



In For The Night
When All The Crows Fly Home

Kevin Ebi

Preface

From One Billion To Zero



Martha, The World's Last Passenger Pigeon
Once There Were Billions: Vanished Birds of North America exhibit
Smithsonian Natural History Museum, Washington, D.C.

In a glass case in the Smithsonian Natural History Museum basement, she's Number 11, but for the last four years of her life, she was Number One. She was the only one.

Martha was the world's last passenger pigeon. Her remains, and those of a few dozen other extinct birds, share a display case that's illustrated to look like an early American scene. These days, she's typically in storage, but when I saw her, she was on display for a special occasion: the 100th anniversary of her death.

She was found lying on the floor of her cage at the Cincinnati Zoo just after lunch on September 1, 1914. The magnitude of her death wasn't lost on anyone. For years, people had been trying to find a mate for her so that passenger pigeons could live on. Now gone, zoo staff rushed her body to a nearby ice factory. Holding her by her feet, workers scrambled to encase her body in 300 pounds of ice as the temperature outside climbed above 90 degrees that Tuesday afternoon. The fastest train to Washington, D.C., carried her to the Smithsonian, where more permanent preservation could be done.

When Martha's parents' parents' parents were alive, it was impossible for most people to imagine a world without passenger pigeons. The first colonists perhaps shared the eastern United States with more than a billion of them. The name passenger pigeon came not because the birds carried anything, but rather because "passenger" sounds vaguely like the French word *passage*, which means "passing by."

The pigeons were known for their spectacular migrations, traveling in such dense packs that naturalist John James Audubon resigned himself to counting flocks, not individual birds, in one migration he documented in 1813. And even then, after about 20 minutes, he gave up trying to count the flocks. "The air was literally filled with pigeons; the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse," he wrote.

But the pigeons were an easy target for hunters. With one well-placed shotgun blast, hunters could kill multiple pigeons. Actually, it didn't even need to be all that well-placed. Hunters would brag that they didn't even have to look where they were shooting. Any random shot was likely to bring down at least a half-dozen birds. With strong demand for their meat and feathers, there was incentive to kill more. As train tracks and telegraph lines spread across the land, word got out fast where the skies were particularly dense with the birds. Like the birds, hunters would flock to those areas. And then enterprising hunters discovered they didn't even need to use guns. They built traps that could lure and kill dozens at once.

Soon there were more dead pigeons than anyone wanted. Their carcasses were left to rot while hunters waited for demand — and favorable prices for them — to return. But then all the pigeons were gone. Too much of their habitat had been cleared and the birds, which relied on being in huge flocks, weren't numerous enough to survive.

The events in these past few paragraphs took place within just 50 years. In the 1860s, one environmentalist tried to convince people the hunting practices weren't sustainable. Everyone laughed.

As thousands of crows fly over my head on their way to their roost in Bothell, Washington, I can't help but draw parallels to the passenger pigeons — not because they are threatened, but because they aren't appreciated.

About an hour before sunset, a few crows stream in. They gather in the tops of trees and call out. Soon there's another, larger parade of crows. And another. They don't quite eclipse the sun, but they look like a

dark, intimidating storm cloud. There are so many that their shrill cries at times drown out the noise from the nearby freeway. Then they all take off. This wasn't their roost. It was just a staging area a couple of miles from the roost. They join a mass of crows from several other staging areas into one super flock that may number 15,000 birds. They fly laps around their roost, making progressively smaller circles. The cloud of birds now resembles a hurricane.

Suddenly, they start dropping delicately to the trees, falling like large snowflakes. It takes only 5-10 minutes for every bird to find a perch. The night's show is over.

It's hard to imagine there is anyone who isn't amazed by this spectacle, but few seem to be.

About three-quarters of a mile from the roost, I'm standing along the Sammamish River, my lens is trained toward the sky as several thousand crows parade by. The line of birds stretches all the way across the sky. This parade has been in motion for a few minutes now without any sign of a break. A woman walking along the trail tries to get me to take a break, however. "Did you know there's a bald eagle over there?" I did see it fly in; it was high in a tree, mostly obscured by branches. Besides, several bald eagles nest in the area; they are hardly a rare sight.

