The emotional ecology of pigeons in early modern England and America

ABSTRACT

This article explores the feelings English people had about, and with, pigeons in early modern England and America. In so doing, the paper uses the concept of an emotional ecology, an understanding of emotion that is situated in a web of relations with other creatures and things. To do this, the paper outlines the context of everyday interactions with pigeons in England and uses these contexts to outline how rural tenants felt about the pigeons in their midst. Hungry, fecund, and gregarious, pigeons cut a divisive figure in the English landscape. Legal sanction and customary practice marked them as privileged while a wide range of other potential agricultural pests were enthusiastically suppressed. We then look at how settler colonists experienced an abundance of American pigeons, particularly the passenger pigeon which would be hunted to extinction in the nineteenth century. Together, this story provides an example of how environments, culture and emotions are mutually, if not equally, constitutive of one another.

KEYWORDS

emotions, pigeons, dovecotes, passenger pigeons, early modern England, colonial America
A flock of pigeons was an emotive sight in the early modern Atlantic world. For English farmers, their arrival was often a cause for resentment, an unwelcome visitation of a landlord’s flock to fatten themselves on the tenant’s grain. For English colonists in America, a flock of passenger pigeons might make mouths water and bring hopes of abundance. These are not feelings associated with pigeons today. Urban feral pigeons trigger feelings of disgust and mutterings about ‘rats with wings’. Passenger pigeons are now extinct, and rather than conjuring hope their memory offers sober lessons about overconsumption and industrial-scale hunting. This article uses the early modern history of these pigeons to draw together histories of environment and emotion, showing how emotions suffused relationships with pigeons long before disgust or remorse became dominant responses.

Understanding the environmental contexts of emotions draws on recent developments in the history of emotions which have demonstrated the value of extending our understanding of emotion beyond the brain and body. Accepting the embodied experience and reproduction of emotion forces us to think about the material contexts of emotionality. Emotions are always ‘felt things’.1 At the same time, the concept of materiality has expanded significantly to include materials’ active and vital qualities. The distinction between materials, and by extension environments, and the historical human body has also been eroded, leaving us to conclude that if materials matter, emotions are embodied, and bodies are enmeshed in their environments, then it makes sense to think beyond an ‘emotional community’ and instead inside an ‘emotional ecology’.2 Such an approach chimes with environmental historians’ desire to see emotions along with ideas as ‘ecological agents’.3

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1 Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (eds), Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
Historians are already thinking about emotions in this way. In their study of frogs and ‘feeling communities’ in modern Australia, Andrea Gaynor, Susan Broomhall and Andy Flack have shown how emotions operated as ‘creative forces’, shaping how people related to the world around them. Landscapes have been shown to produce emotion in the work of Yi Fu Tuan, and recently Ashlee Cunsolo Willox has demonstrated how the loss of meaningful places with and through which Inuit communities in northern Canada feel has resulted in a kind of ‘ecological grief’. Dolly Jørgensen has demonstrated the centrality of emotion in extinction narratives and contemporary de-extinction initiatives. As this research shows, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between environments and emotions which bring historians of environment and emotion into dialogue.

To understand how environment and emotion interacted in human relationships with pigeons this article places those relationships into a thick historical context. As with much history of emotions scholarship, it remains difficult to access exactly what subjects were feeling in any given set of relationships. We can access emotive language used to describe pigeons, but this can only take us so far. Instead, this article takes a broader, contextual approach, and asks ‘what were the limits of feeling?’ Acknowledging that often we cannot know exactly how people felt about quotidian aspects of their lives or fundamental elements of their environments, we can instead seek to understand what it was possible or common to feel, and thus ask ‘how could early modern people feel about pigeons?’

To answer this question, I use sources which reflect the different ways people came to know pigeons in the primary contexts in which they encountered them in England and colonial

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4 Andrea Gaynor, Susan Broomhall, and Andrew Flack, ‘Frogs and feeling communities: a study in history of emotions and environmental history’, *Environment and History* advanced access (2020)
5 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979); Ashlee Cunsolo Willox, ‘Climate change and the work of mourning’, *Environmental Ethics* 17, 2 (2012), 137-164.
America. As such, this article uses sources relevant to keeping, hunting, regulating, and eating pigeons, drawing on accounts of new world, legal and administrative records, recipes, advice literature and husbandry manuals. In two sections the paper outlines the contexts in which early modern English farmers came to know and feel about pigeons, and then how those feelings and meanings translated to new environments and different pigeons in America. Overall, the paper shows how emotions engendered in human-animal relationships are entangled with the cultures and ecologies within which they are practised.

