

**Directions:** Read the report and answer the questions that follow. The following is a draft of a report written by a student for her biology class.

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McLaughlin 1

### **The Passenger Pigeon: A Valuable Lesson**

1 In 1813 the famous naturalist John James Audubon observed a vast flock of passenger pigeons as he traveled through Kentucky. The flock took three days to pass above; in such a black cloud, they obliterated the sun at times. Conservatively, he estimated their numbers at 1.1 billion birds (Reeve 60). This overwhelming population had also been noted by such explorers as Champlain, who reported seeing in 1605 "an infinite number of pigeons" (qtd. in Forbush 40). How could a bird that was the most prolific in North America become extinct? While some might argue they suffered from destruction and loss of habitat, others state that the birds' inability to adapt after their numbers decreased caused their demise. Despite these contributing factors, the main cause of the extinction of the passenger pigeon was unregulated hunting.

2 Some people believe that deforestation caused the downfall of the pigeon. In the 1800s many of America's forests were cut down, and the pigeon was forced to use the forests that remained. By the 1870s, "most of the pigeons concentrated in the West" (Forbush 42). On the other hand, when the forests were cleared, farming expanded. The fields of grain planted in place of the forests offered the pigeon new sources of food. Forbush also maintains, "although great tracts of land were cleared, there remained and still remain vast regions more or less covered by coppice growth sufficient to furnish great armies of pigeons with food" (42). While the loss of habitat did not benefit the pigeon, it was not a major factor in its disappearance.

3 Another reason attributed to the pigeon's extinction was its lack of adaptability. Once their numbers declined, pigeons could not produce enough young to offset those lost to predators, storms, or other natural events. Also, the pigeons' enormous numbers and colonial way of life had previously increased their survival chances. For example, neighboring pigeons cared for orphaned young (Forbush 43). The smaller flocks left in the 1900s could not adapt and rebound without the safety and benefits of large numbers. The passenger pigeon would not have needed to adapt so quickly to such a drastic reduction in its population without overhunting. This was the prime factor precipitating the adaptability issue.

4 The multitudes of pigeons present in the 1800s led most people to believe it was impossible to overhunt this bird, so early settlers generously harvested the birds for food. The pigeons' large nesting colonies and unsuspicious natures made them easy and accessible targets. For instance, one report states that at a nesting site in Michigan, "50,000 birds per day were killed and this rate continued for nearly five months" ("Passenger"). These types of reports were not uncommon. People thought the supply of pigeons would remain endless.

5 In addition, the pigeon was professionally hunted with nets. Hunters might be paid five cents a bird, and in the 1860s, "an army of perhaps 5,000 to 6,000 hunters had mobilized across the U.S." (Reeve 5). Furthermore, the telegraph allowed hunters to hear reports of large colonies of nesting birds. They then traveled to these locations and decimated the passenger pigeon populations. No

nesting site was safe for the pigeons. Next, the railroad made transportation of the birds to different markets possible. Hunters could harvest enormous numbers of birds and ship them to limitless markets. Forbush states, "the New York market alone would take 100 barrels [of pigeons] a day for weeks, without a break in price. Chicago, St. Louis, Boston and all the great and little cities of the North and East joined in the demand" (42). This combination of factors resulted in excessive hunting that dramatically reduced the vast number of pigeons.

6 The Pennsylvania Game Commission states that by the time the government enforced laws protecting the passenger pigeon population, their numbers had already plummeted. Extinction was inevitable. While the birds' disappearing habitat and lack of adaptability sped up the process, the path to extinction began with excessive hunting. Fortunately, the story of the passenger pigeon has taught Americans a valuable lesson. A stronger awareness and concern for wildlife and better conservation laws show that society has learned that no species is too numerous to need protection.

## Works Cited

Forbush, Edward Howe. "Passenger Pigeon." *Birds of America*. Ed. T. Gilbert Pearson. Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1936.

"Passenger Pigeon." *Encyclopedia Smithsonian*. March 2001. 19 Feb. 2002  
<<http://www.siedu//resources/faq/nmnh/passpig.htm>>.

Pennsylvania Game Commission. "Passenger Pigeon." Jan. 2001. 3 Feb. 2002  
<[http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/PA\\_Exec/PGC/pigeon/profile.htm](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/PA_Exec/PGC/pigeon/profile.htm)>.

Reeve, Simon. "Going Down in History." *Geographical* 73 (2001): 60.

Steadman, David W. ". . . And Live on Pigeon Pie." *New York State Conservationist* 50 (1996): 20-3.

Because of testing constraints, some of the specifications of the style manual used (such as double-spacing and a separate page for citing works) have not been followed in this paper.

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1. Which of these sources would most likely contain articles similar to those cited in this report?

F *Hunting Magazine*

G *American History Journal*

H *Conservation Monthly*

J *Forestry Journal*

2. Which of these resources would be **most** useful for a student researching other birds that face extinction?

A A government report focusing on threatened wildlife

B A scholarly journal related to birds and bird watching

C A book detailing the decline of the passenger pigeon

D A magazine article focused on human impact on the environment

3. What does the word prolific mean in paragraph 1?

F intelligent

G abundant  
H attractive  
J respected

4. According to the report, what primarily caused the extinction of the passenger pigeon?

A Loss of habitat  
B Inability to adapt  
C Excessive hunting  
D Natural predators

5. The quotations from Forbush in paragraph 2 clarify that —

F deforestation was only a minor contributor to the decline of the pigeon population  
G the large pigeon population could not be fed by the remaining uncleared land  
H the pigeon population was so large that no amount of deforestation could have affected it  
J such small amounts of land were cleared that pigeon populations were unaffected

6. Which organizational pattern is used in paragraph 4?

A Comparison/contrast  
B Problem/solution  
C Cause-and-effect  
D Spatial layout

7. Which of these could **best** be used as a heading for paragraph 6?

F Saving the Passenger Pigeon  
G Disappearing Natural Habitat  
H Better Conservation Laws  
J Awareness Comes Too Late

8. Which idea from this report would be most difficult to verify as a fact?

A Hunters in the 1860s were paid five cents for each pigeon.  
B Most people in the 1800s believed it was impossible to overhunt the pigeon.  
C The passenger pigeon was professionally hunted with nets.  
D Pigeons were transported by train to New York, Chicago, and other cities.

9. This report uses information from **Encyclopedia Smithsonian** and Simon Reeve's article because they —

F provide concrete statistics  
G describe historical regulations  
H summarize the main argument  
J present an opposing viewpoint

10. A student looking for more information about passenger pigeons found these sources in an online search.

Passenger Pigeon Reference Page

Midwest University's complete collection of articles about the once-great passenger pigeon . . .

Where Have They Gone? On Passenger Pigeons

A touching essay about the disappearance of one of America's native creatures . . .

The Official Passenger Pigeon Page

My good friends John and Kelly have summed up all the information you ever wanted about . . .

EssaysByStudents.com: The Extinct Passenger Pigeon

Browse this and other papers online. Selection begins: "They once blackened the skies . . .

Which site would provide the most reliable information?

A *Passenger Pigeon Reference Page*

B *Where Have They Gone? On Passenger Pigeons*

C *The Official Passenger Pigeon Page*

D *EssaysByStudents.com: The Extinct Passenger Pigeon*