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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Upshot of the Myth of Superabundance

I've written here before about my first forebears in the New World, how they came to the Chesapeake Bay in the 1600s. In that edition of *Around the Campfire* (#44) I wondered what they thought about the wealth—the Superabundance—of the New World: the mighty trees and seemingly endless big woods. I wrote then about how timbermen and settlers cleared that great forest. Here, I'd like to take a look at another resource the earliest comers to North America thought endless. To do that we must wander back to the world of my earliest American forebears—Tylers and Dodsons—and the rest of the seventeenth century settlers.

If we walk these back paths, seaside Atlantic paths dim and misty from more than three hundred and forty years' time, we find thoughts and feelings about the land that are with us still, that overbear our land and wildlife wrangles today.

Yes, beliefs that linger yet—notwithstanding how they should have fallen to naught but feather dust in the Killing Decades after the Civil War.

Maybe the first take on the New World was amazement at the wealth of wood, fish, game, and farmland. The Western Europe from which the first explorers and later settlers sailed to the New World was an old world—overcrowded, overgrazed, overlogged, overfarmed, overfished; it was a land fearing a stark resource shortage with an energy crisis, a land whose carrying capacity had been overshot—a land and a civilization waning owing to land

squandering and overpopulation. This is why the first tales back from the edge of the world were fat with the fullness of the new land and sea.

John Cabot, on his first voyage of exploration for Great Britain in 1497, was keen to bring back tidings on the mighty white pines—so fit for ships' masts—which he found.^[1] But before Cabot, indeed before Columbus, as early as 1480, British fishermen sailing out of the western harbor of Bristol had yearly brought back whopping hauls of cod and other fish from the fat waters off what was to become Canada.^[2] After his 1497 sailing, Cabot wrote that the Grand Banks were so “swarming with fish [that they] could be taken not only with a net but in baskets let down [and weighted] with a stone.” French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1535 found that the St. Lawrence River “is the richest in every kind of fish that anyone remembers ever having seen or heard of.”^[3] Feeding on the wealth of cod and other fish were endless mobs of seals, whales, and seabirds. Among them was the great auk, a big, flightless bird much like a penguin (but not near kin at all—penguins are found only in the southern hemisphere). A French sailor in the 1530s wrote of the great auks on their nesting grounds, “This island is so exceedingly full of birds that all the ships of France might load a cargo of them without anyone noticing that any had been removed. We took away two barque loads to add to our stores.”^[4]

One hundred years later, south in Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Reverend Francis Higginson wrote in 1630, “The abundance of Sea-Fish are almost beyond beleiving, and sure I should scarce have beleived it except I had seene it with mine owne eyes.” William Wood wrote, “If I should tell you how some have killed a hundred geese in a week, fifty ducks at a shot, forty teals at another, it may be counted impossible though nothing more certain.” (A “shot” was not one firing of a blunderbuss, but hunting from one spot.)

The overwhelming wealth of tall timber, fish, seabirds, and ducks truly drove the making of the Myth of Superabundance. But another, in even thicker-crammed throngs, left the settlers from Massachusetts to Carolina speechless and benumbed. It was the embodiment of Superabundance. Historian William Cronon writes, “Nothing so astonished Europeans about New England as the semiannual flights of the passenger pigeons. John Josselyn [1675] measured their numbers in the ‘millions of millions,’ and spoke of flocks ‘that to my thinking had neither beginning nor ending, length nor breadth, and so thick that I could see no Sun.’”^[5]

Linger here for a little while. Read the above again. Put your feet up and head back. Then close your eyes and through your mind’s eye see what Josselyn saw in his eyes. The flight of the pigeon. Noonday dusk beneath their wings. What a mindboggling sight! What a fright when first you beheld it. Ahh, but what wild wealth when you saw the pigeons fly again!

Aldo Leopold once wrote about how a landscape or any kind of wild neighborhood had its “numenon,” a living being that was the soul of that land.^[6] If the Great Eastern Forest thick with chestnut, oak, hickory, and other mast-bearing trees had a numenon or soul it was unquestionably Josselyn’s passenger pigeon. That storm of life gave being and definition to the big woods from Atlantic shores to the other side of the Father of Waters. In other words, the passenger pigeon was the keystone of keystone species in the Mixed Mesophytic Forest (to call it by its ecological handle) of eastern temperate North America. It was its voice, its heart, its maker, and caretaker.



