

BIRDS OF IOWA PIONEER DAYS

BY

JACK W. MUSGROVE, MARY R. MUSGROVE, AND

KENNETH E. COLTON

A hundred years ago, as small clusters of rudely built cabins began to dot the western bank of the Mississippi River, and other inland streams tributary to it, wild life in all forms was abundant in Iowa territory. Found in either the heavily wooded regions of the eastern or southern portions of Iowa, or in the prairie or lake regions of the west and north, all of this wild life, both birds and animals, was native to Iowa, and thrived on the wonderfully balanced habitat the territory afforded. Yet that condition of abundance has altered drastically with the passing of years. Today but few of us living have seen the large flocks, herds, or packs that once were common when the settlement of Iowa began. Many birds formerly common are no longer to be found, or are extremely rare, such as the wild turkey, the ruffed grouse, the prairie chicken, the passenger pigeon, and certain species of waterfowl. To the frequently heard question "Why?" one must answer that almost all of the causes for the disappearance of these valuable birds can be laid at the doorstep of man, and his "civilization."

Wild turkeys, like the other birds, were common to all parts of Iowa a hundred years ago, and for many a decade thereafter. Almost any tract of timber, especially along the rivers and in the heavily wooded eastern and southern sections, was certain to yield its quota of this native American bird. Nevertheless, though common in Iowa, it can hardly be said that the bird was unusually numerous, if we are to take the observation of Dr. Isaac Galland, an early resident of Lee County and well conversant with conditions in Iowa as one of her first residents, and as a land speculator among other things. Dr. Galland in his *Iowa Emigrant: containing a*

Map and General Descriptions of Iowa Territory, 1840, wrote that "the wild turkey, which was so abundant on the Ohio in early times, is but rarely found in Iowa; I have, however, seen large flocks of them on the river Des Moines, more frequently than in any other part of the country."¹

The plentiful presence of wild turkeys in western Iowa, however, is well authenticated by the record of John J. Audubon. In a diary kept of a trip up the Missouri River in 1843, this famous naturalist frequently noted these splendid game birds along the Iowa shore. Some wild turkeys were sighted at the southern border of the territory, and all along the upward journey in May of that year, he made record of these large table birds in addition to other bird species observed. Later, on the downward trip in October, Audubon landed near the mouth of the Big Sioux to shoot three wild turkeys, which unquestionably graced "the captain's table" for several days following.²

Even fifteen years after Galland made his comparative observations—and as such they should be recognized—turkeys in southeastern Iowa continued to be "common," as indicated in the well noted diary of William Savage, who kept as full an account of his hunting exploits as he did of the wanderings of his cow and the method of farming he pursued, both of which were fully noted. Sometimes the bag of this nature loving woodsman was but one turkey, more often two, and occasionally as high as five.

Not being a bloody hunter who killed for the sadistic pleasure of taking life, he may be counted upon as having shot the amount he could use, and no more. Though the bird was so common that Savage occasionally could set out "turkey bait" in the field to lure the unwary bird within range of the waiting gun, more often he had to stalk the bird in the woodlands. This he was not loathe to do, for though the female bird and the younger ones were smaller in size, an occasional turkey would register eighteen and twenty pounds, a mighty good addition to the table of a large pioneer family supporting a struggling field of grain and a cow and a farrow of pigs.

¹Reprint in *Annals of Iowa*, Third Series, XII:501.

²*Ibid.*, XVI:414-419, *passim*.