Food was at the root of human-pigeon relationships in early modern England. A variety of pigeon species can be traced back as far as the last glaciation, including the Rock Dove (Columba livia), Stock Dove (Columba oenas) and Wood Pigeon (Columba palumbus), but the domesticated rock doves which were eaten by elites were introduced to Britain through the Roman Empire. Pigeon husbandry remained an elite preoccupation throughout the post-Roman period and Middle Ages, with archaeological evidence suggesting that large flocks kept in dovecotes produced more pigeon meat than domestic consumption demanded.7 Pigeons formed a small but symbolically important part of diets of the gentry, aristocracy, and large religious houses. Young pigeons were preferred and were provisioned from dovecots for much, but not all of the year, as pigeons only breed from March to September.8 Unfledged squabs were more

tender, and early dietary literature understood birds which were prodigious fliers to be lighter in weight, and therefore less nourishing.\(^9\)

There is little archaeological evidence for widespread or regular pigeon consumption among the poor during the middle ages.\(^10\) Poorer people might obtain pigeons at market, or more infrequently, be given the older, tougher birds that were past breeding age.\(^11\) These were considered unhealthy, and their lifetime of flying rendered them dry, hard, and hot.\(^12\) The mature migrating passenger pigeons that English colonists would come to eat in north America could be just as disagreeable. William Byrd observed that men’s ‘mouths watered at the sight of a prodigious flight of wild pigeons’, yet adult passenger pigeons were ‘very lean, and their flesh is far from being white or tender, though good enough upon a march, when hunger is the sauce’.\(^13\) There were then two types of edible pigeon: the young, delicate squabs taken from the dovecote, and tough adult birds either taken in the wild or disposed of to tenants.

Eating pigeons could be an affecting experience. In the early modern humoral scheme of dietetics, pigeons were understood to be hot. This heat could impact the humoral balance of consumers, whose bodies like all other things were characterised by their temperature and humidity. Excesses of hot or cold, dryness or wetness altered a person’s complexion, with consequences for emotional and physical health. As hot creatures that became drier with age, pigeons were particularly potent. The oldest birds were to be eschewed almost entirely, as they dried further with age, exacerbating their extreme heat and making them difficult to digest.\(^14\)

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10 Serjeantsont, ‘Birds: Food and a Mark of Status’, p. 147.
12 Thomas Cogan, *The haven of health Chiefly gathered for the comfort of students, and consequently of all those that have a care of their health* (London: Anne Griffin for Roger Ball, 1636), p. 154.
14 Thomas Cogan, *The haven of health Chiefly gathered for the comfort of students, and consequently of all those that have a care of their health* (London: Anne Griffin for Roger Ball, 1636), p. 154.
Domestication was thought to temper the humoral excesses of birds, and while birds kept cooped up in pens (‘as prisoners’ in dietetic writer Thomas Moffett’s phrase) were thought to offer less nourishment, domesticated pigeons with their degree of freedom yet desire to return struck a healthful medium between wild and caged. Those of a choleric disposition were particularly vulnerable to heat and dryness. Somerset physician Tobias Venner urged ‘cholerics’ to avoid pigeon meat due to its heat (though this made it suitable for phlegmatics), and Robert Burton listed pigeons, and especially the young squabs most prized at the table, among fowl with ‘unwholsome dangerous melancholy meat’. Adding further to the danger of eating pigeon meat, their heat was understood to inspire lust, ‘breed[ing] an inflamed bloud, and extimulate carnall lust’, sparking the ‘heat of Passion’, and therefore medical writers advised the unmarried to abstain from such ‘Juicy and provocative’ foods. Despite these dangers, pigeon meat could be made healthful through cooking with grapes, vinegar and other fruits to lessen their heat.

Humorally-potent pigeons had a wide range of other uses. The heat of pigeon meat was considered a remedy for poor sight, plague and imbalanced, overly moist constitutions.

