Of pigeons and people

Passenger pigeons and people lived side-by-side for thousands of years, each influencing the other. The birds played a major role in the beliefs and diets of many First Peoples tribes. Both the Cherokee and Seneca perform dances and songs that depict the passenger pigeon. The Ho Chunk held the birds in high esteem and only hunted them for feasts. And the Mi’kmaq of Nova Scotia include passenger pigeons in their constellations.

“...it was proverbial with our fathers that if the Great Spirit in His wisdom could have created a more elegant bird in plumage, form, and movement, He never did.”

—Chief Pokagon, Potawatomi

Pigeon Forge. White Pigeon. Pigeon River. As a prominent and pervasive feature of the landscape, passenger pigeons inspired the names of many rivers, lakes, valleys and towns across the eastern United States and Canada. Some people took the pigeon as their name, such as Potawatomi Chief Wahbememe (White Pigeon, namesake of the town).

European settlers in America supplemented their diet with pigeon meat, shooting some birds whenever a flock happened to pass by.

Wolves also play a prominent role in many cultures, from Pawnee creation stories to Nordic werewolves to Little Red Riding Hood. Once virtually eliminated from the US, the species has been reintroduced into many northern and western states.

Pigeons influenced art and culture

Authors such as Aldo Leopold and John J. Audubon wrote moving passages about the bird. America’s first classical composer, Anthony Philip Heinrich, wrote a symphony inspired by the birds’ migration. Terms such as “clay pigeon” and “stool pigeon” entered our language and remain with us to this day.

Skeet shooters originally used captured passenger pigeons as targets, as their great speed made them challenging marks. The birds were eventually replaced with clay discs, also called pigeons.