

We're all Passengers

The Passenger Pigeon was once the most numerous bird in North America - yet it is now extinct. Students learn how this happened and examine their own thoughts and feeling about extinction.

Time required: 30 minutes

Materials:

- Transparency of two graphics in this activity
- Overhead projector and screen

Instructions for the Teacher:

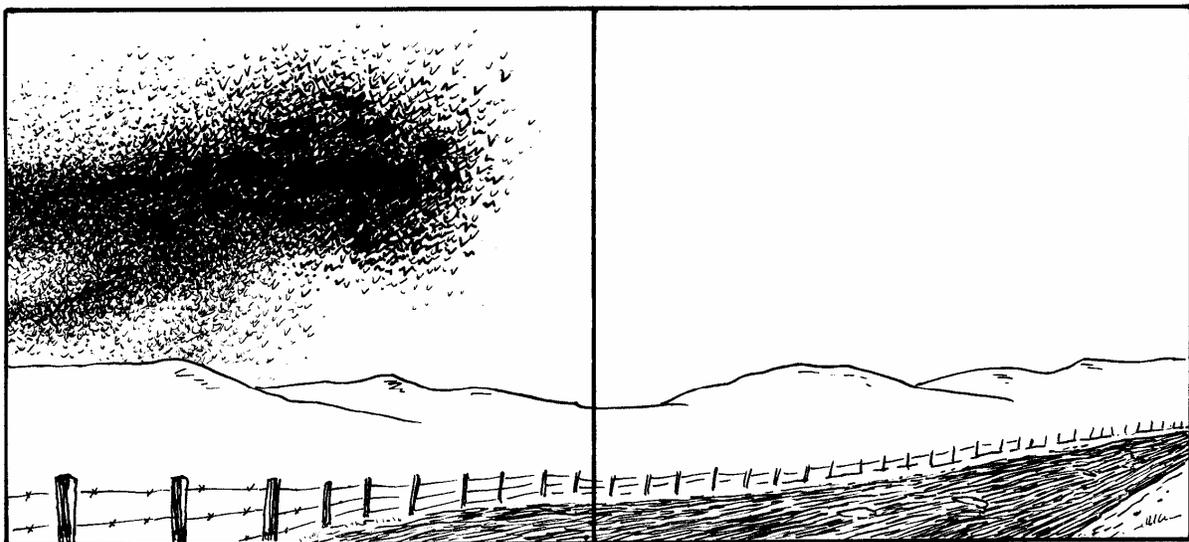
1. Ask your students:

What is your favourite animal? Why? How would you feel if your favourite animal suddenly disappeared? How would you feel if you heard that all of the robins in the world had disappeared overnight?

2. Using an overhead projector, show students the Passenger Pigeon cartoon. Ask them what they think it means. Then read students the story "The Last Passenger Pigeon."
3. After the story, have the students answer the following questions:

How does the story make you feel?

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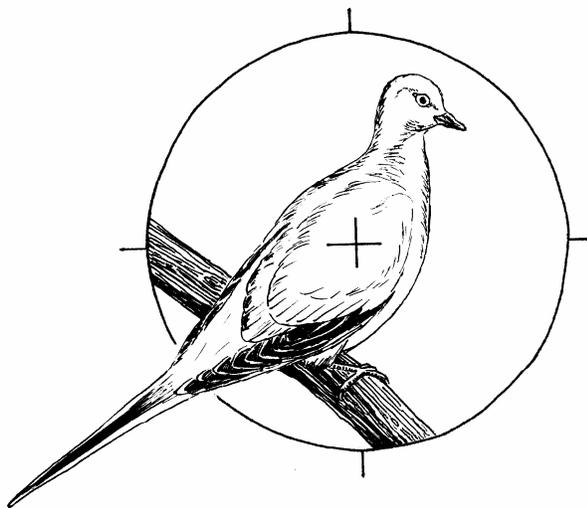
Once an animal is gone extinct it is gone from the Earth forever. There is nothing we can do to bring it back. No one will ever see a live Passenger Pigeon. How does this make you feel? (Ask them to use a descriptive word or phrase.)

4. Tell students that when all the members of an animal species die, that animal is said to be extinct. When the number of animals is low enough so that the species is in **danger** of becoming extinct, the species is said to be endangered.
5. On the board, draw a gravestone for the Passenger Pigeon, with an inscription that reads "Here lies the Passenger Pigeon - extinct because humans didn't understand."

Ask the students:

What does this inscription mean? Do humans understand any better now?

In the last century, humans didn't properly understand that overhunting can lead to extinction. In the past, human actions have resulted in the extinction of species such as the Passenger Pigeon. We now understand that thoughtless exploitation and overhunting drove the Passenger pigeon to extinction; we now know much better the consequences of our actions. Because hunting is much more carefully regulated now, with limits on when hunting can occur and how many animals can be killed, hunting (and poaching, which is illegal hunting) is no longer a cause a big of extinction in North America (although it may be a contributing factor in some cases).



THE LAST ONE

controls on hunting and habitat preservation.

6. Ask the students:

If the Passenger Pigeon were still alive today, and if it were an endangered species, would you let it become extinct?