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16 William Bullein, Bulleins bulwarke of defence against all sicknesse, soarenesse, and vvoundes that doe dayly assualte mankinde (London: Thomas Marshe, 1579), fol. 77v.
20 i.e. Thomas Cock, Kitchin-physick, or, Advice to the poor by way of dialogue betwixt Philanthropos, physician, Eugenius, apthecary, Lazarus, patient (London: Printed for Dorman Newman, 1676.), p. 82; Francis Willughby, The ornithology of Francis Willughby (London: Printed by A.C. for John Martyn, 1678), p. 182; Makluire, Buckler of bodilie health, p. 82; William Vaughan, Naturall and artificial directions for health deriived from the best philosophers, as well moderne, as auncient (London: Richard Bradocke, 1600), p. 18; Thomas Moulton and Robert Turner, The compleat bone-setter ... Whereunto is added The perfect oculist, and The mirrour of health (London: J. C. for Martha Harison, 1656), p. 72; FSLO, MS Add 546, V.a.452, Thomas Sheppey, A book of choice receipts collected from several famous authors a great part in monasteries and often experimented as to a great number of them, ca. 1675, pp. 237, 244.
While eating pigeon flesh might bring on melancholy, applying a dissected pigeon to the head was thought to draw it out; application allowed a pigeon’s heat to stimulate ‘new life and vigour’. In agriculture pigeon dung was recommended as a soil additive for any grounds that were ‘cold, moist, and weely’, and while the saltpetre (potassium nitrate) in pigeon dung was a key ingredient in the manufacture of gunpowder. The pigeon thus presented early modern people with multiple opportunities, if they could take them.

However potent, useful, and abundant pigeons might be, they remained tantalisingly out of reach for most early modern English people. Laws protecting birds and rights to erect dovecotes served to limit their availability to a small subsection of early modern English society. Circumscribed rights to erect dovecotes emerged in the changing economic contexts of later medieval England, in particular the post-Black Death recovery of population. In the later fourteenth century, dovecotes were attached to relatively modest properties, such as tenements, crofts, and taverns. At the same time, wildfowl, once the preserve of elite diets, became increasingly exploited by poorer people, driving elites to differentiate their diet in new ways, focussing on species which could be maintained on their own estates and more closely controlled. In the later sixteenth century, dovecotes were recognised as a manorial privilege. Judgements like Edward Coke’s in Boulston’s Case (1598) gained legal currency and asserted ‘that none may newly erect a Dove-house, but the Lord of a Mannor’, on pain of punishment in the Court Leet. The reassertion of manorial prerogatives over dovecotes in the sixteenth

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21 Willughby, Ornithology, p. 183.
century should be seen in the context of a desire for social differentiation in a period noted for the blurring and policing of status boundaries.

Dovecotes proliferated in sixteenth-century England. While we lack a comprehensive study of the pigeon in pre-modern England, it appears that their numbers increased in the sixteenth century. After the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, large monastic estates which possessed a single dovecote were broken up and their constituent manors divided between multiple new owners, each of whom had the right to erect a dovecote. New dovecotes included both conversions of existing structures (sometimes former monastic chapels), and elaborate new structures, like Sir John Gostwick’s dovecote at Willington (Bedfordshire), constructed using the remains of the recently dissolved Newnham Priory between 1535-41.

Construction in England continued a wider European post-Black Death trend for ornate dovecotes. Konrad Heresbach noted the proliferation of elaborate dovecotes ‘built with great cost and beautie’ in mid-sixteenth-century Europe during. Cambridge colleges spent significant sums glazing dovecotes across the sixteenth century, and one, Corpus Christi, even sold church plate to fund a new dovecote in 1547. Such dovecotes were used to indicate elite status in the landscape, helping signify privileged spaces within estates and projecting an image of lordly power.

Manorial privileges over dovecotes were undermined in the court of King’s Bench in 1619, and across the seventeenth century increasing numbers of substantial yeoman farmers and people of the rising middling sort began to erect dovecotes in moves indicative of

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28 Stone, ‘The Consumption and Supply of Birds’, p. 156
29 Heresbach, Foure bookes of husbandry, p. 168
their broader cultural alignment with those of higher social status and against those below them.\textsuperscript{32}

![Willington Dovecot](https://geograph.org.uk/p/4885459)

\textit{Figure 1 Willington Dovecot (photography by James Wood, Geograph.org, CC BY-SA 2.0, image converted to greyscale)}

