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From "Brief Eulogies for Lost Species"

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DANIEL HUDON

From *Brief Eulogies for Lost Species*

The Passenger Pigeon

— *Ectopistes migratorius*

"For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun," said Aldo Leopold in 1947 upon the dedication of a plaque to the passenger pigeon at Wisconsin's Wyalusing State Park, near the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers. He once called it "a biological storm" and mentioned trees that were "shaken by a living wind." According to Chief Pokagon of the Potawatomi tribe, the sound of the birds was "a mingling of sleigh bells, mixed with the rumbling of an approaching storm" (Mershon 50). John James Audubon estimated that a flock about one mile wide and one hundred eighty miles long took three hours to pass overhead and contained a billion members. He described another flock that took three days to pass overhead.

Slightly larger than a mourning dove, with similar but more iridescent plumage, the passenger pigeon was the world's most abundant bird in the 19th century, but by the 1890s, a century of hunting reduced the species to a few scattered individuals.

Remarking on the swiftness of the bird in flight, Audubon wrote, perhaps prophetically, "When an individual is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought, and on trying to see it again, the eye searches in vain; the bird is gone" (Mershon 27).



Passenger Pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*, male, chromolithograph after painting
K. Hayashi (public domain)

The Banff Longnose Dace

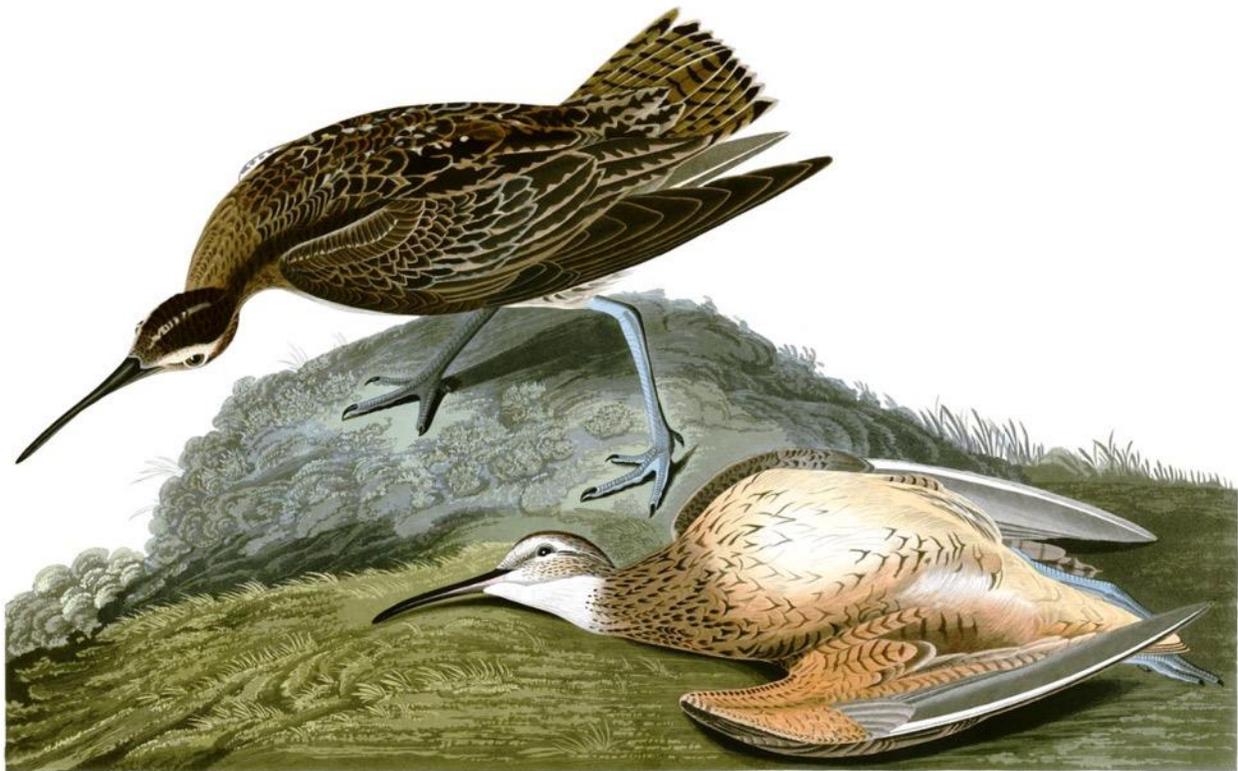
— *Rhinichthys cataractae smithi*

Suspended among rocks and reeds; hiding, darting about to avoid being eaten; foraging at night. It isn't easy being a minnow, especially when your universe is a single marsh fed by a pair of hot springs in Banff National Park. Between the chlorine leaching in from the pools and the introduction of tropical fish—to eat mosquito larvae or just to look at from the boardwalk—who compete for food with you and eat your annually spawned eggs, you know your days are numbered.

The Eskimo Curlews

— *Numenius borealis*

Once the curlews flew across North America in vast flocks a mile long and a hundred yards wide. From far off the calls of a distant flock were said to sound like the jingling of countless sleigh bells. They flew in a wedge shape, the sides of which were constantly swaying back and forth like a cloud of smoke wafted by the lightest wind. At times, the leader would plunge downwards successively, followed by the remainder in a graceful undulation, clumping for a moment into a dense mass and splaying into a thin sheet spread wide, forming and reforming like a great shifting cloud.