Perhaps it was the result of an unusually high bag, or a successful catch via the bait route that enabled Savage from time to time to bring turkeys to the Salem market. The low price these large brown-tailed birds brought offer further evidence of their plentiful supply; on one occasion he methodically noted in his diary that a young turkey brought but thirty cents.³

Turkeys were a flock bird, and, though nesting on the ground, roosted in trees, where at night silhouetted against the sky by a good moon, they made easy targets for the skillful huntsman. Hunting wild turkey in this manner was one of the more common methods of combining sport and adding variety to the dinner table at the same time. Savage in his meticulous diary entries, notes more than once of shooting "1 turkey at roost."⁴ And even before Savage took up the white man's war against the feathered tribes, John J. Audubon recorded the custom of moonlight hunting of turkey cocks and hens in his diary journal of the Missouri River expedition already noted. He philosophically observed on his downward trip one night that "it is late; had the weather been clear, and the moon, which is full, shining, it was our intention to go ashore, to try to shoot wild turkeys; but as it is pouring down rain as dark as pitch, we have thrown our lines overboard and perhaps may catch a fish."⁵

Inevitably, however, as the advancing tide of settlers brought the echo of a ringing axe into the hills, and claim cabins and pioneer homesteads penetrated the virgin woodland areas of Iowa, the large turkey flocks along the rivers and in the timbers began to diminish. To the loss of their woodland homes and nesting areas due to settlement must be added the decimation of the hunters' gun, for in the absence of well established communities and the "division of labor" found therein, many a pioneer depended upon the assistance of his gun and the availability of wild game nearby to bring meat to the dinner table. This combination of settlement and slaughter almost eliminated the wild turkey population in Iowa before 1900.

³*ibid.*, XIX:90-114, *passim*.

⁴*ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵*ibid.*, XVI:416.

There are to be sure, records of single individual birds in Appanoose County in 1902 and in Davis County in 1905, and of three birds in Lucas County in 1910, but the mere statement of these isolated observations tell a graphic story. By 1910 most of the woodlands capable of supporting these birds had either been destroyed in Iowa, or else so well settled, that the birds, failing to find nesting areas in Iowa, either died out or else migrated to more favorable territories. The passing of these birds entirely exhausted the native supply of wild turkey in Iowa, so far as is known. In later years birds of this species were imported from outside the state and released in suitable localities in the hope that they would multiply and again become a game bird. This hope has been in vain.⁶

The wild turkey has a long record in history. At the time of the discovery of the New World they were very abundant and became a regular source of food for the colonists. Easily killed in their large flocks by the bow and arrow, they were even more markedly thinned out by the use of the gun, though they soon became more wary and gun shy. Still to be found in some parts of the country, notably in the South, legal protection and their shyness reduces the kill considerably.

This bird, America's principal contribution to the domesticated birds kept by man, is best known today by its cousin the "domestic" turkey, or the southern and Mexican strain of the species which the Spaniards discovered in captivity among the Indians of Mexico.⁷ This southern specie, used commonly as a sacred sacrificial bird by the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest, shows its difference from the "wild" strain by the white or buffy tipped tail and rump feathers. The eastern or wild turkey, which was the bird found wild in Iowa, had brown tips on the tail and rump feathers.⁸

The same causes which worked to eliminate the wild turkey also resulted in the practical elimination of the ruffed grouse whose muffled drumming could once be heard in almost any tract of Iowa woodland. The grouse—also called by some a pheasant—though it nested upon the ground, had to have

⁶Philip A. Du Mont, *Birds of Iowa*, (Iowa City, Iowa, 1935), p. 58.

⁷*National Geographic Magazine*, LXX:461-62.

⁸*Ibid.*

large untouched tracts of woodland in which to range and rear its young. But how long did out timber last? It was cleared as quickly as possible, and with it went our ruffed grouse so that today only a few are left. The loss of our timber, and the inevitable smoking gun, combined effectively to place the grouse among the scarce or rare game birds of Iowa.*

Although a ground bird, the grouse never gathered in as large flocks as did the more gregarious turkey, more often maintaining a semi-isolation in small flocks of a half dozen or so. The young are hatched in nests hollowed out of the ground, usually near the foot of a tree, and lined with dry leaves. Even though as many as sixteen eggs are sometimes laid, nesting cover is so scarce in Iowa that the bird does not appear to increase. Some states, though, do have enough birds left for limited hunting seasons.¹⁰

Their drumming, one of the distinctive features of the ruffed grouse, comes as a dull throb through the still woodlands, slowly increasing in speed until it becomes a muffled roar, then it ceases suddenly. If one could trace the sound, he would find a grouse cock strutting on a hollow log, his neck ruffs spread, his tail at an angle, beating the log with his swiftly moving wings. The bird is calling his mates, or perhaps challenging some distant rival, who will answer from his own favorite drumming log.