To the average English farmer, the increasing flocks of domestic pigeons seen flying about the countryside and fattening themselves where they landed might well have been understood as pests. But they were also identifiable as residents of lordly dovecotes or at least those of prosperous and ambitious tenants, and the law protected them accordingly. While other species had been targeted for their destruction of crops in acts seeking to preserve grain since the 1530s, pigeons were granted limited protection. Legislation marked out numerous animals

as raveners of corn the hunting of which was to be encouraged by bounties. Yet both the 1533 act against birds which distroye devour and consume a wonderfull and marvelous greate quantitie of Corne and the 1566 act for the preservacion of Grayne specifically exempted pigeons. Until seventeenth-century legislation protected pigeons, the legality of hunting pigeons varied by manorial custom and lordly discretion. But legislation in 1604 grouped pigeons with other game, making it illegal to kill them with weapons or implements. The act railed against the vulgar sorte and men of small worthe… spoylinge and destroyinge pigeons, pheasants, and other game.

Local court records show that pigeons remained off limits for non-elites. Across England people were indicted for discharging their firearms at pigeons. In the first eighty years of the Jacobean statute, the North Riding Quarter Sessions presented offenders twenty-two times for shooting at pigeons and dovecotes. Occasionally these were gentlemen, perhaps hunting for sport or protecting their fields, but often they were more humble men, legally restricted from even owning guns due to insufficient wealth, men like Ellis Holden, a husbandman from Blackburn, Ralph Morres, a linen weaver from Aspull, both Lancashire, or Richard Balarde of Worcester, a barber, who regularly shot pigeons and other birds.

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34 Stone, ‘The Consumption and Supply of Birds’, p. 154; National Archives, SP 16/378 f.87, ‘Foulke Reed to Edward Viscount Conway and Killultagh’, 7 January 1637–8
35 McCann, ‘Dovecotes and Pigeons’; 1 Jac. I, c. 27 ‘An Acte for the better execution of the intent and meaninge of former Statutes made agastine shootinge in Gunnes, and for the preservation of the Game of Phesantes and Partridges, and agastne the destroyinge of Hares with Harepipes, and tracinge Hares in the Snowe’.
36 1 Jac. I, c. 27. The gregarious, semi-tame nature of pigeons made them hard to classify as property when flying away from the dovecote, causing legal confusion over who had been wronged, and how, with the taking of a pigeon. However, the Jacobean statute made clear that hunting pigeons was a crime.
38 J.C. Atkinson (ed.), Quarter Sessions Records (9 vols, London: North Riding Record Society, 1884-92), I-VII.
Together these contexts turned pigeons into potent symbols of inequality and figures of resentment in rural England. Pigeons had great potential as natural resources and fed far and wide across a socio-economically variegated landscape yet were restricted to economic and social elites. Agricultural writers recommended keeping pigeons because they might feed abroad on surrounding arable land for much of the year.\(^40\) As such, restrictions on owning dovecots were a source of resentment as birds took from surrounding fields; popular discontent was an occupational hazard of the pigeon keeper. Mascall noted that pigeons were commonly ‘calde ravening byrdes, devourers of Corne, and reapers in fieldes’, and warned that in winter townsfolk became ‘daungerous for taking with nettes, and killing divers other wayes’.\(^41\) While estimates of the total amount of damage pigeons caused sometimes stretched credulity (four million pounds per annum by one calculation), the specific damages they did do were a source of great annoyance.\(^42\)

The post-dissolution proliferation of dovecotes contributed to popular grievances about pigeons. Hollinshead’s *Chronicles* remarked on the later-sixteenth century proliferation of pigeons, ‘now an hurtfull foule by reason of their multitudes, and number of houses dailie erected for their increase (which the bowres of the countrie call in scorne almes houses, and dens of theeues, and such like) wherof there is great plentie in everie farmers yard.’\(^43\) Seventeenth-century agricultural writers noted the general damage done by pigeons. John Worlidge observed that they ‘bring so great an advantage to one’, yet ‘prove a far greater annoyance and devourer of Grain to all the rest of the Neighbourhood’, while *The husbandman, farmer and grasier's compleat instructor* advised that pigeons were ‘gainful to the owners, but


\(^{41}\) Mascall, *The husbandlye ordring*, sigs. 12v, H8r.


injurious to the Neighbours, by devouring abundance of Corn’.\textsuperscript{44} James I channelled popular scorn for dovecotes in his search for saltpetre, calling them ‘in some measure a grievance and an inconvenience, and an offence to Our Subjects in generall’.\textsuperscript{45}

