

# The Passenger Pigeon



*Flocks of these birds could quickly strip a field of grain.*

*A place you will read about:* Montreal (mon trē ôl')

a large city in Canada

*People you will read about:* John Jacob Audubon (jon jā' kəb ô' də bon)

an American painter who studied birds

Alexander Wilson (al ig zan' dər wil' sən)

a man who studied birds and made pictures of them

Once there were millions and millions of passenger pigeons in North America. The early settlers could hardly believe the size of the flocks they saw. When they wrote to Europe, they told their friends that there was no limit to the number of pigeons. They wrote about the flights of birds that filled the

skies for miles. The Europeans found it hard to believe that there were such glorious flights of birds anywhere. No one in Europe had ever seen such a sight.

An American observer of nature, Alexander Wilson, wrote in 1810 that he saw a flock of over two thousand million birds.

He wrote that the flock was so thick that it darkened the sky from horizon to horizon for four hours. He said the birds flew past him at sixty miles an hour. They were flying faster than most cars travel on our highways today.

The flocks were so huge and glorious that people in America

thought that these birds would be here forever. But now the great mass of pigeons has disappeared. There are no passenger pigeons left anywhere in the world.

What happened to them?

One trouble was that it took so much food to keep the huge flocks alive. They ate berries, small fruit, acorns, and other nuts. But sometimes they ate the farmers' grain. Alexander Wilson figured that the tremendous flock of pigeons that he saw would eat a total of 17½ million bushels of grain in one day. At that time there were only about six million people in the United States. Wilson's flock could eat more grain in a day than the entire population of the country would eat in a year!

Naturally, the farmers in the United States and Canada were very unhappy to see such huge flights land in the woods near their fields. Near Montreal, Canada, in 1687 the number of pigeons was enormous. They ate so much grain that the farmers considered them evil beings. They asked their church leaders to get rid of the pigeons with specially blessed waters.

Wherever the great flights traveled, they frightened some people with their huge numbers that darkened the skies for hours. They were not flying to find a different climate. They were simply searching for food. When the pigeons discovered enough food, they would land on all of the trees in the neighborhood. Every twig on every branch became a landing place. Sometimes so many birds landed on a single branch that

the branch broke. Sometimes an entire tree would be stripped of every twig by the weight of the passenger pigeons.

Although the pigeons ate a lot, they were also good to eat. They were good-sized birds with heavy bodies. Counting their eight-inch tails, the male pigeons were about seventeen inches long. The males were colored dark blue above and deep red below. Their necks were brilliant shades of shining colors. The females were not so brilliant. They were smaller and less colorful.

The early settlers found both the males and females very tasty. At first they would eat what birds they could and preserve a few barrels of pigeons to help feed their families through the long winters.

Then the trains came along. There seemed to be no limit to the number of birds that the railroad cars could carry for sale in New York and Boston and other eastern cities. John Jacob Audubon, a famous student of nature and painter of birds, reported that in 1805 he saw ships in New York's harbor loaded with pigeons to be sold in Europe for one cent each.

Hundreds of thousands of live pigeons were captured. Many thousands were kept in cages and fattened for the market. Other live pigeons were used in "trap shooting." These pigeons would be let out of traps and then shot by men with guns. Finally the public was angered and put a stop to this cruel sport.

But the public could not save the glorious pigeons that thrilled people in North America for

nearly three hundred years. One reason was that their number was so tremendous. People did not think that they would ever disappear from the skies. However, the female pigeons would breed only once a year. They would lay only one or two eggs at a time. This rate of breeding was not enough to make up for the total number of birds killed every year.

About one hundred years ago, some people began to doubt that the pigeons would thrive much longer. But every year millions of birds were still reported. Most people thought that there was just no limit to their numbers. When one of the great flocks was reported, people would come from miles around to kill the birds by the thousands. Some came just to watch the killing. The number of wild pigeons was dropping rapidly.

The last glorious gathering of pigeons — at least one hundred million birds — was last seen in Michigan in 1878. About twenty years later the last wild passenger pigeon was killed. The brilliant flashing flights were seen no more.

In 1914, in a Cincinnati zoo, a bird named Martha died at the age of twenty-nine. She was the last passenger pigeon in the entire world.

# The Passenger Pigeon

## COMPREHENSION CHECK

Choose the best answer.