In the case of the prairie chicken, however, when the prairies were first broken and crops planted the birds remained and even increased, because of the help offered their winter feeding by the settler's shock and stack. And, until settlements became too thick, the prairie chicken adjusted itself to changing crowded conditions, and tended to cling "to the locality in which it was hatched and raised."¹¹ Perhaps these two reasons account in part for the report of one man that actually more prairie chickens were to be seen near the towns and villages of years ago than out on the open prairies. Nonetheless, though frequenting the habitations of man, the bird would not become domesticated, despite the several at-

*Du Mont, p. 56.

¹⁰*The Book of Birds*, The National Geographic Society, p. 235.

¹¹*The Register & Leader*, Des Moines, Iowa, March 15, 1909.

tempts on the part of bird lover made in later years as the species dwindled.¹²

The birds seemed inexhaustable and scant heed was given to any thought of their protection. So common were their appearance on pioneer tables, so easily procured, that many a threshing crew had occasion to pray for "deliverance" from a larder heavily stocked with these birds. Older residents probably can still recall the vast numbers of "chickens" that were to be found in the prairie regions and even in the smaller clearings in the more wooded sections too, how thick they were at feeding grounds in the winter, and how their booming voices could be heard in the courting season of the spring.¹³

The largest single factor in the vanishing of this small game bird—small compared with the wild turkey—was the hunter's gun. During the hunting season, in more than one Iowa town, in Burlington and Waterloo, for instance, the kill of the huntsmen was taken by regular shippers and hurried off to eastern markets.¹⁴ In Fort Dodge, Rees, McBane & Marlatt, real estate speculators and general merchants, found both the demand and the supply so good that they found it profitable to advertise on November 28: "Prairie Chickens Wanted.—We are prepared to buy all the PRAIRIE CHICKENS that will be brought to us during the cold weather this season."¹⁵ In the winter of 1871-1872, 300 dozens of these birds were shipped from Waterloo alone. They were so numerous, and yet the demand so good, that as one Iowan recounted, there are "innumerable half sections in Wright, Franklin and Hancock counties from which market shooters have carried away and sold birds enough to pay for farms twice over in those days, when the birds were plentiful and cheap." The business of supplying the eastern markets was a coldly calculating one according to John C. Hartman, who as the birds were becoming really scarce in Iowa described the first period of recurrent scarcity as being the result of trapping and market shooting. "The half grown chicks were shot in July and August," he observed, "and those that

¹²*Iowa City Republican*, September 14, 1908.

¹³*Waterloo Courier*, February 25, 1911.

¹⁴*Burlington Hawkeye*, Jan. 9, 1910; *Register & Leader*, March 15, 1909.

¹⁵*Iowa Northwest*, Dec. 26, 1864.

escaped were trapped during the winter by farmers and men who made a business of catching them in traps constructed of lath and baited with corn." The results of these forays into the countryside were huge, Hartman recalled as a boy of having seen "three wagons with top box loads of chickens drive into Waterloo in the winter of 1871-72." Drawing from a large surrounding territory, the particular birds Hartman referred to came from Grundy County.¹⁵