Moments of social unrest and rebellion highlighted opposition to dovecots and claims to private property in pigeons. Proclamations enforcing statutes against rebellion listed dovecotes alongside hedges, ditches, and parkland, the architecture of enclosure and dispossession which became targets of rural discontent.\textsuperscript{46} Robert Kett’s rebels defaced a dovecote at Sprowston, Norfolk, in 1549, and demanded that no man below the status of knight or esquire be allowed to keep a dovecote except by ancient custom.\textsuperscript{47} During the Civil Wars, dovecotes raised the ire of radical protestant troops in the English midlands. A company of parliamentary troops which had been active in Northamptonshire and Warwickshire promoting a particularly radical form of protestantism railed against ministers and their sermons, encouraged Bible reading in place of church attendance, and refused to eat poultry that had been strangled as per apostolic decree.\textsuperscript{48} At Leamington Hastings they set their sights on Thomas Trevor’s manorial dovecotes, proclaiming ‘pigiones were foules of the aire given to the sons of men, and all men had a common right in them that could get them, and they were as much theirs as the Barons’.\textsuperscript{49} Their behaviour contrasted to royalist troops quartered there

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} James I and VI, \textit{A proclamation for the preservation of grounds for making of salt-peeter, and to restore such grounds which now are destroyed, and to command assistance to be given to his Majesties salt-peeter-makers} (London: Bonham Norton and John Bill, 1624), p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Elizabeth I, \textit{A proclamation for the observation of certain statutes with a fourme howe the same shal be executed, and a summarey abridgement of euer of the same statutes, folowing.} ([London], 1562), sig. G4r-Gv; Joseph Keble, \textit{An assistance to justices of the peace, for the easier performance of their duty} (London: for Samuel Keble, 1683), pp. 52-54, 61; Briony McDonagh, ‘Making and Breaking Property: Negotiating Enclosure and Common Rights in Sixteenth-Century England’, \textit{History Workshop Journal} 76 (2013), 32-56.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Fuller, \textit{Church-history}, p. 393; Frederic William Russell, \textit{Kett's rebellion in Norfolk} (London: Longman et al, 1859), p. 36.
\end{itemize}
months before. Trevor’s steward lamented how parliamentarian troops made ‘such spoyle and wast, killing old as well as young without distinction’, in contrast to the more reserved royalists. Attitudes towards pigeons were then a marker of contentment with the prevailing social order.

These are then some of the crucial, everyday contexts in which early modern English people encountered and related to pigeons. The pigeon presented the inhabitants of rural England with a source of food and a remedy that could help regulate physical and emotional health. Yet they were unavailable to many. Large flocks of domestic pigeons were symbolic of lordly privilege, with the dovecote a potent symbol of exclusivity, wealth, and status. As they flew abroad and fed in fields, pigeons enjoyed the privileges of their nominal masters. In a time during which a wide range of ‘noyfull fowls’ were subject to state-directed pest control, the gregarious and greedy pigeon slipped through the fowler’s net. Protected by statute, pigeons flew free in England, stirring up resentment where they flocked and fed. It is in these contexts that we understand early colonial attitudes towards pigeons in the Americas.

When colonists arrived in north America, they brought with them ways of seeing and feeling that were rooted in their experiences in England. As Christopher Parsons has shown, North American environments were uncannily familiar to European colonists. Colonists across the continent approached this ‘not-so-new world’, its animals and landscapes through their experience of home and proceeded to read their expectations into what they encountered in the Americas.

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51 Miguel de Asúa and Roger French, A New World of Animals: Early Modern Europeans on the Creatures of Iberian America (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016 [2005]), p. 231.
For early colonists, the vast flocks of passenger pigeons they encountered were emblematic of the perceived bounty of American nature. Reports of the new world frequently emphasized the abundance of New England, particularly the great numbers of pigeons and other birds.\textsuperscript{52} This was a country understood as composed of ‘vast Wildnesses whose extents are unknown to the English’, full of ducks, geese, turkeys, pigeons and many more fowl.\textsuperscript{53} Birds were so abundant in New England that they were said to ‘serve the Inhabitants almost to excess.’\textsuperscript{54} Edward Winslow evoked images of the bounteous ocean when he wrote of the ‘Ayre darkening sholes of pigeons’ which fed on cherries and other woodland fodder in summer(notably not the colonists’ corn).\textsuperscript{55} Not yet portrayed as a threat to agriculture, passenger pigeons were also a source of food in lean months and authors emphasised the extent of pigeon availability in wintertime. Samuel Clarke described Virginia with its ‘wild Pidgeons in Winter numberless, the flocks of them will be three or four hours together flying over, so thick that they obscure the very Light’.\textsuperscript{56} Seemingly unbound by privilege or legal censure, the large numbers of passenger pigeons offered hope to would-be colonists consuming this literature.

