Pigeon histories go online

Pigeon fancier spreads narratives of species

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cial to The Advocate

RANKLIN — Numbered at more than five billion birds in the 19th century, the now extinct passenger pigeon may be experiencing something of a renaissance thanks to university of Louisiana at Lafayetteology professor Garrie Landry. Through the Passenger Pigeon Society he founded, Landry said he seeks to spread the narratives and history of the bird whose extinction is dated with prompting hunting to protect birds.

Landry's interest in ornithology, or study of birds, began to take shape in 1980, when he started collecting birds. His aviary has since grown to accommodate hundreds of exotic species, including the New Ine pheasant pigeon, the bleeding heart dove and the turkey-sized tortoise crown pigeon, which he said is the largest known pigeon.

His passion for passenger pigeons, however, was a little more recent. In 1999, Landry noticed that a stuffed passenger pigeon was being advertised over the Internet for $1.4 million. Curious, he followed the progress of the advertisement and watched the price drop gradually to a fraction of its original price. So he bought the specimen.

Owning one of the few mounted specimens of the passenger pigeon, however, did not satisfy Landry's keen interest in the bird. He could see the other birds he raised in his aviary — and he did sell them all over the country — but what could he do with a species that had long since vanished from the planet?

After I bought the stuffed pigeon, I developed a Web page dealing with the passenger pigeon and its history. It's amazing how many school children will choose the passenger pigeon to do their reports on. I've even made an offer to post their school reports on the Web page, and...
In the 1850's there were no commercial hunting laws, and for the next 50 years, the huge flocks of birds were hunted, shot and netted. Trappers invaded the northern nesting areas of the flocks. Sportsmen even trapped the birds to shoot them live and use them in "pigeon shoots."

The winner of one shooting contest had to shoot 30,000 birds in one day to win the contest. The population of birds was so decimated by the turn of the century that the last nesting colony — 45 miles wide, 90 miles long, and estimated at 250,000 birds — was reduced to a mere 5,000 birds in a couple of weeks.

The last wild pigeon sighting was documented in 1900. Landry said. The passenger pigeon flocks — once so finely synchronized that every egg in a flock of millions was laid and hatched on the same day — were no more.

In their abundance, the spectacular pigeon flocks held all witnesses in awe. In their extinction, the birds still generate collection mania. Landry's own collection of passenger pigeon paraphernalia has grown dramatically. Before he located his mounted specimen, Landry commissioned a New York artist to carve the bird from a single block of wood. Today, dozens of historical prints depicting the passenger pigeon and other rare birds, including an original Audubon print, adorn his living room.

On the Internet:
The Passenger Pigeon Society: