

The BEAT

PEOPLE

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RECIPES

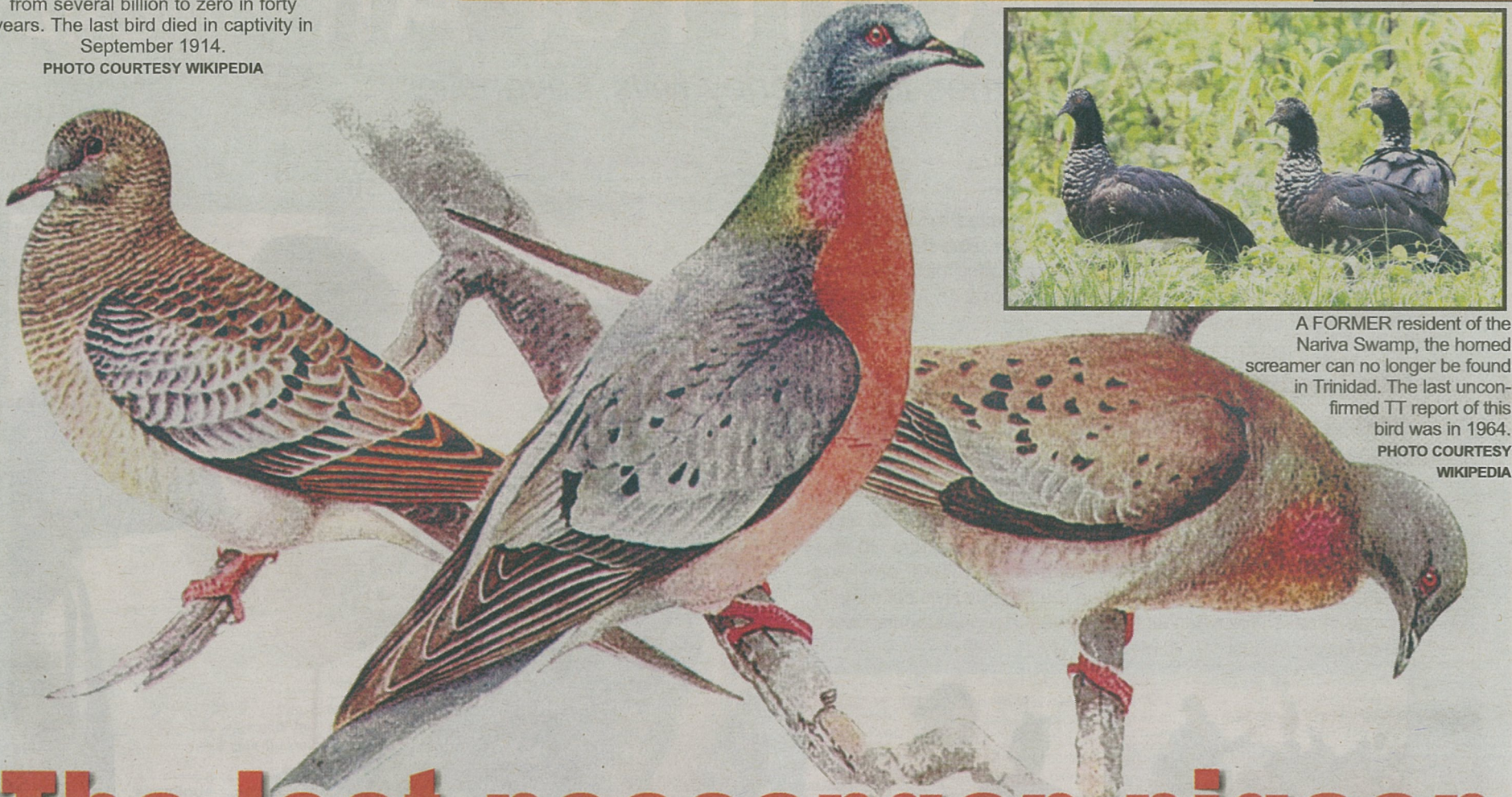
MUSIC

ART



ILLUSTRATION of the now extinct passenger pigeon. The population fell from several billion to zero in forty years. The last bird died in captivity in September 1914.

PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA



A FORMER resident of the Nariva Swamp, the horned screamer can no longer be found in Trinidad. The last unconfirmed TT report of this bird was in 1964.

PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

The last passenger pigeon

Lessons for Trinidad and Tobago

ONE HUNDRED years ago, in September 1914, a bird named Martha died in the Cincinnati Zoo. With all eyes then focused on World War I, perhaps few people noticed her death. But it was a sobering landmark in human history, finalising the largest extinction of a

species in the history of the planet caused by humans, largely due to indiscriminate and uncontrolled hunting.

Martha was the last passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*). In the mid-1800s this may have been the commonest bird on the planet. The migration of

this pigeon would darken the skies for days at a time. James Audubon described a flock's passage saying "the light of noon-day was obscured as by an eclipse" for three days in succession. One migrating flock in 1866 in Canada was described as being one mile wide and 300 miles long, took 14 hours to

pass, and held in excess of 3.5 billion birds.

The passenger pigeon was an important source of food for the Native peoples of North America, and played a religious role in the lives of several Native American tribes.

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ENVIRONMENT

Some species threatened in TT

● PIGEON from Page 1B

However the hunting seems to have been controlled by the tribes, reflecting the way they valued and coexisted with the nature around them.

It seemed impossible that hunters could destroy such an abundant species, but within a mere forty years, this bird was virtually extinct. The bird was a brilliant, fast and powerful flier. At over 95 kmph speeds, it was designed to evade fast aerial predators like falcons. But it could never evade the gun.

Wikipedia states that "an amateur hunter could easily bring down six with one shotgun blast; a particularly good shot with both barrels of a shotgun could kill 61 birds." At a single nesting site, up to 50 thousand birds could be killed daily for nearly five months. The well documented statistics are mind-boggling. Hunting of the species developed on an industrial scale, as the bird was considered good and cheap food for slaves and the poor. The massive flocks got progressively smaller, and disappeared. The last wild bird was killed in 1900 by a boy with a BB gun.

Conservationist efforts to protect the species were completely ineffective, but the extinction helped to eventually formulate the Endangered Species Act in the USA, a powerful piece of legislation that has probably saved many species in its time.

Here in Trinidad and Tobago, the average citizen probably never thinks about the extinction of a species. But we should. Trinidad and Tobago is home to several endemic species, scattered amongst the various branches of the plant and animal kingdoms. By rough estimate, our twin isles contain at least 80 endemic plants and animals (the true number is likely to be larger). These 80 species are to be found nowhere else in the world.

Thankfully, we have not unknowingly lost any of them as yet, but some are threatened.



DEPICTION of a passenger pigeon hunt in the 1870s. Clouds of pigeons used to darken the sky as they passed overhead.

ILLUSTRATION FROM *THE ILLUSTRATED SHOOTING AND DRAMATIC NEWS*, JULY 3, 1875.

The Trinidad piping guan (pawi), is threatened by hunting and habitat loss. The golden tree frog is limited to the highest cloud forests of Trinidad, a habitat which is expected to be negatively affected as global warming progresses.

But species can also disappear from a country while still extant in other countries. Not extinction but rather extirpation (whereby a species no longer exists in a specific geographic region but is still present in other regions).

In Trinidad and Tobago, we have several examples of this. Birds, in particular, have been hard hit. Species such as the horned screamer and blue-and-yellow macaw of Nariva Swamp and several of our seedeaters have been extirpated thanks to hunting, capture for the cage bird trade and habitat destruction. The band-tailed pigeon, a resident of mountain forests, has not been seen in many years.

And then there are the species which are close to being extirpated. Amongst the mammals, populations of the west-indian manatee remain

critically low with estimates of just about 30 to 40 individuals remaining in the wild. The Tobago population of manatee, unfortunately, fared even worse as they have already been wiped out.

It is up to us to put an end to this cycle. And we can make positive changes if we put our will and resources behind it - already, the blue-and-yellow macaw has been re-introduced into the wild and the manatee, golden tree-frog and pawi have been declared Environmentally Sensitive Species. We must use our natural resources wisely. Let's try to make sure that none of our plants and animals ever suffers the same fate as the passenger pigeon.

Today's feature was written by Feroze Omardeen and Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfnfnc.org or visit our website at www.tfnfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on October 9 at St. Mary's College, PoS.