

# Passenger pigeon

## Passenger pigeon

1898 photograph of a live  
passenger pigeon

## Conservation status

**Extinct** (IUCN 3.1)

## Scientific classification

Kingdom: [Animalia](#)  
Class: [Aves](#)  
Order: [Columbiformes](#)  
Family: [Columbidae](#)  
Genus: ***Ectopistes***  
[Swainson](#), 1827

## Binomial name

***Ectopistes migratorius***  
([Linnaeus](#), 1766)

*Ectopistes migratorius*

The **passenger pigeon** (*Ectopistes migratorius*) or wild pigeon was a species of [pigeon](#) that was once the most common bird in [North America](#).

## Description

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The passenger pigeon, or, wild pigeon was a species of [bird](#), *Ectopistes migratorius*, that was once common in North America. It lived in enormous migratory flocks — sometimes containing more than two billion birds — that could stretch one mile (1.6 km) wide and 300 miles (500 km) long across the sky, sometimes taking several hours to pass.

Some estimate that there were three billion to five billion passenger pigeons in the United States when Europeans arrived in North America. Others argue that the species had not been common in the Pre-Columbian period, but their numbers grew when devastation of the American Indian population by European [diseases](#) led to reduced competition for [food](#).

The species went from being one of the most usual birds in the world during the 19th century to extinction early in the 20th century. At the time, passenger pigeons had one of the largest groups or flocks of any [animal](#), second only to the Rocky Mountain locust.

Some reduction in numbers happened because of habitat loss when the Europeans started settling further inland. The primary factor emerged when pigeon [meat](#) was commercialized as a cheap food for slaves and the poor in the 19th century, resulting in hunting on a massive scale. There was a slow decline in their numbers between about 1800 and 1870, followed by a catastrophic decline between 1870 and 1890. Martha, thought to be the world's last passenger pigeon, died on September 1, 1914, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

In the 18th century, the passenger pigeon in Europe was known to the French as *tourtrel*; but, in New France, the North American bird was called *tourte*. In modern French, the bird is known as the pigeon migrateur.

In Algonquian languages, it was called *amimi* by the Lenape and *omiimii* by the Ojibwe. The term passenger pigeon in English derives from the French word *passager*, meaning to pass by.

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