Not only were there the so-called "market hunter," but many a weekly newspaper in the middle years of the last century carried an occasional item calling all interested gunmen to assemble for a "chicken hunt" on a certain date. The results of these "sporting" events often reached an astounding bloody total. So plentiful were the birds that a hundred to a single gun were not unrecorded feats of arms.¹⁶ Due to both types of invasions, the commercial butcher and the sporting man, the prairie chicken population markedly dwindled in the seventies, but when the thinning supply of available birds no longer served to attract the commercial hunter, and when the reduced number of flocks no longer made the week-end outings gala gory affairs for even a poor shot, the bird began to increase again. This success only brought tragedy, for as the bird population increased and once more made it profitable for hunters to supply eastern markets with their meat, the market hunters invaded the prairies to wreak their ruinous toll again. And the sporting element likewise took a heedless levy upon the bird. Thus in the middle and late eighties the obvious depopulation of the prairie chickens again brought a period wherein the bird was not so ruthlessly hunted. Recurrent phases of this cycle appeared until about the close of the last century when the second major factor in the disappearance of the bird in Iowa caused their almost complete extinction in this state.¹⁷

Properly called the prairie chicken, the bird failed to adapt itself to domestication because of its refusal to nest in other than virgin prairie soil. As the decades mounted and the

¹⁵*Register & Leader*, March 15, 1909.

¹⁶*Burlington Hawkeye*, Jan. 9, 1910; *Marshalltown Times-Republican*, Sept. 8, 1905.

¹⁷*Register & Leader*, March 15, 1909.

century wore on, that particular kind of soil in Iowa grew less and less. The bird, therefore, was driven farther and farther west by the settler who poached upon the virgin soil. So resistless was this encroachment that according to a report in 1905, the last thirty years had seen the "chicken" almost exterminated.¹⁸ Some still remained, but their number was not ten percent of what they totaled twenty years before. In many a county, the destruction of the bird and the placing of land under cultivation so great that the change was definite and permanent; no longer was it possible to state with a semblance of veracity that "there were more prairie chickens than poultry" in certain counties.

Since that time the decrease in prairie chickens has continued as the area of the state in which the birds are found has decreased. Our state now has precious little of virgin prairie soil left, and as a result only a few prairie chickens. Thirty years ago, one student of the chicken found that he had to go into central Nebraska before he could find the bird in sufficient numbers to study its habits. And that condition hardly exists today. In some neighboring states, however, enough birds remain to support an open hunting season.

Perhaps the most publicized of the once common birds of the middle west, and for that matter, of all inland America, is the passenger pigeon, more frequently called the "wild pigeon" in the early days. This slender long bodied bird differed from the others mentioned above in that for Iowa it was a migrant species, and moved into the state almost solely during its migratory season as it sought food and nesting grounds farther north, or during the southward migration in the autumn.

But unquestionably, in the very early days of Iowa, before the Civil War, the large noisy flocks of these swift flying high shouldered birds were common sights to Iowans. They did not appear in the relatively small flocks of the prairie chickens and the grouse, or even the wild turkey, but rather in sky-darkening clouds that often resembled a roaring thunder in the beating of wings and the blackening aspect of the heavens. In neighboring states it is recorded that sometimes hours were

¹⁸*Marshalltown Times-Republican*, Sept. 8, 1905.

required for a good sized flock to pass, and that they occasionally seemed continuous for days, and so thick that the sun was obscured. Alexander Wilson, an early American ornithologist, estimated conservatively that some of these flocks must have counted millions—millions in sight at one time.¹⁹ Moving in unison and with the muffled thunder of their wings heard for miles around, the flocks usually sought oak timbers, tamarack, hemlock, or groves of beechnut trees. When this noisy invasion and winged avalanche settled for the night in a grove of trees the whirring and beating of wings grew to a roar as the birds fought for room to roost.²⁰ They alighted in such crowded numbers, that aside from trampling upon one another, their packed weight was so great that they often broke branches off their roosting trees. And if they stopped on a newly sown field, the ravenous host swept it bare of every kernel in an hour.²¹