Outfitted with the Myth of Superabundance and Puritan witch-hunter Cotton Mather's wilderness-conquering theology, settlers scalped the land as they scalped the Indians. All too soon, the endless land-wealth began to run out. Poorly husbanded farms lost their high yield. Overhunting of deer was such that “in Massachusetts a closed season was enforced by 1696, and by 1718 a closed term of three full years became necessary.” Ducks and geese fared no

better: "Massachusetts, in 1710, prohibited the use of boats, sailing canoes, and camouflaged canoes in the pursuit of waterfowl," writes Peter Matthiessen.[\[7\]](#)

Never mind. There was more just over yonder. And the pigeons still flew. Westward ho!

The lines of my family seemed to go through a farm about every generation and then moved on to richer soil, yet-uncut trees, and teeming wild meat. By the 1740s, the Dodsons had left the Virginia tidewater for the edge of settlement in southwestern Virginia. Before 1796, they were hacking away at virgin forest in middle Tennessee. My father's family, Tylers, Foremans, and Shieldses, were trekking, too—first to the Shenandoah Valley and then following Daniel Boone over the Wilderness Road into Kentucky after the Revolutionary War.

They were barely in time. Elk were going fast east of the Appalachians and the last bison east of the Appalachians was killed in 1801 at Buffalo Cross Roads in Pennsylvania.[\[8\]](#) West of the Appalachians all was well, however. Boone recalled Kentucky where he "found everywhere abundance of wild beasts of all sorts, through the vast forests. The buffalo were more frequent than I have seen cattle in the settlements."[\[9\]](#)

In 1808, my great-great-great grandfather William Frizzell settled in Belmont County, Ohio. Passenger pigeons darkened the skies above Frizzell, as they did the skies o'er my forebears south of the Ohio. In 1810, early American ornithologist Alexander Wilson reckoned that a brawny flight of pigeons in Kentucky had 2,230,272,000 birds. That's more than two billion birds.[\[10\]](#) What Josselyn saw nearly 150 years earlier yet had not withered. Thirty years later, when my great-grandfather David Foreman was born in Kentucky, there was still no end to the meaty birds. I wonder if he hefted a gun in the great pigeon hunts when millions were killed on their nesting grounds, salted down for shipment to the cities, or left on the ground for the thousands of hogs herded in for the fattening binge. As late as 1857, the state of Ohio saw no grounds to slow the slaughter: "The passenger pigeon needs no protection. Wonderfully prolific, having the vast forests of the North as its breeding grounds, traveling hundreds of miles in search of food, it is here to-day and elsewhere to-morrow, and no ordinary destruction can lessen them or be missed from the myriads that are yearly produced."[\[11\]](#) Ahh, Superabundance!

After the Civil War, though, landscaping blew up into a giddy free-for-all of bloodletting—The Killing Decades. In the twenty gory years following Appomattox, 30 to 50 million bison were shot, tongues hacked out, and mostly left to rot; most of the Great Eastern Forest from the Appalachians to the Great Plains and Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes was sawed down, burned, and cleared for farms. Even the swift, dreadful ransacking of rainforests in Africa, the Amazon, and Southeast Asia in the last twenty years barely matches the wasted or gobbled flesh and stumps in the United States between 1865 and 1885 or so. It seems that American manhood didn't get enough blood at Antietam and Gettysburg.

And over a billion passenger pigeons were shot down to....

David Day, author of *Vanished Species*, writes, "As late as 1860 any naturalist or layman might easily have argued that the Passenger Pigeon was, in biological terms, the most successful species of bird on earth."[\[12\]](#)



In 1871 in south-central Wisconsin, 136 million passenger pigeons nested in an area seventy-five miles long and ten to fifteen miles wide. That newfangled contraption, the telegraph, drew thousands of hunters in the upper Midwest to the great barbecue waiting for them. Peter Matthiessen writes in *Wildlife in America*, "The area was laid waste. Hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of dead birds were shipped out at a wholesale price of fifteen to twenty-five cents a dozen...."[\[13\]](#) Superabundance still gleefully, drunkenly frolicked in Americans' minds.

