

XXXIV. PIGEONS AND PIGEON ROOSTS.

As long ago in the mystic mazes of the past as the writer can remember there was what was called a pigeon roost in a tamarac swamp not far from Wolf creek mills. There were thousands of pigeons then where there are only dozens now.

The history of the bird now called pigeon is very interesting, and in many of its details is quite wonderful. The pigeon is very gentle and peaceable, entirely harmless and even timid by nature. Accurate and experienced "birdologists" who have made the history of the pigeon usually found on this continent a careful study, give accounts of vast flocks covering many square miles of territory in various places in the United States which occurred about this time. During the mating season they describe vast breeding places in western and southern forests, many miles in extent, where as many as ninety nests were counted on one tree. In these breeding places, which were different from the roosting places, thousands and hundreds of thousands of nests were built on the limbs of the trees wherever one could be fastened. The nests were carelessly made of sticks and grass and twigs; sometimes some of them were so porous that, when empty, one could see through them from the bottom.

Only one egg is usually hatched at a time, never more than two, but they make up any deficiency in that respect by repeating the operation several times during the season. The male and female take turns in covering the eggs until they are hatched. At first, and until they are ready to leave the nest and take care of themselves, they are fed on a sort of milk from the old birds which they "belch up" and feed to the young by inserting their bills into their open mouths. They grow rapidly and soon flyaway, leaving the old birds to raise another and probably several more during the season.

The pigeon roost in question was in a dense growth of tamarac trees, and for some distance away from the swamp, oak and other trees were nightly full of these birds. They moved in immense droves or swarms, and looking in the direction from which they came they had the appearance of a heavy dark cloud coming up. As they flew through the air they made a great noise, reminding one of a hard gale passing through the limbs of the trees.

After the roost had been established, and its location had become generally known, the people for miles around turned out in great numbers to see the almost miraculous wonder and secure what birds they needed for food. They were provided with torches, poles, sticks and guns, and sacks and baskets in which to carry them home, and camp fires were built at different places around the roost which embraced several acres of ground. The birds began to arrive about sundown, and all did not get in until several hours later. As darkness came on many of them flew against the trees and limbs and were knocked down, crippled and killed. As they passed over where our camp was located they produced, with the motion of their wings in their flight, a very strong current of air that was remarkable. The birds came in by thousands and alighted everywhere, side by side, one above another until solid masses were formed on every tree in all directions. Here and there the limbs gave way under the heavy weight with la crash, and falling to the ground, destroyed hundreds of the birds beneath, forcing down the dense groups with which every limb was loaded.

It was a scene of the utmost uproar. and confusion. Talking was out of the question, and only the sound of the guns could be heard above the great noise. Men and boys with long poles knocked the birds from the lower limbs and struck and killed many as they came flying in low down in great numbers to the roost.

Our party remained until well on towards morning. After midnight the subsided to some extent, but in the early morning long before objects at all distinguishable, the pigeons began to move off, in a different from that in which they had come the evening before. By sunrise that was able to fly had disappeared. Hundreds were unable to get from having been hurt flying against trees, by the falling of trees from exhaustion and other causes. A circuit was made by our around and through this wonderful roost, and everywhere, from the limbs to the highest, the view through the timber presented a per tumult of crowding and fluttering multitudes of pigeons, their wings like thunder, mingled with the frequent crash of falling timber. It was to walk under these flying and fluttering millions from the frequent of large branches broken down by the weight of the multitudes above, and which in their descent often destroyed large numbers of the birds themselves, while the clothes of those who made the excursion were completely covered with the excrement of the pigeons falling like snow flakes upon them.

A week or so after the roost had been established, the pigeons had broken camp and gone, no one knew whither. During the time they remained, where they went for food during the day no one could tell. They may have gone ten or twenty miles away, or even one or two hundred, as it is thought by those who have investigated the matter that they can fly for many hours at the rate of a mile a minute. Their power of flight enables them to survey and pass over an astonishing extent of country in a very short time. An instance is recorded of pigeons having been killed in New York with their crops full of rice which they must have collected in the fields of Georgia or Carolina, these states being the nearest in which they could possibly have procured that kind of food. As their power of digestion is so great that they will decompose food entirely in twelve hours, they must, in this case, have traveled between 300 and 400 miles in six hours.

After they left the roost it presented a scene of desolation and destruction hard to picture. Many of the limbs on all the trees were broken, hundreds of trees had been felled by the weight of the pigeons roosting on them, and the ground was covered completely with the excrement of the birds, as were also the trees and limbs. Vegetation was killed, and even to this day evidences of the destruction of the multitudes of pigeons that roosted there at that time are still visible.