This abundance played into early plans for managing colonial life. Colonists were advised to prepare for natural abundance before embarking for America. The Massachusetts Bay company required long fowling pieces and shot to be carried on voyages from March 1629.\textsuperscript{57} But such abundance had apparent social consequences. Colonial governors regulated

\textsuperscript{52} i.e. Samuel Clarke, \textit{A geographicall description of all the countries in the known world} (London: R.I. for Thomas Newberry, 1657), p. 185
\textsuperscript{54} N.N., \textit{America: or An exact description of the West-Indies} (London: Richard Hodgkinsonne for Edw. Dod, 1655), p. 263.
\textsuperscript{56} Samuel Clarke, \textit{A true and faithful account of the four chieuest plantations of the English in America to wit, of Virginia, New-England, Bermudas, Barbados} (London: Printed for Robert Clavel et al, 1670), pp. 12, 14.
wildfowling to ensure it would not become an occupation. Records from the Court of Assistants at Boston in the early 1630s show tightening controls on wildfowling, as individuals were prosecuted for fowling on the Sabbath and on private land. In October 1633, the court ordered that no person ‘shall spend his time idly or unprofitable’, like ‘comon coasters, unprofitable fowlers, & tobacco takers’. Pigeons were not an export commodity, and fowling detracted from labour-intensive tobacco cultivation.

One of the chief concerns with fowling was the ease with which birds like pigeons might be taken. Pigeons were thought to lack both gall and anger. Their characters were understood to be simple, peaceful, and naïve, and thus they might be hunted with little skill or labour. Contemporary fables give us a picture of the pigeon as ‘Poor, Peaceable, Innocent’ birds often easily taken by other creatures, who consequently often suffer moral correction. These fears of subsistence easily got amidst the bounty of nature were prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic, with similar fears voiced over supposedly idle and indigent inhabitants of English wetlands, who, it was claimed, made lazy livings catching fish and fowl from the fens. Neither mode of living fitted well with the muscular Protestantism of early colonists and agricultural improvers which prized the godly sweat and toil of arable farming and the spiritual and commercial rewards it reaped.

However, early colonial governors had little to worry about. Archaeological remains from late seventeenth-century Boston show that poultry like pigeon and chicken contributed

59 i.e. Hamlet’s claim to be ‘pigeon-liver’d and lack gall’, Hamlet Act 2, scene ii; for anger see Nicolas Coeffeteau (trans. Edward Grimeston), A table of humane passions With their causes and effects (London: Nicholas Okes, 1621), p. 9.
little to diet compared to domestic mammals like sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs.\textsuperscript{63} For all their abundance, passenger pigeons required extensive preparation to make them palatable. The meat of adult birds was ‘dry and blackish’, and commentators like William Douglass noted that passenger pigeons were ‘good delicate eating’ if caught and fattened on maize but were otherwise predominantly only ‘of great benefit in feeding the poor’.\textsuperscript{64}

Nevertheless, images of numberless flocks of pigeons struck an enduring chord with settlers. As Jennifer Price has shown, pigeon hunting was associated with ideas of rugged individualism and frontier settlement well into the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{65} The freedom associated with an inexhaustible natural abundance of pigeons was encapsulated in the rustic rewrite of Isaac Watts’ popular hymn ‘The Hope of Heaven our Support under Trials on Earth’: ‘When I point my rifle clear/ At pigeons in the sky/ I’ll bid farewell to pork and beans,/ And live on pigeon pie.’\textsuperscript{66} The romantic associations of independence and abundance had a strong and lasting pull in England: tune was part of popular working class entertainment into the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{67} In 1834, Catherine Parr Strickland Traill wrote of a boy of fourteen, sent to study agriculture with her in Canada, and filled with visions of ‘fascinating amusements and adventures arising from hunting the forest in search of deer and other game, pigeon and duck-

\textsuperscript{63} Gregory Brown and Joanne Bowen, ‘Animal Bones from the Cross Street Back Lot Privy’, \textit{Historical Archaeology} 32, 3 (1998), 72-80

\textsuperscript{64} Alexander Wilson, \textit{American ornithology, or, The natural history of the birds of the United States} (9 vols; Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1808-14), V, p. 110; William Douglass, \textit{A summary, historical and political, of the first planting, progressive improvements, and present state of the British settlements in North-America} (2 vols; London: R and J Dodsley, 1760 [1748]), I, p. 126, ii, p. 218; Thomas Anburey, \textit{Travels through the interior parts of America} (2 vols; London: William Lane, 1789), i, p. 276.


