

The Passenger

Pigeon

Blueprint for Reading

BACKGROUND BYTES

How does an animal species go from a population of billions to none?

In 1857, a committee of the Ohio State Legislature declared, “The passenger pigeon needs no protection.”

Passenger pigeons were slaughtered by the millions. They were killed for their feathers, for sport, for food. In the 19th century, forests in the U.S. began to disappear. The forests held the nuts and berries the passenger pigeon needed.

Once the number of passenger pigeons had fallen below a certain level, the species could not recover. The balance tipped toward extinction—the disappearance of an entire species.

When there are many life forms, it is called biodiversity. With biodiversity, *everything is in balance*, as it was meant to be. When a species becomes extinct, there are massive die-offs of other species, because each depends on the others.

INTO . . . *The Passenger Pigeon*

30,000 species are becoming extinct each year. Nearly half of all living animal and plant species could be lost in the next 50 years. Sadly, those who follow us will not even know what they have missed.

FOCUS

• Memorial Poem

Written in free verse, this form poem cries for the passing of an entire species.

The similes compare the passenger pigeon with stars in the heavens, grains of sand in the sea, and the American buffalo. The metaphors tell us that when these birds took flight, “the sun was darkened and day became dusk.”

• Using Repetition in Poetry

In *The Passenger Pigeon*, the poet repeats words to create an echo. This echo gives emphasis and importance to the words. Because of the way the repeated words are laid out on the page, they look like pigeons in flight.

• New Words to Describe Repetition

Sometimes, we need new words, if we want to describe something perfectly. Try these:

epistrophe (eh PIH stroh fee): The repetition of a word or words at the end of two or more successive verses.

anaphora (an ah FOR ah): The repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of two or more successive verses.

palillogy (pal ILL oh jee): The repetition of a word or phrase for emphasis.

The Passenger Pigeon

Paul Fleischman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PAUL FLEISCHMAN grew up in the 1950s in Monterey, California. His father, Sid Fleischman, is also a well-known children's author. Paul Fleischman's writing is often characterized by a fondness for historical material. Sometimes, he uses a lesser-known snippet from history to inspire a story. He also enjoys writing about contemporary issues. Mr. Fleischman has won the Newbery Award for his work.

We were counted not in

nor

but in

billions.

stars

As grains of

sand

at the sea

buffalo

When we burst into flight

that the

sun

was darkened

day

Humblers of the sun

we were!

The world

inconceivable

Yet it's 1914,

and here I am

alone

the last

thousands

millions

billions.

We were numerous as the

stars

in the heavens

sand

As the

buffalo

on the plains.

we so filled the sky

sun

and

day

became dusk.

Humblers of the sun

we were!

inconceivable

without us.

alone

caged in the Cincinnati Zoo,

of the passenger pigeons.

Studying the Selection

A HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Thank You, World Wildlife Fund!

Does your town or city have grizzly bears in the woods? Condors flying in the sky? Manatees in the rivers? No? Well, it's still full of life. This activity will show the biodiversity (variety of life) in your region. Here is your chance to do a rapid assessment, or quick survey, of your locale.

• Each Student Group Needs

- ✓ A simple map of the survey area
- ✓ pads of paper, pens, and pencils
- ✓ magnifying glasses
- ✓ field guides

• The Task

1. Select an area to study. Form small survey teams.
2. Each team member is assigned a role. Each is responsible for different parts of the survey area, or for tracking specific organisms: insects, plants, mammals, reptiles, or birds.
3. Note all signs of living things and their location. If you can't name an organism, make a sketch and write a description, such as *tiny white flowers with red middles* or *dark caterpillar eating an oak leaf*.
4. Walk softly, slowly, and quietly. Don't frighten the animal life. Don't destroy the evidence! Respect any signs of life, including spider webs and insect hills. Do not injure any organisms.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Is the ending of the poem a good one?

• Look for Animal and Insect Signs

- tracks
- burrows
- nests
- digging and scratching marks
- bones
- feathers
- insect eggs
- cocoons
- spider webs
- nibbled leaves and branches
- animal droppings
- feeding holes in dead trees and logs

• Questions for Discussion

1. Which organisms—plant, insect, reptile, bird, mammal—did your group find? Have you noticed these organisms before?
2. Are organisms present throughout all of your survey area?
3. Would your results be the same during another season of the year?
4. Wildlife habitats are disappearing quickly because of destruction by man. Why do scientists find rapid assessments so useful?
5. All of the small groups from your class can now pool their knowledge. With your teacher's guidance, the class will create a mini field guide, following the model of the field guides used for your survey. The class field guide will show the biodiversity of your survey area. Existing field guides will help members of the class identify the organisms and animal signs they observed.