The answer will most likely be a resounding "No!" This question gives you the opportunity to provide students with a ray of hope. Tell your students that in the last century, humans weren't as aware of our impact on the earth as we are today, and overhunted the pigeon into extinction (show the "Gunsight" drawing to the students). If the Passenger Pigeon were still alive today, and if it were an endangered species, humans might well mount a campaign to save it from extinction, a campaign that might include strict

Modern Alberta campaigns to help endangered animals include the Burrowing Owl, the Swift Fox, and the Whooping Crane. Several activities found towards the end of this guide will enable you to help your students take action to help endangered species.

7. Tell students that, despite what we've learned about overhunting, the rate of extinction is still increasing at an alarming rate. State of the World 1993 (Worldwatch Institute) estimates that nearly 140 species of species become extinct every day on the planet. Many of our fellow "Passengers" on spaceship Earth are at risk of extinction, and there is a huge need for concerned people (such as your students, perhaps) to take action to help endangered animals. Tell students that they will have a chance to help once they learn a little bit more about the problems. The last few sections of this activity guide details some of these actions.

Extension activity

8. Ask the students to write a poem or short story as if they were able to spend a day watching the last animal of a species (i.e. Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon). Ask them: "How do you think this animal might feel? How do you feel about it?" Have them describe this in their story. As a supplementary activity, ask them to do a drawing that shows this. As a follow-up, have students discuss their feelings in a small group setting.

Song: Passengers



Listen to the title song, "Passengers." Write down the following lyrics from the song, and ask students the questions below that follow each snippet of song. Discuss with students and then listen to the song again!

"We're just passengers - that's all/fellow travellers/ on a blue-green ball."

Q: The song suggests we're travellers - on what? (The Earth). Who are the fellow travellers referred to? (all other species of life on the Earth)

"...The joy of life's green web keeps me singing along..."

Q: What is the web referred to here? (The web that is the vast and complex network of relationships between all living things).

"We're just passengers like the pigeons - were!"

Q: What does this line mean? (This is a play on words - not only are we passengers on the Earth, but we're just another species - like the Passenger Pigeon that went extinct in 1914).

"... all those thriving connections make up...diversity."

Q: What does the word "diversity" mean? (It is a synonym for variety. The word biodiversity means the variety of life on the planet - and in a way, it's kind of what this book is about!)

Read-aloud activity: “Martha the Passenger Pigeon”

This is a story about a bird that is no longer found upon the earth, even though it was once the most numerous bird in all of North America. The name of the bird is the Passenger Pigeon.

This slender, fast-flying bird travelled in huge flocks of millions of birds. A single flock would literally darken the skies overhead as it flew, and might take 24 hours to pass a viewer. Pioneers used to rely on the Passenger Pigeon as an important source of food. But they were killed in such vast numbers that the species became extinct.

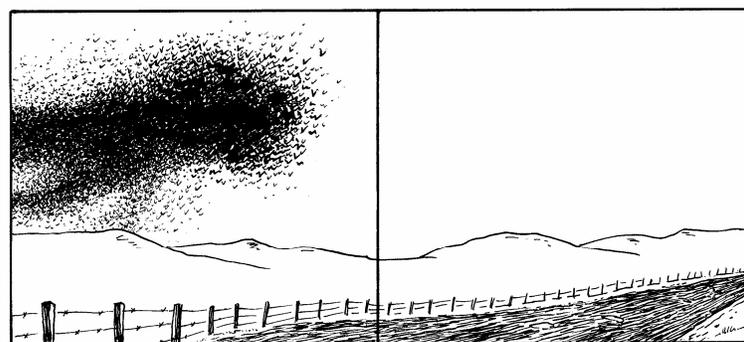
Around one hundred and eighty years ago, a famous birdwatcher called John James Audubon wrote about the arrival of one flock:

“...Everything was ready and all eyes were fixed on the clear sky that could be glimpsed amidst the tall tree tops... Suddenly a general cry burst forth ‘Here they come!’ The noise they made, even though still distant, reminded me of a gale at sea. As the birds arrived and passed over me, I could feel a blast of air from their wings. Then I saw a magnificent, wonderful, terrifying sight. The pigeons, arriving by their thousands, landed everywhere, until solid masses were formed on the branches all around. Here and there perches gave way with a crack under the weight, and fell to the ground, destroying hundreds of birds underneath. The scene was one of uproar and confusion. The birds made so much noise that I found it quite useless to speak, or even shout, to the persons next to me. Even the sounds of the hunters’ guns could not be heard...”

“The uproar continued the whole night. I was anxious to know how far the sound could be heard, so I sent off a man used to roaming the forests, who returned in two hours to tell me that he heard it distinctly five kilometres away from the roosting place...”

Just one hundred years after this was written, a solitary bird sat in a cage in the St. Louis zoo. Its long tail and bright feathers showed that it was a Passenger Pigeon. A sign on the door proclaimed that its name was Martha. She would often sit with her head cocked to one side, looking at the sky intently as if waiting for a huge flock of Passenger Pigeons to fly over. But no more flocks would ever darken the skies again, no feathered wings would ever fan the air into a wind: for Martha was the last of her kind, the last passenger pigeon to live on the earth. On September 1, 1914 Martha died, and the Passenger Pigeon became extinct.

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