

## – Pleasant Valley, New York –

**I**t is one hundred and sixty miles from Worcester, Massachusetts to Pleasant Valley, New York. Driving west on the I-90, then on Taconic Parkway, then west on US-44, one might take a little over two and a half hours to get there. It would have taken a great deal longer in 1911 when no parkways or freeways existed and a patchwork of railways competed for routes. Clifton Hodge in any case would have undertaken the arduous enough journey (perhaps of five hours or more) with an alloy of hope and resignation. He was on a wild pigeon chase and felt sure that it would turn out to be exactly that. He had not caught sight of the bird since a flock of about thirty birds flying south six years before had excited him so much he took off his hat and waved it, shouting, ‘The passenger pigeons are not extinct!’ and then began a campaign to prove it beyond any doubt. Yet the most hopeful reports had to be followed up, it being a matter of life or death for the species.

And it was no ordinary bird; he thought it the finest breed of pigeon that had ever graced this undeserving world. In early May word had come in from Pleasant Valley of a tiny nesting colony of ten pairs. He could

spot the dozens of false reports straightaway: the nests were in the wrong place, the eggs were of the wrong number, the birds' behaviour was untypical. But this report required his travelling shoes.

When he got to Pleasant Valley he was met and taken to a clump of tall Norway spruces. True, the nests were at passenger pigeon height, thirty to thirty-five feet off the ground, but he sighed, knowing at once that here was merely an uncustomary colony of mourning doves. The mourning dove was the usual suspect when reports of pigeons came in: President Theodore Roosevelt had volunteered to help find passenger pigeon nests but what he found and forwarded were always dove nests. Hodge circled the trees, watched the doves, then went through the motions of climbing the trees and checking the nests. He knew the doves had inadvertently created this colony merely by having to crowd into a few isolated trees. They had probably built their nests unusually high because of the cats he saw malingering and because the drooping lower branches of the spruce had no horizontal support for the doves' rickety platforms of twigs. The passenger pigeon was almost palpable in its absence. He shook hands with his informants, accepted their \$5 forfeit fee, and retraced his steps to Worcester where he taught in Clark University, no closer to solving the passenger pigeon problem. All of eighteen months before, he had made it clear he could not blame anyone who lost hope that a wild member of the species existed anywhere on the North American continent.

The problem, as he had called it when he addressed the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) in New York City in December 1909, was how to explain not just the disastrous collapse of the species but the failure to find nests even while apparently reputable sightings were reported. Perhaps the dollar incentive needed to be raised; certainly it needed to be swung in another direction. The businessman and philanthropist Colonel Anthony Kuser had offered \$100 for 'the discovery of any surviving representative of the Passenger Pigeon' (as the AOU rather legalistically put it). This included the fresh carcass of what *had* been a surviving representative of the species until the discoverer got it in his sights. Then the penny dropped that if theirs was an effort to preserve, not kill, the ways of the shotgun-wielding field-collector were inappropriate; the reward would become a bounty and some innocent or guilty party might claim \$100 for the scalp of the very last passenger pigeon in the wild. Kuser withdrew his offer and replaced it with \$300 (not far short of \$7,000 today) 'for first information on a nesting pair of wild passenger pigeons (*Ectopistes migratoria*) undisturbed'. After Hodge had spoken at the annual Stated Meeting of the AOU, the virtuoso zoologist and pioneer ecologist C. William Beebe of the New York Zoo announced the new reward, directing correspondence on the matter to Clifton Hodge. Beebe was on the eve of an expedition across the northern hemisphere to research and collect the world's pheasants, financed by

Kuser, who later lent money to William Fox to establish 20th Century Fox.

Soon other pledges came in from well-known ornithologists whose names were to become associated with the doomed bird – the wealthy lumberman W. B. Mershon, the pigeon specialist Charles Otis Whitman, Ruthven Deane (a founder of the AOU), John E. Thayer (of the philanthropic banking family and son of the man who financed Louis Agassiz' expedition to South America) and the suitably named Edward Avis (a famous bird-imitator) and George Bird Grinnell, the latter a Renaissance man among naturalists. The legendary conservationist John Burroughs pledged \$100 for proof of an occupied New York nest. Burroughs' friend John Lewis Childs, the politician, horticulturalist (who started the first seed catalogue business in the United States) and avid ornithologist, offered \$1,200. Eventually the sum of \$3,045 (\$70,000) was raised for regional rewards and for office and travelling expenses. By the start of 1910 the Passenger Pigeon Investigation was fully primed. The biologist William Lochhead in Quebec was in charge of reports from the vastnesses of Canada where the pigeon had once flourished in the east of the country. Hodge had a large wall map of North America bristling with variously coloured pins at the ready. This 'plan of campaign' was to be warfare backwards: to find and rescue friends, not find and destroy the enemy. Or less warfare, perhaps, than a different kind of zoological expedition, though there

were no qualifications for membership, since anyone could join the Passenger Pigeon Restoration Club of America. Yet the Investigation lacked the optimism of Beebe's quixotic pheasant hunt. Many had already deemed the species extinct.

Still, hope flickered. In February 1910 Hodge reported nine red flags on his large wall map where pigeons had allegedly been seen in 1909 in all of nine states, from New Hampshire to Kansas. But a sighting of *Ectopistes migratorius* (as it had belatedly in its career come to be scientifically known) was an oddly frail thing; to see it in one place was no guarantee of seeing it again in the same place: the bird moved through space and time on some improvised itinerary perhaps unknown even to itself. Hope was thus unique and did not breed itself – it was kept alive chiefly in the energetic preparations for the search. These included a special all-points bulletin issued by the *New York Times* on 4 April: 'Reward for Wild Pigeons'. This, like the leaflet published by Chas. K. Reed, with a description and a coloured picture of the pigeon (cock, hen and juvenile) and a list of the rewards, was timed to coincide with the previously earliest recorded date for a pigeon nesting – the first week of April. The next two months, the leaflet claimed, would decide whether or not 'the great North American pigeon is extinct'.

Charles Keller Reed of Hodge's home town of Worcester was making amends. He had been a taxidermist, egg-collector, naturalists' supplier, editor

and publisher. By 1904 the Audubon bird-protection movement was gaining purchase on the American conscience and the New York branch accused Reed of illegal trade in eggs and specimens: in 1905, feeling the wind in his face, he sold his immense egg collection and turned to conservation. Reed's conversion began to look too late. A year after he addressed the AOU, Hodge gloomily reported his findings to it. Not one reward had been successfully claimed. 'What is the reason or sense in prolonging the misery?' But to keep faith with the North American public, the rewards needed to be kept alive until 1 October 1911. It looked as if the worst fears of American naturalists were confirmed, yet the campaign still needed to be waged the next season. Indeed, the Investigation, thus far a desperate scramble to reverse those fears, could become an educational campaign involving school children and college students in Canada and the United States. It was this return to the fray that six months later took Clifton Hodge to Pleasant Valley, New York, in search of the unconfirmed.