also 2 PM. Before we head to swamp white oaks and bulrush marshes, we'll briefly gaze downriver, considering the passenger pigeon colony Zebulon Pike encountered as he returned from seeking the headwaters, 1806.

“The most fervid imagination cannot conceive their numbers,” he said. “Their noise in the woods was like the continued roaring of the wind.”

A white canoeist noted a September roost near Wabasha's Prairie in 1836, and Lafayette Bunnell heard oak limbs crash from the immense breeding flock circa 1843.

Passenger pigeons bred at different islands and forests during different years, facing predators that remain at Aghaming today: mink, raccoons, peregrine falcons, owls, merlins, Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks.

Passenger pigeons did not defend chicks. They used an evolutionary strategy called predator satiation. Predators ate their fill while 90% of chicks successfully left nests, says Birds of North America Online.

Passenger pigeons were decimated during the late 1800s, when harvesters disrupted nest colonies until reproduction ultimately failed. People shot, netted, clubbed and smoked out the doves. They poked, shook and plucked tender-tasting squabs from nests.

The first historical record of a massive nest abandonment derived from a colony near Mankato, 1860. Islands below Wabasha hosted the final massive nesting on the Upper Mississippi, 1871. The last large nesting anywhere occurred in an el-shape 50-130 miles northeast of Winona, 1881.

One of the final railroad shipments to eastern food and trap-shooting markets left Sparta, Wisconsin in 1882.

We'll also gaze at a quiet sandy road the city has considered protecting during the nesting season of snapping turtles, since vehicles have crushed eggs and turtles there. Snappers practice a reproductive strategy currently at risk. It's the wrinkled old-timers,

not young snappers, who reproduce best. The older and larger snappers become, the more eggs they lay.

Snappers may reproduce 60-100 years, but when adults die prematurely, young don't rapidly fill the void like mice or rabbits. A snapper in Wisconsin may take 10-12 years to grow a shell large enough to mate, ten inches, said Robert Hay, Wisconsin DNR.

Snappers fall to plentiful hazards around Winona. Roads and railroads cause significant mortalities along the Upper Miss, and since females migrate to egg-laying sites without males, they suffer the largest losses, according to Mark Andersen, Wisconsin DNR. Riprap also foils turtles during travel. Smaller turtles especially get trapped between rocks and dehydrate or die other ways.

A busy highway near Aghaming--Highway 35--is a death trap in some locations" said Hay. Habitat loss, nest predation, commercial fishing and trapping probably reduce snappers even more than road mortalities.

We'll look for early turtles and also rusty blackbirds, a species in 99% decline since 1966, according to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Rusties foraged atop floating logs beside the path I call Prothonotary Trail last weekend.

Sunday may bring the trail's namesake, the prothonotary warbler, a floodplain specialist in 40 percent decline since 1966. Ospreys may flap and flirt atop their nest, and if we're really lucky, the state-threatened red-shouldered hawk might scream, or the spring's first oriole may sing, or sandhill cranes may fly above a nest again.

The river shines uniquely during Earth Day, reflecting the velvety burgundy of emerging maple leaves, green shoots on purple blackberry stems, cottonwood-tops soft and brushy, chestnut-colored oak buds. Sunlight pours through a mostly-open forest onto mirror-like sloughs while warblers, waterthrushes and kinglets sing amid the flyway.

We'll absorb the tones and hues, discussing how to conserve wildlife in a world of channelized rivers where only 10% of Midwestern floodplain forests remain.

Bring binoculars. Kids get first chance to ask and answer questions.

Info in this story derived from The Passenger Pigeon, its natural history and extinction, A.W. Schorger, and The Use and Conservation of Minnesota Game 1850-1900, E.B. Swanson. The story first appeared in the Winona Daily News, April 26, 2008.