



Birds in Iowa's History: Where Did They Go?

Have you ever visited the Iowa towns of Curlew, Mallard, and Plover? How did these towns get their names? Iowa's history of glaciers and prairies left Iowa with rich soil and many wetlands. In northwestern Iowa, wetlands are still common today. The names of these towns came from the birds that once frequented this wet region of the state.

Several species of birds became extinct or extirpated in Iowa as a result of habitat changes and market hunting. Market hunters made their living by killing and selling wild game. In the 1880s, a mixed bag of ducks sold for \$1.50 a dozen. Often they were shipped to Chicago or cities on the east coast.

Passenger pigeon

The demise of the passenger pigeon was caused by market hunting, decline of forests, and loss of colony nesting sites. These birds depended on oak, beech, and chestnut forest areas for food and nesting sites. Often tens of thousands of pigeons nested in a small area. Market hunters could easily kill many birds at one time by using sticks to knock them out of their nests or easily shooting them. In the 1860-70s, an estimated 600 million migrated near Dubuque in one day! The last in Iowa was shot near Keokuk in 1896. By 1914, the very last passenger pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo.

Greater prairie chicken

The prairie chicken was one of many game species that were hunted by early settlers in Iowa. Market hunters killed tens of thousands of these birds and shipped them back east for consumption. When settlers first arrived, prairie chicken populations increased because early farming practices created a mixture of habitats which was good for prairie-chicken nesting. The 1870s-1880s were probably the height of the prairie chicken populations. Soon, however, the balance shifted, and as native prairies disappeared, so, too, did prairie chickens. Their population began a long decline as modern farming removed the grassy lands they needed to nest. By 1955, no prairie chickens remained in Iowa.

Wild turkeys

The turkey was once common in the forested areas of Iowa. The American Indians used turkeys for food, and their feathers for clothing and ceremonial purposes. By the 1920s, no wild turkeys remained in the state. Again, market hunters and reduced forest habitat led to their demise. In the 1960s, the Iowa Conservation Commission (now the Iowa Department of Natural Resources) began introducing wild turkeys into Iowa. By the 1990s, it was estimated that nearly 75,000 turkeys roamed our forested lands.

Long-billed curlew

This unusual bird was a common nester on the prairies of northwestern Iowa in the 1800s. Long-billed curlews were common in Cherokee and Sac Counties. But, by the 1890s, curlews no longer nested in the state. Loss of the prairies, wetlands, and market hunting were the culprits.



American golden plover

Plover, Iowa! It was Charles Whitehead, railroad president and hunter, who named three towns in Iowa after his favorite game birds - the plover, curlew, and mallard. Golden plovers nest on the arctic tundra and winter in southern South America. Huge flocks once passed through Iowa, especially during spring migrations. At Steamboat Rock in 1860, thousands of these birds passed overhead in huge flocks. Pomeroy also reported the same in 1877. Market hunters harvested many of these birds, and changes in habitat in the far north and south finally decreased their numbers. These birds still migrate through Iowa today but are no longer seen in large flocks.

Whooping and sandhill cranes

Both whooping and sandhill cranes once nested in abundance on the prairies and wetlands of northwestern and north-central Iowa, although sandhill cranes were the more abundant of the two species. In May 1871, it was reported that thousands of sandhill cranes were seen at the headwaters of the Iowa River in Hancock County. The last year that a whooping crane nest was found was in 1894 north of Hayfield in Hancock County. These eggs were collected and put into private egg collections, a popular hobby in those days. Loss of wetland habitat and mortality due to collecting as a hobby were the primary reasons for the disappearance of these nesting birds.

Thousands of sandhill cranes can be seen during their migrations along the Platte River in central Nebraska each spring and fall. Their beautiful mating dances attract thousands of visitors each spring. Sandhill crane numbers are increasing; nesting has been documented at marshes in Tama, Bremer, Jackson, and Butler counties.

Waterfowl

Early settlers and explorers often commented on the abundance of ducks and geese in Iowa. Iowa's waterfowl habitat stretched from Des Moines north and east to Mason City and west to Spirit Lake. The rolling topography of this land was dotted with thousands of small depressions called prairie pothole wetlands. Iowa also had good wetland habitat along the Missouri, Mississippi, Des Moines, Skunk, and Iowa Rivers. Many species of ducks and geese migrated through Iowa every year. It was estimated that before the wetlands were drained, three to four million ducks nested annually in Iowa. Species such as blue-winged teal, redhead, northern shoveler, ruddy duck, mallard, and northern pintail were predominant in Iowa. In the 1860s-1870s, with rail service being introduced into Iowa, market hunters increased, and they took their toll on the waterfowl. Sport hunters did not sell their game on the market and were often at odds with market hunters because of the large numbers of birds killed.

Help for waterfowl and other species arrived in the early 1900s with the Lacey Act, which attempted to stop market hunting. This bill was introduced by Representative John Lacey of Oskaloosa. The Migratory Bird Treaty between the United States and Canada also set regulations on waterfowl hunting. Other famous Iowans who took lead roles in protecting habitat and waterfowl in the United States included Aldo Leopold, J.N. "Ding" Darling, and Ira Gabrielson.



Activity: Birds Under Glass

Objective: Students will identify the birds in a collection.

Materials: Pencils, checklists, and clipboards

Procedure: Complete the activity "What is a Bird" and "Where Would a Bird Be Without Its Bill?" Obtain permission to visit a nearby bird collection. Students will observe the many specimens of birds in the bird collection and compare the feet, beaks, and color of the birds, as discussed during the previous activities. Students will check off the birds that are on the IOU checklist. The IOU checklist is located on pages 8-10.

University of Iowa Museum of Natural History
Iowa State University
University of Northern Iowa
Coe College Biology Department
Central College
Luther College
St. Ambrose College
Wartburg College
Westmar College

Iowa City
Ames
Cedar Falls
Cedar Rapids
Pella
Decorah
Davenport
Waverly
LeMars

Iowa Historical Society Collection
Iowa Conservation Education Center

Des Moines
Springbrook State
Park in Guthrie County

Calhoun County Historical Society

Rockwell City

Putnam Museum
Museum of History and Science
Sanford Museum
Sioux City Public Museum
Sogers Museum

Davenport
Waterloo
Cherokee
Sioux City
Maquoketa

Many state and county conservation agencies have nature centers with exhibits and displays.