\textsuperscript{67} Henry Mayhew, \textit{London labour and the London poor; a cyclopaedia of the condition and earnings of those that will work, those that cannot work, and those that will not work} (4 vols; London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861-62) iii, p. 129.
shooting’. Unfortunately for the boy, what awaited him was ‘drudgery… in a country where the old and young, the master and the servant, are alike obliged to labour for a livelihood’.68

Prodigious flocks of birds also had spiritual and soteriological significance for colonists. American abundance was an indication of divine providence, of which passenger pigeons were another sign. Unusual bird behaviour had long been glossed with supernatural interpretation.69 The significance of passenger pigeons was heightened by their transitory appearances, being at once superabundant but infrequent. Large pigeon flocks were uncommon and noteworthy: Massachusetts diarist and judge Samuel Sewall noted flocks in January 1683, and an ‘incredible Number’ at a wedding in Woodstock in December 1707.70 In hard times these uncommon appearances were understood as gifts of providence. Puritan minister Cotton Mather saw vast flights of passenger pigeons as analogous to the quails which presaged manna from heaven for the Israelites in their flight through Egypt.71 As well as being understood as a general providence of God, individual flocks indicated specific moments of providence. Pigeons which ate settlers’ corn in 1643 were directed by the ‘just hand of the Lord, to punish our ingratitude and covetousness’.72 But they could equally indicate God’s mercy. Throughout summer 1770, a plague of army worms destroyed corn in the fledgling colonial settlements of the lower Connecticut Valley (New Hampshire). The subsequent arrival of passenger pigeons was understood providentially, and colonist Grant Powers noted ‘we are bound to recognize the Divine Goodness in this providential supply’ which ‘generally characterizes the Divine

Government, when He has tried his people.”73 For Janet Schaw, a Scottish tourist writing in 1774, the arrival of passenger pigeons in hard times was evidence that ‘indulgent nature makes up for every want’.74

While passenger pigeons were freighted with emotive significance, the experience of hunting them was affective and communal. The arrival of fleeting, irregular but massive passenger pigeon flocks was a communal occasion, and intercommunity cooperation was common during pigeon seasons. Flocks were inexhaustible by a single or even several communities.75 There was nothing to be lost by sharing knowledge of pigeons’ arrival with another group as the resource was infrequent but not scarce, and many hands were required to make the most of it.76 As fresh meat, dead pigeons had to be eaten in a relatively short window of time to avoid spoilage and sharing meat in this way was common in early colonial America.77
As vast stores of readily available meat, pigeon flocks were understood as resources to be shared among neighbours rather than reserved for private exploitation.

The hunt itself was a communal event. Before large-scale hunting for sport, colonists’ recreational pigeon hunting drew on forms of communal bird hunting practised in Europe. Several descriptions of colonial pigeon hunts are reminiscent of the past-time bat-fowling,

75 Other pigeon species were understood in this manner by colonists elsewhere. cf. Alexandre Olivier Exquemelin (trans. Anon.), *Bucaniers of America: Or, A True Account of the Most Remarkable Assaults Committed of Late Years Upon the Coasts of the West-Indies, by the Bucaniers of Jamica and Tortuga* (London: for William Crooke, 1684), p. 12.
which was recorded by the antiquary John Leland in sixteenth-century Kent. Bat-fowling involved a team of a dozen or more people divided into three, one with long torches, one with long sticks, and another with nets. The group would silently approach resting birds at night, lighting their torches to startle them. Those with the poles would proceed to beat the birds, while those with nets would collect the spoils. This ‘sport’, noted Richard Blome in *The Gentleman’s Recreation*, provided ‘good Divertion’ for much of the night, and remained a popular rural entertainment well into the nineteenth century. Naturalists and travellers remarked on the taking of passenger pigeons with nets, and with bats at night, and a practice very similar to bat-fowling was recorded by the naturalist William Bartram on the Georgia-South Carolina border in the 1770s:

Many people go out together on this kind of sport, when dark; some take with them little fascines of fat Pine splinters for torches; others sacks or bags; and others furnish themselves with poles or staves; thus accoutered and prepared, they approach their roosts, the sudden blaze of light confounds, blinds and affrights the birds, whereby multitudes drop off the limbs to the ground, and others are beaten off with their staves, which by the sudden consternation, are entirely helpless, and easily taken and put into the sacks.

