



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



Playing God

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I'm really quite happy having my own words appear in my column but, in this case, I believe what has been printed can't be bettered – and is definitely important enough to be shared with all my readers. Therefore, most of the remainder will be direct quotes and pictures from my alumni magazine, “CALIFORNIA, Fall 2021.”

It was the early 1900s, shortly before the United States entered the first World War, and Martha was at the height of her fame. Perched on her humble roost at the Cincinnati Zoo, she was an object of fascination to the thousands of visitors who lined up just to catch a glimpse. With her muddy-gray plumage and mottled wings, Martha may not have looked the part of an animal celebrity, but she was hardly average – in fact, she was the very definition of one of a kind. After the death of her companion George in 1910, Martha had become the world's last living passenger pigeon.

There was a time not long before when her kind accounted for more than a quarter of the birds in North America and may have been the most abundant bird species on the planet.

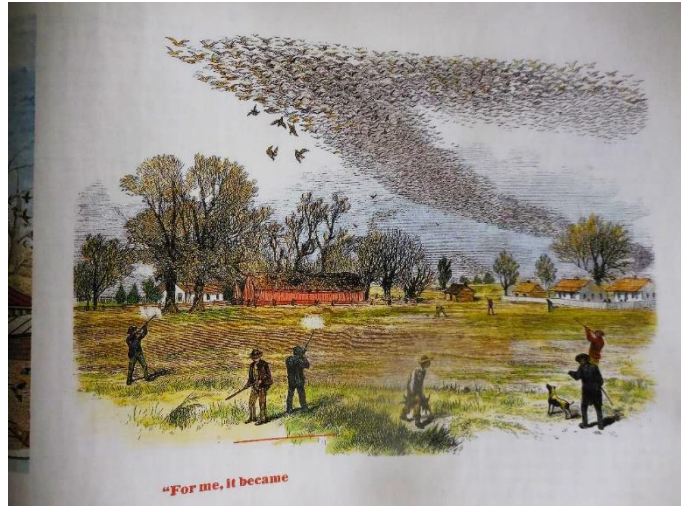


Traveling at 60 miles an hour in flocks a mile wide and 300 miles long, the mere sound of the pigeons' passing inspired whisperings of apocalypse. Witnesses compared it to stampeding horses or a train rumbling through a tunnel. Livestock scattered, children ran home, adults dropped to their knees in prayer. In their wake, the passenger pigeons left a path of tornado-like destruction: toppled trees, razed crops, droppings several inches thick. They were a terrifying and seemingly indestructible force of nature. Until they weren't.

An agricultural pest and reliable source of protein, they became easy targets for hunters who slaughtered them in the tens of thousands, sometimes simply by swatting at them with poles. In a matter of decades, a bird that once numbered in the billions was reduced to a few captive flocks – and then, eventually, to one.

So desperate were her caretakers to continue her lineage that they offered a \$1,000 reward to anyone who could find her a viable mate. None succeeded.

At 1 p.m. on September 1, 1914, Martha fell from her perch, never to rise again – one of the rare occasions in which historians could pinpoint the exact moment of a species' extinction.



More recently dubbed the “sixth mass extinction,” our modern, human-dominated era has been marked by an acceleration in species loss. Close to a thousand animal species have died off in the last 500 years, and the prognosis is only getting worse. We even have a word for animals like Martha: “endling,” meaning the last of her kind.

In her 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, “The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History,” environmental journalist Elizabeth Kolbert writes that current models predict the loss of up to half of all living species in the next century.

That harsh reality is in the name itself – “extinct,” which comes from the Latin word “extinctus,” as in “put out” or “extinguished.” As in, it would take an act of God to relight.

Well, humans have never shied away from playing God.

“De-extinction,” as it's somewhat flippantly called, has been the subject of much scientific inquiry, not to mention speculative fiction over the last few decades.

As noble as that may sound, it raises many difficult questions. Which species should get a second chance? How do we make sure the world we're bringing them into is better than the one they left? And, perhaps most troubling of all: Should we be playing God?

Allow me to leave you with those questions until next week.

Written September 30, 2021