

The Passenger Pigeon by Errol Fuller

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BOOK REVIEW

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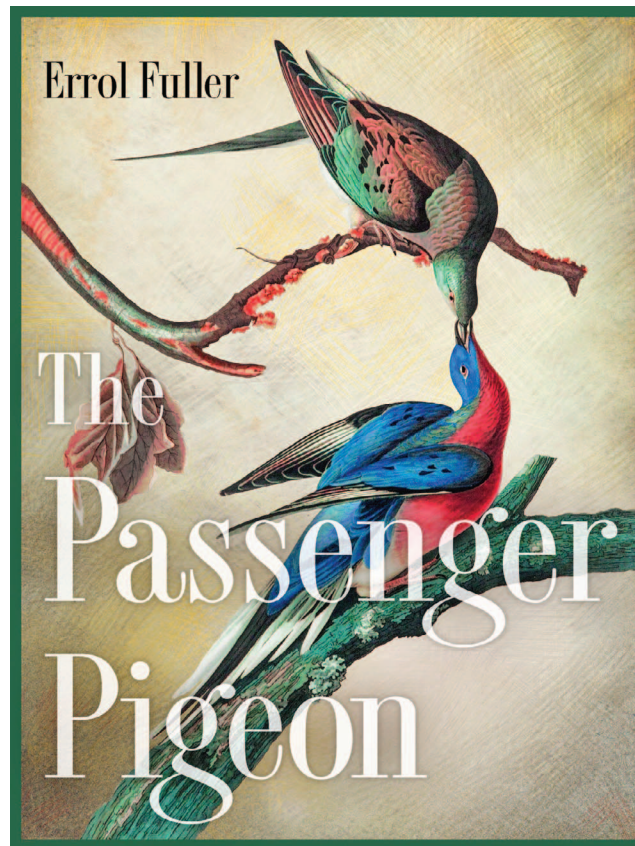
The Passenger Pigeon by Errol Fuller. 2015. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, USA. 177 pages, many color and grayscale photographs, color illustrations. \$29.95 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-6911-6295-9.

Unless you have deliberately avoided news and birding for the past few years, you can't help but know that 2014 was the centenary of the death of Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) known to exist. During 2014 and 2015, no fewer than four books were published and others reprinted to celebrate this extinction (though "celebrate" may be the wrong word—perhaps "memorialize" is more appropriate). Of these, Fuller's is the shortest and the most lavishly illustrated; more than 50 percent of the book is photographs and illustrations. If you are not familiar with Errol Fuller's excellent books on birds—such as *Extinct Birds* (2001) and *The Great Auk* (1999)—this is a fine book on which to cut your teeth (his other books are much more detailed than this one). Fuller is an excellent writer who really does his homework and has a critical eye for details, the human perspective, and art, and he has a low tolerance for speculation that is not backed by evidence.

The Passenger Pigeon is not an academic review of the species. If that is your interest, go back to Schorger (1955). Fuller's book is a tightly written set of highlights of specific passages and events drawing attention to the peak, decline,

and demise of the Passenger Pigeon. Each chapter is short and peppered with illustrations. Fuller starts by setting the mood with a very brief overview of some well-known recent bird extinctions. He then starts in on the pigeon, first by trying to provide imagery of its abundance, then supplying information on the biology of the bird itself—size, appearance, reproduction, habitat use. He notes unusual things about the species, such as its abundance, its behavior of abandoning chicks before they fledged, and some musical interpretations of the species' calls. The next chapter, one of the more text-filled, is about the "downward spiral" of the species, followed by a chapter on "causes of extinction." In these chapters Fuller quotes liberally from firsthand sources and does his best (which is very good) to convey a sense of numbers and loss.

The next chapter is on the "last captives"; there are many (fairly dark, flat) photographs of Passenger Pigeons in dovecotes, with descriptions of the last captors and the possible fates of their birds. This is followed by a short chapter on Martha—her origin, fate, and postdeath pathway to her display at the Smithsonian. The final chapters are on Passenger Pigeons in "art and books," followed by famous, and less famous, early quotations describing Passenger Pigeons and their flocks (by Mather, Kalm, Wilson, Audubon, and others). There is also an Appendix by Julian Pender Hume on the anatomy of the Passenger Pigeon.



The book is a fresh, brief retelling of a well-known story that adds extensive examples of art and photos that are less well known. If I have one criticism, it is that the number of photos of captive birds in boxes was more than was needed, since the only behavior they show is perching and a glassy stare. The book is well organized and well written and should appeal to a wide audience. For readers who are well versed in the Passenger Pigeon story, Fuller provides highlights and quotes that will renew and refresh their knowledge, and his chapters on “last captives” and “art and books” provide images that have not been seen by many people. For anyone who is new to the ideas of extinction or wildlife conservation, or to the Passenger Pigeon story, this book will provide an excellent entry into this depressing but important arena.

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