On another day, a man walks by clenching his extended umbrella. It's not raining. Crows have filled the tops of trees on both sides of the trail. They're almost as thick as the leaves will be once summer arrives. "They make me nervous," he says of the birds. A year ago, I might have shared his anxiety. There are so many birds, you can hear their droppings hit the ground every few seconds like large raindrops at the start of a storm. But over the six months I worked on this project — often trying to position myself under as many crows as possible — I've been hit only once.

Across the lake in Seattle, crows were at the center of a neighborhood war. After an 8-year-old girl made international headlines for befriending the birds, neighbors organized to stop her. She fed them peanuts; they brought her shiny trinkets. Crows appreciate an easy meal, so perhaps 100 crows were drawn to the girl's house. Neighbors, however, didn't appreciate the noise or the bird droppings. At least 50 signed a petition demanding she stop. Several neighbors went on to file a \$200,000 lawsuit. (There are only two known crow roosts in the greater Seattle area. It's quite likely the birds she fed use the roost I photographed.)

We make no attempt to hide our disdain for crows. We even call a group of them a "murder." And while humans doomed the passenger pigeons, crows do quite well around people. Traditionally, as we have thrived, so do they.

But crows aren't assured success. The Hawaiian crow is extinct in the wild. Nearly half of the American crows were killed in less than a decade by the West Nile Virus, although their numbers are improving now. And the crow isn't even our most common bird. Mourning doves, red-winged blackbirds, robins, sparrows and juncos are just some of the birds that outnumber the crow — some by a margin as large as 15 to 1.

Art can help people see something in a new way, and that is the spirit of this project. Crows have been glamorized before in art. Several of Vincent Van Gogh's masterpieces come to mind. There's also a rich tradition of featuring crows in Asian art. But more recent art, particularly Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, paints them to be the menace that many people believe them to be. I hope this project helps you see the beauty of such a common bird.

Even ordinary birds can put on extraordinary shows, so enjoy the show. There's no guarantee it will still be playing 100 years from now.

— Kevin Ebi
Bothell, Washington

In the morning, the roost erupts with crows.

Well before sunrise — the moment the sky begins to take on the slightest hint of blue — the crows awaken and the roost empties out.

They all leave within 10 minutes of each other, venturing out in different directions. They are difficult to see; it is so early that the sky is barely brighter than the crows' black feathers.

None of the birds is carrying a tracking collar, but scientists know they can travel far. There are very few roosts and given where crows are spotted during the day, researchers believe the birds can travel 30 miles from the roost. In fact, about the only place you won't find crows is around the roost site.

While they spend the night in dense colonies, during the day it's a much different story. They work in small groups — usually not more than a dozen birds — scrounging for food wherever they can find it.



28 minutes before sunrise
1 mile southwest of roost



8 minutes before sunrise
1 mile southwest of roost

28 minutes after sunrise
6 miles south of roost



Just before sunset, crows begin returning to the roost.

The return is more drawn out than the morning evacuation. Within a several-mile radius around the roost, crows congregate in progressively larger staging areas.

Perhaps a couple dozen crows will claim the top branches of one tree. Then they'll wait. Another group may see them and stop by. Or maybe they will take off and join other crows flying by.

They don't stay in any one staging area for long, though. The shorter the distance between the sun and the horizon, the shorter the distance between the crows and their roost.



6 minutes before sunset
1 mile northeast of roost



24 minutes before sunset
½ mile east of roost



11 minutes after sunset
1 mile northeast of roost







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Most images were captured using digital 35mm format SLR cameras, including the 1Ds, 1Ds Mark III, 1D Mark IV, 1Dx Mark II and 5Ds R from Canon. Software tools were used to remove dust spots and other minor imperfections, and to adjust color and tone to accurately portray the feel of the natural scene. No adjustment materially changed the original image.

About the photographer



Kevin Ebi fell in love with nature early in life; it took many more years for him to discover his passion for photography. Growing up, Kevin went on many outings with his parents to Pacific Northwest parks. As an adult, he began carrying a camera on hikes so he could show others what he saw, but over time discovered that the patience and keen observation photography required helped him appreciate nature even more.

His images are used regularly by major calendar and greeting card lines and have appeared in a wide range of publications including National Geographic, National Wildlife, Smithsonian, Lonely Planet guides and Outdoor Photographer. One of his images was featured on a U.S. Postal Service Forever stamp commemorating the National Park Service centennial. He lives near Seattle, Washington, has photographed more than half the U.S. national parks and has also traveled extensively in Canada, Mexico, Iceland and New Zealand.

