

Michigan Every Day
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September 1, 1914
Last passenger pigeon dies

Near the close of the 19th century, flocks of passenger pigeons darkened Michigan's skies as millions of the birds made the state their summer home. Early settlers found the birds so tasty and easy to kill that Michigan's passenger pigeons went the way of the mastodon.

The last one died on Sept. 1, 1914, in captivity in the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens. The passenger pigeons nested in hardwood forests near the Great Lakes in the summer and flew south for the winter. As the forests disappeared, and the birds sought nesting areas in and around farms, the birds came to be seen as a nuisance, often requiring an umbrella for protection.

But they were also a delicacy. They were killed at a rate of 50,000 per day and shipped to restaurants around the country. Hunting passenger pigeons became a profession and they were taken in unlimited numbers. A Michigan historical marker commemorates a massive slaughter of the birds near Petoskey in 1878.

In Oden, the marker explains that the passenger pigeon, once North America's most numerous bird, made its pathetic last stand against hunters in that area. Bird hunters devised some not-so-sporting methods to flush them out and make them easier to kill. They baited the birds with alcohol-soaked grain, which slowed them down. They also set fires to smoke them out of their nests. One particularly gruesome method involved sewing a captured bird's eyes shut so it could be used as a decoy. Tied to a stool that could be raised into the air with a lever, the bird would flutter its wings as it fell and attract other birds that could be caught in nets. Thus the term stool pigeon.