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78 John Leland (ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith), *The itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1535-1543* (5 vols; London: George Bell and Sons, 1906-10), IV, p. 67.


Pigeon hunts were then communal activities. Price has shown that pigeon shoots were constitutive of a particular kind of settler community in the nineteenth century, affective collective actions which ‘knit together’ rural communities.\(^81\) Those practices have their roots in the recreational communal hunting of small birds in Europe, transposed to new environments but with similar emotional resonances.

Each of these ways of relating to passenger pigeons and the feelings that came with them involve large numbers of birds. People could and did feel for individual birds, but they felt with, and understood themselves as colonists with relation to the abundance of passenger pigeons. That feeling for rather than feeling with could become apparent in individualising moments, when birds could be grasped as single creatures or, much later when their vastness was in decline. In 1834, the scale of market hunting was a source of pain and anguish for the erratic actor JB Booth. Moved by the number of dead pigeons for sale on street corners in Louisville, Kentucky, Booth bought a bushel of pigeons and staged a full-scale funeral and burial for them.\(^82\) As the extent of passenger pigeon decline became clear, ornithologists began to understand them as emotional subjects in their own right.\(^83\) However, these moments of feeling for individual birds were few and far between. As Kelly Enright has argued, the dominant colonist experience of passenger pigeons was one of quantity and enormity, encountering flocks as elements of the landscape, rather than as collections of individuals.\(^84\)

There were of course ways of relating to passenger pigeons that did not fall into this dichotomy; the Seneca people of the northeast held that the Creator had provided passenger pigeons for their consumption, and engaged in reciprocal exchange offering thanks, gifts and tobacco in


\(^{82}\) Albert Hazen Wright, ‘Other early records of the passenger pigeon’, The Auk 28 (July 1911), pp. 346-66; Asia Booth Clarke, Booth memorials. Passages, incidents, and anecdotes in the life of Junius Brutus Booth (the elder) (New York: Carleton, 1866), pp. 116-123.

\(^{83}\) Wallace Craig, ‘The Expressions of Emotion in the Pigeons. III. The Passenger Pigeon (Ectopistes migratorius Linn.)’, The Auk 28 (October 1911), 408-427.

return for squabs. But for settlers, masterless flocks of passenger pigeons served to reinforce feelings of divine sanction, dominion and collective identity.

The history of the emotional dimensions of human-pigeon relationships highlights some of the broader ways in which emotions and environments intersect and entangle. Environment triggered emotion, particularly in the highly affective encounters between early colonists and passenger pigeons. But this was far from an essentialised, automatic response. The scale of passenger pigeon numbers was affecting, but those affects were conditioned by narratives of American abundance and the providential mandate for colonisation. Colonists’ mouths may have watered at the sight of squabs and they may have been caught up in the camaraderie of hunting, but these were feelings born of longstanding restrictions on and rituals around the pigeon hunt learnt in England.

In this sense, how early modern English farmers and colonists felt about pigeons relied on several factors. The elite status of pigeon meat and its uses in health care inscribed it with value and made it desirable, as did legal restrictions placed on bird ownership and the value of pigeon meat in hard times. But other factors were ecological: the ways pigeons exploited the landscapes around dovecotes, and the seasonal migrations of large numbers of passenger pigeons played as much a part of shaping those feelings as meanings and rules. Yet none of these factors which shaped human feelings for pigeons were independent, and it is futile to attempt to disentangle them to any great degree. Rather, we cannot properly understand feelings of resentment or hope, for example, without any one of them.

To this extent, emotions are ecological. That is, we should recognise that emotions suffuse ecological relationships and are engendered by them, they are part of ecology, act on and are enacted in the relationships between webs of living things. In this reading, emotions are not just an interface between people and their environments, they are of people and by extension of environments.