1. The passenger pigeon was
  - a. brought to America from Europe.
  - b. a native American bird.
  - c. always a rare bird.
  - d. killed for its brilliant feathers.
  
2. Because there were so many passenger pigeons in 1810, people thought that
  - a. they would scare the little children.
  - b. they would be here forever.
  - c. they would frighten the other birds away.
  - d. a national park should be set aside for them.
  
3. There were so many pigeons in some flights that
  - a. they darkened the skies for hours.
  - b. they kept crashing into each other.
  - c. they frightened the settlers back to Europe.
  - d. they prevented the crops from getting rain.
  
4. One of the largest flights reported had at least
  - a. several hundred birds.
  - b. several thousand birds.
  - c. a million birds.
  - d. many millions of birds.
  
5. The early settlers found that the pigeons ate
  - a. fish and small game.
  - b. only nuts and berries.
  - c. their grain crops.
  - d. mostly insects.
  
6. The weight of a flock of pigeons often
  - a. broke in the settlers' roofs.
  - b. broke the twigs off trees.
  - c. caused landslides.
  - d. crushed the grain fields.
  
7. The last flock of passenger pigeons was seen
  - a. in Michigan about one hundred years ago.
  - b. in a zoo in Europe.
  - c. in Montreal, Canada, a few years ago.
  - d. in California during a snow storm.
  
8. The saddest fact about the passenger pigeon is that
  - a. it ate so many berries.
  - b. it used to darken the skies.
  - c. it broke down so many trees.
  - d. it is no longer living.
  
9. Another name for this story could be
  - a. "The Most Brilliant Birds in America."
  - b. "The Last of the Wild Animals."
  - c. "The Greatest Flocks That Ever Flew."
  - d. "The Bird They Could Not Tame."
  
10. This story is mainly about
  - a. a kind of wild bird.
  - b. the food of the early settlers.
  - c. the largest bird that ever flew.
  - d. how to breed pigeons.

**Preview answer:**

a. North American once had millions and millions of passenger pigeons.

*Check your answers with the key on page 53.*

**Idea starter:** Name some other wild animals that may disappear forever if people do not protect them.

# The Passenger Pigeon

## VOCABULARY CHECK

breed	brilliant	glorious	limit	total	twig
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I. Choose the best key word from the box to complete each sentence. Each word should be used only once.

1. What is the speed \_\_\_\_\_ in a school zone?
2. After the rain, the grass was a \_\_\_\_\_ shade of green.
3. Helen paid a \_\_\_\_\_ of ten dollars for what she bought.
4. Rabbits produce many young because they \_\_\_\_\_ often.
5. A statue was built to honor the \_\_\_\_\_ hero.
6. The robin flew to the highest \_\_\_\_\_ on the apple tree.

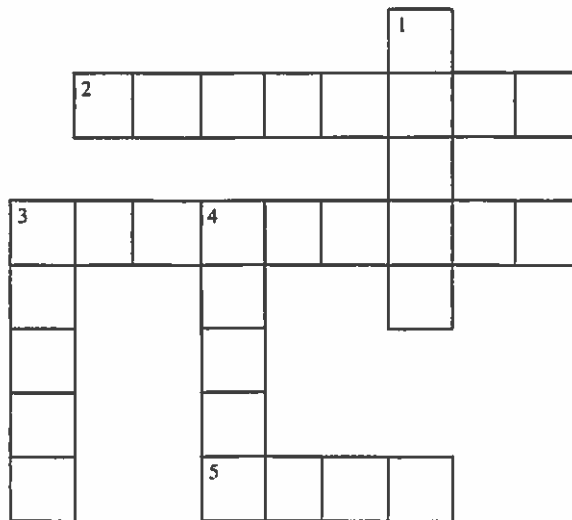
II. Use the key words in the box above to complete the puzzle.

