

THE BAND-TAILED PIGEON

Stencil No. 68

By
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Is California about to unfold another chapter in the sad history of the destruction of wild life on the North American continent? Must the picturesque and still comparatively abundant Band-Tailed Pigeon join that limbo of other birds extinguished by man's greed and lack of foresight? Gone are the Great Auk, the Labrador Duck, the Pallas Cormorant, the Heath Hen and the Passenger Pigeon; while the Carolina Parakeet and the Eskimo Curlew are probably extinct; and the California Condor verging on extinction.

The Band-tailed Pigeon (*Columba fasciata fasciata*) is a handsome and distinctive bird of the Sequoia National Park. Its beautiful coloring and graceful form and flight are striking features. The plumage is soft and subdued in color, bluish gray on upper surface of body and pinkish brown beneath, with white crescent stripe across nape, and a distinct dark band across the tail. This tail marking gives the common name "Band-tailed Pigeon". Both male and female are marked alike. When in flight, the birds show a bluish-slate color. The birds in general shape resemble the domestic pigeon, but are possibly more trimly built and larger than most domestic pigeons. They are about fifteen inches long, and weigh about one and a quarter pounds.

The Band-tailed Pigeon is our western representative of a group of closely related species inhabiting North and Central America. They range in the cool forest regions from the Rocky Mountains and westward to the Pacific, from British Columbia to Mexico. In this locality they regularly occur between 3,500 to 6,500 feet. They seldom drift below their range unless forced by scarcity of food. They nest in the mountains in single pairs or many, and sometimes in large flocks. Their nests are the rudest structures of sticks and twigs in either trees or bushes in the more heavily wooded districts. The one or two eggs laid during May or June are pure white in color, equally rounded at each end, about one and one-half inches long and one inch in diameter.

The Band-tailed Pigeon, owing to similarity in form and habits to the domestic pigeon, is easily identified whether perched or in flight. Their deep, mellow "coo-coo" or "took-a-doo-doo" notes, and their direct, swift flight with constant flapping of the wings, are identical with the domestic pigeon. When starting to fly, they also have the same habit of striking their wings in such manner as to give a loud slapping sound similar to the domestic pigeon. I have often watched the birds to find out how they make this loud slapping sound, and for a long time thought it was accomplished by striking the wings heavily against the sides of the body; but in recent years I have changed my mind and now believe it is done by striking the backs of the wings together.

When white men first entered the Sequoia National Park region in 1856, Band-tailed pigeons were found in flocks of millions; in fact, they supplied much of the food for the Indians, who captured the birds by means of traps and snares: but persistent hunting and settlement so diminished the flocks that a law was passed for their protection. Since then the birds have increased, but are still in only a fraction of their previous number.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Band-tailed Pigeons because of their extensive range. Usually they range remote from settlements, and concentrate where food is most plentiful. The flocks in the Sequoia National Park vary from year to year, being very abundant one year, fewer another, and even entirely absent, as was the case during the years of 1903 and 1904. Where all the birds lived during those two years I have never been able to learn; perhaps they were in Canada, or possibly in Mexico. During some winters, when hard pressed for food, the birds congregated in large flocks in the vineyards of Tulare and Fresno Counties to feed on the dried left over grapes. So numerous were the birds that the farmers became alarmed, fearing the buds of the fruit trees might be damaged. Measures of defense included shooting in the air in an effort to frighten the birds away; but as this failed, the State authorities issued permits to the farmers to kill the birds. This proved effective after many of the birds were slain. Just where the birds went, no one seems to know; perhaps to some locality where similar measures further decreased their number, as their home feeding ground was still covered with a heavy blanket of snow, making their existence there impossible. The sight of so many of the birds at one time and place has led many people to believe that the United States is teeming with them. This is not the case. On the contrary, the birds are not abundant, and who knows but that the flocks we had here represented most, or possibly all, of the specie which remains.

The food of the Band-tailed Pigeon in its natural haunts is principally acorns during winter, while in summer they eat practically every kind of berry to be found. When forced to the valley, they eat all kinds of grain. I have never yet seen one of the birds eat any kind of an insect.

Nests Found					Approximate
Year	Date	Number	Location		Elevation
1895	July 15	34	Coffee Pot		5,600 ft.
1896	July 10	2	Surprise Camp		6,300 ft.
1905	July 8	6	Pigeon Creek		5,100 ft.
1906	May 31	2	Garfield Grove		6,500 ft.
1909	June 2	1	Clough Cave		3,500 ft.
1909	June 17	9	Pigeon Creek		5,200 ft.
1914	July 8	3	Black Oaks		4,350 ft.
1915	May 6	1	Big Spring		4,300 ft.
1915	May 15	1	Paradise Ridge		5,500 ft.
1921	May 16	1	Big Spring		4,300 ft.

In making a careful study of the breeding habits of the birds, as revealed in connection with the above information, much data has been obtained.

1. The birds usually construct their rudimentary nest within a period of about three days. Both male and female assist in the building.
2. One egg is laid about as often as two.
3. Incubation takes about 21 days, and both parents take part. Likewise, they both feed the young.
4. The young birds are bright yellow in color prior to acquiring their pin-feather coating.
5. The young are about seven weeks when first they take to flight.
6. When several pair nest in proximity in the same tree, there is much quarreling and fighting amongst the male birds for nest locations. After a pair once start building, the other birds leave them alone.
7. The mother bird, when frightened from her nest of young, leads an intruder away from her helpless young by playing wounded.

Whether the Band-tailed Pigeon will continue to hold its own, or go down and out like its relative the Passenger Pigeon of the east, is a problem. To me it seems that the odds are strongly against our western pigeon. To begin with, the birds are not prolific breeders. Many kinds of vermin and birds of prey destroy the eggs while in the nest, and young birds before they come to maturity. After the birds reach the adult stage, they have but few dangers to contend with, except man with firearms, as they are swift in flight and expert dodgers. Their greatest peril seems to be contracting diseases from domestic fowls, just as do deer when exposed to foot and mouth disease, or buffalo when infected by black-leg. There is great danger of disease when the vastness of their range is considered, as well as the steady increase of settlement. Another danger is from poisoned grain set out for rodents. Ranger Fry, at Three Rivers, once lost 30 carrier pigeons from this cause. Furthermore, the birds will not thrive in captivity.

It is possible that disease, as well as destruction by man, wiped out the Passenger Pigeon. A bird species may survive either attack, but not both. So man should go slow with the Band-tailed Pigeon, or the sad story of the Passenger Pigeon will be repeated.

The vanishing of so many species of our North American birds in so short a time should be a warning to every patriot and bird lover of the nation. Vigilance must be the watchword to prevent one more crime, for I know no other North American bird more deserving of study and zealous care than our picturesque Band-tailed Pigeon. He decorates our foothills and mountains. Long may he wing his swift and tireless flight through the black oaks and the pines.