Only seven years later (1878), though, in Petoskey, Michigan, came the last big nesting. After the jubilee of killing there, never again did millions of passenger pigeons come together. In 1896, a nesting of only 250,000 pigeons, near Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, drew droves of hunters. (In other words, for every pigeon in this flock, there had been ten thousand in the flock Wilson saw eighty-six years earlier.) It is thought that only 5,000 pigeons fled the slaughter. Forty thousand were left broken and torn on the forest floor for hogs. Ahh, but two hundred thousand were loaded on boxcars and

shipped east.

A derailment up ahead on the line stopped the shipment.

They rotted on the tracks and were dumped into a gulch.[\[14\]](#)

The last of the living storm.

My great-grandfather, David Foreman, living only a few miles away, was fifty-five years old, and my grandfather, William Foreman, who later dandled me on his knee, was thirteen. I hope they were not among the hunters, but I fear they could well have been.

On March 24, 1900, in Pike County, Ohio, a passenger pigeon was shot. It was the last known passenger pigeon in the wild. All hail the man or boy who shot it. He stands as the true soul of the American pioneer.

At 1:00 PM, September 1, 1914, in the Cincinnati Zoo, a passenger pigeon named Martha died.[\[15\]](#) She was the last of her kind in all the world. You can see her today, stuffed with cotton, behind glass at the Smithsonian. The last little puff of a whirlwind of life had ended. I wonder when last she blinked her eyes, if a sweet memory of flying with millions of others flickered blissfully before the dark blew in.

Why? How? We shot them and ate them and left them to feed hogs or to rot like they would never end. Big city hucksters were selling as many as 18,000 birds a day in the 1850s. Shooting clubs would go through 50,000 birds in a week's shooting match.[\[16\]](#)

Even after the last slaughter, we could not believe they were gone. Excuses were made. We could not have done it. They had flown to Australia. They had flown to the moon. They dove to the bottom of the sea. Truly,[\[17\]](#)

On May 11, 1947 (when I was seven months old), the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology put up a monument to the passenger pigeon in Wyalusing State Park. Aldo Leopold wrote about it:

Men still live who, in their youth, remember pigeons. Trees still live who, in their youth, were shaken by the living wind....

There will always be pigeons in books and in museums, but these are effigies and images, dead to all hardships and to all delights. Book-pigeons cannot dive out of a cloud to make the deer run for cover, or clap their wings in thunderous applause of mast-laden woods....They live forever by not living at all.[\[18\]](#)

None of us will ever see such a living wind. We cannot even bring it up before our mind's eye.

So I wonder. One hundred years hence, what that we know so well today will we have sent into the dark of books and museums to be with the passenger pigeon?

Dave Foreman

In my dreams, with Wilson in Kentucky 200 years ago



Adapted from my forthcoming book, Conservation vs. Conservation.

[\[1\]](#) Carl O. Sauer, *Northern Mists* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968), 41.

[\[2\]](#) Sauer, *Northern Mists*, 57.

- [3] Farley Mowat, *Sea of Slaughter* (Bantam Books, New York, 1986), 166.
- [4] Mowat, *Sea of Slaughter*, 23. It took 300 years, but enough "barque loads" were taken and the Great Auk was gone from the Earth.
- [5] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1983), 22-23.
- [6] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), 137.
- [7] Peter Matthiessen, *Wildlife In America* (Viking, New York, 1987), 65.
- [8] Matthiessen, *Wildlife In America*, 63.
- [9] Matthiessen, *Wildlife In America*, 82.
- [10] Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America*, 119.
- [11] Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America*, 158.
- [12] David Day, *Vanished Species* (Gallery Books, NY, 1989), 32.
- [13] Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America*, 159-160.
- [14] Day, *Vanished Species*, 36-37.
- [15] Errol Fuller, *Extinct Birds* (Facts on File Publications, NY, 1988), 116.
- [16] Day, *Vanished Species*, 36.
- [17] Such theories were indeed offered
- [18] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), 108-109.
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