New technology, new troubles

For centuries, people hunted passenger pigeons for their own use or for sale in local and regional markets. But hunting increased dramatically in the mid-1800s as technological advances created national markets. The nationwide telegraph network alerted hunters to current roosting and nesting colonies. And the expanded railroad system allowed them to ship their catch to the growing cities of the East and Midwest.

Stool pigeons lured flocks to their deaths

Hunters often baited traps with a stool pigeon—a live bird tied to a small stick or “stool.” From their hiding spot, hunters pulled a string to shake the stool, making the bird flap its wings. This movement attracted other passenger pigeons who would land looking for food. Once on the ground, they were easily captured.

“When I shoot my rifle clear, to pigeons in the skies, I’ll bid farewell to pork and beans, And live on good pot pies.”
—Niles (Michigan) Republican, May 6, 1843

Most hunters used guns or nets to kill and capture the birds. Some lit smoke pots beneath bird-laden trees—the rising smoke choked the birds and they fell to the ground. Others used long sticks to knock squabs out of their nests. The fat squabs were especially tasty and much sought-after. But killing millions of young left fewer birds to grow up and produce the next generation.

Pigeon hunters used large woven baskets like this one to collect dead birds.

Hunters nearly wiped out the American crocodile as well, collecting skins for belts, shoes and other goods. Regulations protecting the animal and its habitat helped get crocodiles off the endangered species list, though they remain threatened.