

NWI Times Sunday, March 30, 2014

Lessons from Extinction: Local researcher uses pigeons as a cautionary tale about the relationship of humans and nature



Joel Greenberg, a research associate of both the Chicago Academy of Sciences and Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum

by Jane Ammeson Times Correspondent

For those who think feather creatures are for the birds, the plight of the passenger pigeon is the story for you.

From a population that likely reached or exceeded 5 billion, it was the most abundant bird in North America and probably the world according to Joel Greenberg, a Research Associate of both the Chicago Academy of Sciences Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and the Field Museum.

In the ultimate birds of a feather, passenger pigeons aggregated in flocks comprising hundreds of millions, if not billions, of birds.

If you go

What: The Shirley Heinze Land Trust is sponsoring a talk by and book signing by Joel Greenburg. That same day, Ken Brock will receive the very prestigious American Birding Association's Ludlow Griscom Award for 2014.

When: April 6 at 2pm.

Where: Indiana Dunes State Park Nature Center, 1600 N. 25 E., Chesterton, IN

Cost: There is a \$5 park entrance fee; attendees should allow an extra 5 minutes to get to the Nature Center.

FYI: (219) 926-1952

“A single flight in 1860 near Toronto probably numbered more than a billion individuals,” Greenberg said. “Numerous accounts dating back to the 1500s written in at least six different languages attest to this fact. John James Audubon saw a flight in 1813 in Kentucky that darkened the sky for three days. Enough of the birds would land in old oaks such that large branches would break, and the woods would look as if a tornado had hit. One nesting in Wisconsin in 1871 spread across 850 square miles and involved over 136,000,000 birds.”

But luck and man were not on the side of the pigeons.

“The last wild birds were wiped out by the first few years of the 20th century,” said Greenberg who should know, being the author of the recently released "A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction" (Bloomsbury USA 2014; \$26) and co-producer, with director David Mrazek, of the documentary, "From Billions to None: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction" available later this spring. The very last of the species died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914.

Indiana had two distinctions in the history of the passenger pigeon. The pigeons were said to have nested in the Indiana Dunes until the Great Chicago Fire October 8, 1871 started the chain of events that destroyed their habitat here.

“I don’t think the fire itself did it,” said Greenberg noting there were several significant fires on that date including one in Peshtigo, Wisc. which was more destructive than the Chicago fire, killing more people. There were also fires on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan burning such cities as Holland and Manistee.

Indeed, more than the fires was the sacrifice on woodlands rebuild Chicago. Our state's other more shameful act was the shooting of the last wild passenger pigeon in 1902 in a small Southern Indiana town called Laurel.

But how do billion upon billions just disappear?

“They were the cheapest terrestrial protein and thus were highly coveted for food,” said Greenberg who lives in a Chicago suburb. “With the expansion of the railroads and telegraph in the 1840s, it was possible to convey barrels filled with passenger pigeons from rural nesting and roosting locations to the burgeoning cities of the Midwest and East. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of men who spent their entire time following the birds across the landscape and killing them wherever the pigeons might be.”

Not much effort was taken to protect the passenger pigeons from extinction says Goldberg.

“They were thought to be of such abundance that very few imagined they could disappear,” he said. “Michigan was the only state or province that eventually banned all killing of the bird, but unfortunately this was enacted in 1897, a decade or two too late.”

But Greenberg isn’t just aiming to write a history of the bird.

“The story of the passenger pigeon is a powerful cautionary tale that no matter how common something is- be it alive or something inanimate like fuel or water- we can cause its depletion if we are not careful in our use,” he said. “That is an important message everywhere and especially in the 21st century when the world population of human beings exceeds 7 billion and is growing.”

So now, a century after the last bird died, Greenberg believed it's important to mark the event. He, along with others, have spent the past few years building a broad based effort called Project Passenger Pigeon. P3 was created to familiarize people with the story of the bird and as a portal into the current issues related to extinction and the connections between people and nature. Besides Greenberg's book, there's a website, documentary, curriculum, social media and a host of exhibits and programming. According to Greenberg, over 160 organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada are involved at one level or another.

Greenberg described Northwest Indiana as a major birding area. He often goes out on dune trips with Chesterton resident Ken Brock, a renowned birding expert, Professor Emeritus of Geology. At Indiana University Northwest and author of several books including *Birds of the Indiana Dunes* and Brock's *Birds of Indiana* in search of birds.

“I love migration,” said Greenberg, “and Ken pointed out to me that Lake Michigan is the only Great Lake with a north-south axis. It's like a funnel for birds flying south and Miller Beach is where they first cross land after flying hundreds of miles over water.”