The passenger pigeon, however, was never so common in Iowa as in the eastern central states, notably Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Consequently, the bird did not commonly nest in this state, although there are records of nestings and hatchings, few and scattered to be sure. A few nested along the Yellow River in northeastern Iowa, and are reported by Philip Du Mont as having bred in Woodbury, Sac, Cerro Gordo, Floyd and Jackson counties as well. But the greater part of these numberless flocks moved on to the dark forests of Michigan and the hemlock, tamarack, and beechnut groves of the east for nesting, where also a larger supply of food was available to them. In those areas where they did nest in the hundreds of thousands, their colonies were in keeping with the size of their flocks. Audubon tells of one such colony that extended forty miles in length and was three miles in width.²² In nesting as in roosting, the birds so crowded together that limbs would break and the ground would be littered with the remains of nests, eggs, and young. Their droppings fell as rain on the timber floor. Not a belligerent bird, quite on the contrary,

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Auk*, New Series, XXVII:428-443; XXVIII:346-366, 427-449.

²¹*Marshalltown Times-Republican*, Sept. 8, 1905; *Auk*. *ibid.*

²²*Clinton Herald*, Dec. 1, 1910; *Cf. Auk*, *Supra*.

termed by some a coward, this is sometimes offered as the explanation for their unusual acceptance of the crowded conditions of nesting and roosting.²³

By virtue of being a "way station" in the migratory life of the bird, the passenger pigeon was not hunted in Iowa to the same devastating extent it was in other states. The crowded nature of their nesting and roosting, together with the whirling roar which accompanied the flocks at rest or in flight, and which announced their presence to the whole countryside, made them easy prey to the bloody hunter and farmer, who gathered about the roosting or feeding woods at sunset with guns, clubs, nets, and torches, ready for the slaughter.²⁴ Accounts of this slaughter are now almost unbelievable, though generally agreed upon by contemporaries of those years. Some of these market "hunters" bagged as many as 500 a day, most of which were packed and shipped to market. When the wholesale butchers could carry away no more, hogs were let loose to fatten on what remained, or else the birds were left on the ground to rot.

One account of this mass killing relates that in three years 990,000 dozens of these birds were shipped from western Michigan to New York. Another report states that in 1869 three carloads a day, each car carrying 150 barrels of passenger pigeons, were shipped from Hartford, Michigan, for forty days. The almost unbelievable toll of these seemingly innumerable birds also records that in less than five months, according to one writer, a million and a half birds were shipped from a single Michigan town, and some 80,000 more birds were shipped alive for use in trap shooting. Still another report claims that in 1850 shiploads of these birds were at New York piers, loaded in bulk, sent to the market to sell at a cent apiece!²⁵

Yet so common was the bird that all this shooting, clubbing, and trapping seemed to have had no effect on their numbers, at least few gave any thought to the wild pigeon's possible extinction. Inexorably, however, the ranks of the passenger pigeon began to thin, a trend noted even as early as 1853.

²³*Auk*, New Series, XXVIII:412-13; *National Geographic Magazine*, LXX:495.

²⁴*Clinton Herald*, Dec. 1, 1910; *Davenport Democrat*, Sept. 13, 1914. See also W. G. Mershon, *The Passenger Pigeon*, New York, 1907, especially chaps. 7-10.

²⁵*Ibid.*, *The Book of Birds*, p. 252; the *National Geographic Magazine*, LXX:495.

Some observers tried to comfort themselves with the suggestion that the birds had gone to South America, or some other distant place. When that myth was exploded, the bird, once hunted by men given protection of the laws, became instead the coddled darling of ornithologists.