Eskimo Curlew, John James Audubon (public domain)

Strong fliers, theirs was among the greatest migrations of any living thing, wrapping the Americas in a giant elliptical ribbon, from their breeding grounds high in the Canadian Arctic to their wintering spot in the Argentinean pampas and back. Southbound, they stopped in Labrador where the Cree named them Weekemenesew for “likes eating berries.” On a visit there in 1833, John James Audubon observed them arriving, “flock after flock . . . in search of the feeding grounds, [flying] in close masses, sometimes high, at other times low, but always with remarkable speed, and performing beautiful evolutions in the air.”

After alighting they all ran the same direction, probing the low bushes with their four-inch bills and picking up the berries in their way. They plumped up so much that by the time they flew down the East Coast, hunters named them "dough birds."

In Audubon's illustration for his landmark tome *The Birds of America*, a male curlew laments his fallen mate. Such a scene was often repeated whether the birds were flying south or north, and in *The Last of the Curlews*, Fred Bodsworth quotes a nineteenth century bulletin: "They were so confiding, so full of sympathy for their fallen companions that in closely packed ranks they fell, easy victims of the carnage." In Bodsworth's tale, a male curlew's solo flight is interrupted when he finally finds a mate. After a brief, exhilarating courtship, she succumbs to a hunter's shot and the male flies on alone.

No Eskimo curlews have been seen since the mid-1980s.

The Great Auk

— *Pinguinus impennis*

Among the islands and skerries of the North Atlantic Ocean once thrived the great auk, an impressive seabird the size of a large goose. Known as *Isarokitsoq* for “stump-winged” by the Greenlandic Inuit, and *geirfugl* or “spearbird” for its large bill by the Norse, the great auk was unable to fly and awkward on land, but a strong swimmer that “easily left a six-oared boat far behind” (Bengtson 3). It was capable of accelerating under water then shooting out of the water to land on a rocky ledge above the ocean’s surface. Otherwise, they would swim up to rocky outcroppings and hop ashore where they would breed.

Some of the larger colonies probably numbered tens of thousands of birds. Males and females were thought to mate for life, and when she was ready, the female laid a single pear-shaped egg directly onto the rocks. Eggs had unique markings, as if brown ink had been drizzled over them, perhaps so their parents could recognize them in the crowded colonies.

A companion of humans for millennia, the great auk was hunted by Neanderthals one hundred thousand years ago and painted onto caves in Spain thirty-five thousand years ago. In the early 1500s, Jacques Cartier was astounded by the large colony on Funk Island, off Newfoundland, saying, “the numbers are so great as to be incredible, unless one has seen them; for although the island is about a league in circumference, it is so exceedingly full of birds that one would think they had been stowed there” (Birkhead 87).

Sighted far beyond these rocky outposts, great auks provided a valuable navigation aid for fishing ships that land was near. Initially, they were hunted for fresh meat, oil, and eggs, as, Cartier adds, “these birds are so fat it is marvelous” (Birkhead 89), but when auks replaced eider as the down of choice, their fate was sealed. With their numbers plummeting in the 1700s from over-hunting, the extinction warnings went unheeded and scientists and museum collectors scrambled to get one before it was too late. The last pair of great auks were strangled off Iceland in 1844 while incubating an egg.



Great Auks (extinct) in summer and winter plumage
John Gerrard Keulemans (public domain)

Lake Hadley Benthic and Limnetic Sticklebacks

— *Gasterosteus spp.*

In biological circles, stickleback species pairs are budding evolutionary stars. Inhabiting tiny glacial lakes in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, they are among Earth's youngest species. They descended from the marine threespine stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*), a minnow-like fish that swims into inland rivers and lakes to mate and reproduce. When the ice sheets receded thirteen thousand years ago, sticklebacks ventured into new streams and, rather than returning to the sea, some young stayed along the bottoms of the lakes to complete their life cycles. For a time, changing sea levels cut off the lakes; when connection was restored, a new wave of sticklebacks invaded, but enough time passed that they didn't see the first wave as potential mates. The second-wave sticklebacks that stayed exploited the vacant shallow water niche of the lakes. Still in the process of speciating, the species pairs don't even have unique names yet; they are simply referred to as *Gasterosteus spp.*

In the spring, male sticklebacks lose their camouflage colors while developing brilliant red neck spots and enticing blue eyes to attract mates. They build small trench-like nests, and when a female approaches, her abdomen swollen with eggs, the male darts about excitedly in a brief zigzag pattern to impress her. If she responds, he shows her the opening to the nest and she deposits her eggs that the male then protects.

But the males were ill-equipped to protect the eggs at night. In the early 1990s, catfish were accidentally introduced to Lake Hadley and, being bottom-feeders, wiped out the next generation of sticklebacks. By 1995, one of evolution's greatest contemporary debuts came to a premature end.

DANIEL HUDON, originally from Canada, is an adjunct lecturer in astronomy, physics, math, and writing. He is the author of a nonfiction book, *The Bluffer's Guide to the Cosmos* (Oval Books, UK), and a chapbook of prose and poetry, *Evidence for Rainfall* (Pen and Anvil). He is completing a manuscript of ekphrastic poems about the paintings of surrealist Rene Magritte, and his new manuscript, *Brief Eulogies for Lost Species*, from which these pieces are excerpted, will be published in 2016 (Pen and Anvil). He lives in Boston, MA.

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