

GENERAL NOTES

Flight speed of the Old-squaw.—On May 11, 1935, Frank Beldan and the writer timed two Old-squaws (*Clangula hyemalis*) as they flew from the north to the south end of the 2400-foot cut between Toronto Bay and Lake Ontario. In both cases the time was 26 seconds. This would give an average speed, over the 2400 feet, of 63 M. P. H. In this case both observers were stationed at the north end of the cut and on the east side of it. We could tell when the ducks passed our end of the cut, but had to guess when they passed the south end. We believe that the guess was fairly accurate, however, as the ducks kept close to the west wall of the cut and we followed them with a 47X telescope.

Several later attempts were made to obtain more accurate data and on April 26, 1936, we again succeeded in being at the cut at the time the Old-squaws were flying through it. This time Frank Beldan was stationed at the north end of the cut with field glasses while the writer was stationed at the south end with the telescope. When Frank saw a group of Old-squaws approaching his end of the gap he raised one arm as a warning; as soon as they passed the north end of the cut he raised both arms and the stop watch was started. The writer then searched for the group of approaching ducks with field glasses and stopped the watch when they passed the south end of the cut. The watch was started and stopped when the first duck in each group passed the ends of the cut. Some groups flew much faster than others, but the individuals in any given group kept very well together. None of the ducks appeared to be doing its best; birds toward the rear of a group would quite often put on a spurt and gain the leadership of their group without any apparent effort; and in the space of 100 feet such a spurt might carry a duck from the rear to the lead of a ten-foot group of the Old-squaws. The strength of the breeze did not seem to affect their speed very much, as some of the slowest records were made when the wind was strongest.

The observations were made between 7:00 and 8:15 P. M. The official wind velocity at 8:00 P. M. for Toronto was 11 M. P. H. from the northwest. This official reading was made in a different part of the city, and is at best just an indication of the average wind prevailing at the place where it was observed for the previous 20 or 30 minutes. Quite considerable variations in the strength of the wind were noted while the ducks were flying through. However, we had no means of measuring these wind fluctuations and so have used the official wind in calculating the average air speed below. The wind was so close to being a true tail wind that no allowance has been made for the slight angle between the average wind direction and the direction of flight of the Old-squaws. The seventh group timed swerved to the east when part way through the cut, hesitated, and then came on through. No allowance was made for this hesitation in computing the average. It must be remembered that the times given are the intervals elapsed between the time that the first bird in the groups passed the north end of the cut until the first bird in the group (but not likely the same individual) passed the south end of the cut. It was quite impossible to time any given individual in the rapidly-shifting groups. The average, then, will be the average speed for the 12 groups. Some idea of the size of the groups will be gained by noting the counts made for the last five groups timed.

Group No.	No. in the Group	Time to fly 2400 ft.	Ground Speed
1	—	25.2 secs.	64.8 M.P.H.
2	—	26.0	62.9
3	—	22.5	72.5
4	—	29.0	56.2
5	—	25.2	64.8
6	—	26.8	60.9
7	—	29.6	55.2
8	2	29.6	55.2
9	11	26.5	61.5
10	20	24.0	68.0
11	7	26.0	62.9
12	3	30.4	53.9
Average		26.7	61.5 M.P.H.
Average wind speed (a tail wind)			11.0 M.P.H.
Average air speed			50.5 M.P.H.

J. MURRAY SPEIRS, 92 McIntyre St. West, North Bay, Ontario.

Prating for Passenger Pigeons.—Thoreau's journal records many observations on the Passenger Pigeon and the means used in Concord for catching it, and these observations, all of which are gathered in his 'Notes on New England Birds' (1910), later reissued as 'Thoreau's Bird-Lore,' include several references to the call-notes of the species, especially the *prate*, or *prating*. An imitation of this note was used for luring the birds to the net, and the journal entry for March 29, 1853, tells us that one Dugan had seen two pigeons that day and had 'prated' for them. As the dictionaries appear to have overlooked this use of the word 'prate' and as I do not find it in any of the ornithological literature I have at hand, it may be worth while to put on record what the late Fletcher Osgood, of Chelsea, Massachusetts, an expert in phonetics who was also something of an ornithologist, told me about it some twenty years ago. "Many and many a time," he wrote, "have I heard my father *prate* for pigeons. Father was born and brought up in Westford, Mass., [a town near Concord] and knew all about pigeon netting and shooting . . . Wild pigeon prating consisted of voice delivered through *tightly* approximated lips, with a buzz or vibration of those lips, in two somewhat prolonged, high-pitched monotonous (a very brief interval of silence between the monotonous, of course) followed by a somewhat more prolonged monotone on a decidedly higher pitch, this immediately followed by two scale-descending monotonous, the descent approximately an octave or more, each descending monotone *briefly* uttered, no prolongation. No doubt this formula was individually varied; at times, I think, rising inflections, still high-pitched but of short range, were substituted for the first two monotonous. The formula as given seems at least to be an approximation to orthodox usage in old Westford."

This 'prating,' whether called by that name or not, was probably much the same method of luring the pigeons as that used by Herman Behr ('Cassina,' 1911, pp. 24-27, quoted by Bent in his 'Life Histories') and described by H. T. Blodgett (Mershon's 'Passenger Pigeon'). The art is doubtless as completely extinct now as the Passenger Pigeon itself.—FRANCIS H. ALLEN, *West Roxbury, Massachusetts*.

An unusual feeding habit of the Black Vulture.—During the past winter, grazing conditions were unusually good in southwestern Louisiana and, as most of the