Although it had been sighted by many of the early explorers in the Mississippi Valley and up the Missouri, by Lewis and Clarke, Long, and Pike, and others of that hardy race, there are very few records proving the numerous presence of the bird in Iowa. The last great flights through Iowa were between 1868 and 1870.²⁶ An idea of how scarce the bird quickly became may be gathered from the fact that the last known nesting place of the bird in large flocks anywhere was in Michigan, in 1877,²⁷ and that in Iowa collecting and sight records of the bird began to be recorded as early as the 1880's, as things of note. W. H. B. Greenwood collected a male bird in Delaware County in 1881, but that record was preceded by Mr. F. V. Hayden of Woodbury County in 1856, when Sioux City was but a small cluster of quickly built houses.²⁸ Small flocks of the birds were reported from a number of the eastern river counties, notably Jackson and Lee in the 1890's, and even a small flock in Polk County in the middle of the state is recorded in 1899. But the large flocks of the 1860's and 1870's never reappeared. By the turn of the century the bird was gone.²⁹

The last known passenger pigeon collected in Iowa was taken in Lee County in 1896, by W. E. Praeger, but no one knows what became of this bird. The last sight records of the passenger pigeon, 1903, as well as some of the previous ones at the turn of the century, cannot be unqualifiedly accepted, since they could easily have been confused with common mourning dove.³⁰

²⁶Du Mont, p. 80.

²⁷*Clinton Herald*, Dec. 1, 1910.

²⁸Du Mont.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Davenport Democrat*, Sept. 13, 1914. The last bird reported shot in the United States was taken in 1904, though sight records, outside of private aviaries, extend down to 1907. The last known specimen, a female, aged twenty-nine years, and itself hatched in captivity, died in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1914.

The truth of what caused the passenger pigeons to disappear probably will never be known, but many possible reasons are given. Some feel that shooting and the destruction of the birds themselves brought about their extinction, that the cutting of timber and destruction of feeding grounds led to a great food shortage, so weakening the flock that disease or parasites claimed the remainder. Others believe that a storm or some other natural disaster caused the decimation of the flock, and cite records of a storm over Lake Michigan after which huge numbers of passenger pigeons washed ashore. At any rate, one of the most numerous birds in history is gone. Never again will its flocks darken the sun, never again will oak trees break under the weight of perching birds, never again will millions of them be shipped east to market. They have joined the ranks of the dodo and Labrador duck.³¹

When Audubon visited Iowa in 1843, he found several birds which are no longer common in the state. On May 8, he tells of seeing Louisiana paroquets; he also mentions them on May 10. Audubon's notes for October also record "plenty of sand-hill cranes." He says that geese and ducks were abundant beyond description.³²

The Louisiana paroquet, a gay little fellow, marked a good deal like the polly in many people's homes, was reported by other early travelers to occur along the streams of Iowa. There is a record of a small flock of them in Decatur County as late as 1872.³³ This bird, like so many others, is considered extinct today, and unfortunately we have no collected specimens taken in Iowa and our records are therefore not very substantial.

But with the coming of man, many of the birds Audubon saw have passed on or have remained only in greatly diminished numbers. The whooping crane and eskimo curlew have disappeared entirely, and the whooping crane's cousin, the sand-hill crane, has almost entirely deserted the state. The trump-

³¹*The Book of Birds*, p. 252.

³²*Annals of Iowa*, XVI:414-419, *passim*.

³³Du Mont, p. 281.

eter swan, which once nested occasionally in the state, has not been seen since 1900, and its numbers are now reduced almost to the point of extinction. Only a few birds remain, in Yellowstone National Park and in Montana, where they are being carefully protected in the hope that their numbers will increase. The whistling swan still occurs in Iowa, but is not nearly as common at it once was.³⁴

Many others of the birds which the early settlers found in Iowa commonly are now considerably reduced in number. And the answer in almost all cases appears to have been man—man's over-shooting, man's cutting of timbers, man's plowing of prairie, man's draining of prairie marshlands, man's reducing of feeding grounds and nesting sites. The question of the future lies strictly with man. He can, if he will, preserve many of the remaining birds, so that future generations will not need to turn to books to learn about some bird of which their grandfathers tell.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 10.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.