### Across

2. Full of glory
3. Full of light
5. The smallest branch

### Down

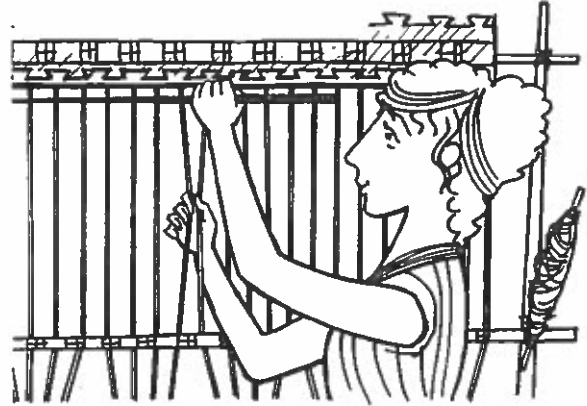
1. The whole amount
3. Give birth
4. Where something ends



Check your answers with the key on page 56.

## Arachne

There once lived a young country girl named Arachne, who was a very talented weaver. She had learned this craft from Athena, the goddess of wisdom and teacher of the arts of spinning, weaving, and needlework. People came from miles around to admire Arachne's work, and she soon became quite conceited. "My weaving is even more beautiful than that of the goddess Athena," she boasted to her visitors.



Hearing this, Athena was **indignant**. Disguised as an old woman, she went down to earth to scold Arachne. "Be careful," she warned. "It is wrong to compare yourself to a goddess."

"But I am a better weaver," the girl haughtily insisted. "Let Athena come, if she dares, and we'll have a competition."

With that, the old woman disappeared. In her place stood the radiant, gray-eyed goddess Athena, crowned with her golden helmet. "Let the contest begin," she said. "We'll soon see who is more skilled."

Arachne and Athena sat down at their looms and began to weave. With shimmering threads of gold and silver, Athena wove wondrous pictures of the gods in all their glory. In the corners of her tapestry, she designed scenes of the punishments of mortals who had dared to compete with the gods. "Take note, foolish girl, before it's too late," she cautioned Arachne.

But Arachne paid no attention. Her shuttle, strung with rainbow-colored thread, flew back and forth across her loom. She smiled to herself as she filled her tapestry with scenes showing the gods' weaknesses, trickery, and faults.

When Athena saw Arachne's work, she was furious. "Your weaving is indeed skillfully done, but your pictures are an insult to the gods. You will pay for your arrogance and your lack of respect," she declared angrily.

The goddess took her shuttle and ripped the girl's tapestry to pieces. Then, she sprinkled Arachne with a magical liquid. The girl's body shrank and shrank until it was no bigger than a pebble. Her **agile** fingers, which had been so clever at weaving, turned into eight thin legs. Athena had transformed Arachne into a spider. "For all your days you will weave and spin," said the goddess, "and so will your children and your children's children."

⇒ COMPREHENSION CHECK ⇐

1. Athena's main purpose in coming to earth to visit Arachne was to
  - A. see if Arachne's weaving skills were truly better than hers.
  - B. give her another weaving lesson.
  - C. have a weaving competition with her.
  - D. scold her for boasting about being a better weaver.
  
2. According to the myth, which of these skills was Athena most likely to teach to women?
  - A. how to write poetry
  - B. how to embroider fabric
  - C. how to play a musical instrument
  - D. how to paint portraits
  
3. In what way were Athena and Arachne alike?
  - A. They were both mortals.
  - B. They both had gray eyes.
  - C. They were both very proud of their weaving skills.
  - D. They both had magical powers.
  
4. In paragraph two, it says, "Athena was indignant." Which of these is the best synonym for *indignant*?
  - A. puzzled
  - B. astonished
  - C. displeased
  - D. afraid
  
5. During the competition, Athena cautioned Arachne to take note before it was too late. What did the goddess want the girl to notice?
  - A. the scenes in her tapestry that showed the fate of mortals who tried to outdo the gods
  - B. that she was wearing a golden helmet
  - C. the shimmering gold and silver threads that she was using in her tapestry
  - D. that her weaving was nearly finished
  
6. In paragraph eight, Arachne's fingers are described as agile. Which of these is the best antonym for *agile*?
  - A. skillful
  - B. strong
  - C. wrinkled
  - D. clumsy
  
7. What emotion did Arachne seem to express while she was weaving her tapestry?
  - A. disappointment
  - B. confidence
  - C. boredom
  - D. sadness
  
8. Some myths have a moral (a lesson to be learned from the story). Which of these is the best moral for this myth?
  - A. Having talent can lead to trouble.
  - B. Some spiders have a poisonous bite.
  - C. Becoming a good weaver requires lots of practice.
  - D. Being boastful and arrogant can lead to trouble.