

BIRDS OF THE ISLAND'S PAST

BY GEOFF HOGAN

In July 1534, Jacques Cartier journeyed along the north shore of Prince Edward Island recording his observations of the natural features of land and shore. He was familiar with some of the wild creatures he saw but others were new to him. How different the flora and fauna of the Island were back then. The Acadian forest was home to moose and bear and, on shore, walrus hauled themselves out to sun. He described numerous birds in terms of familiar species from home but in reality many were different. In time, human pressure eliminated the moose, bear and walrus from the Island and some of the birds as well. They remain however, a part of our historical natural heritage.

In later years, early Island naturalists such as Francis Bain, John MacSwain and Professor Macready provided specific information on the birds of the Island. They noted that changing land use patterns and human interference were affecting our wildlife. Nearly a century later, we have only their reports to confirm the presence of species long since gone from Prince Edward Island.

FOREST DWELLERS

A book in the U.P.E.I. library by A.W. Schorger, entitled The Passenger Pigeon - Its Natural History and Extinction, details one of the most awesome atrocities by man against nature the world has ever seen. Now extinct, the Passenger Pigeon is believed to have been the most numerous land bird that ever lived. Few people today ever saw a living Passenger Pigeon yet when the first European settlers arrived in North America the population of these large doves was believed to be between 3 and 5 billion birds. The reality of this tragedy is brought closer to home in the opening sentences of chapter one. "The recorded history of the Passenger Pigeon began on July 1, 1534. On this day Cartier saw an infinite number of "wood pigeons" and other birds at Cape Orleans (Kildare), Prince Edward Island." Cartier had never seen a Passenger Pigeon before, for the species occurred only in North America, and, hence, he described them as wood pigeons, a wild pigeon of Europe.

By various accounts, Passenger Pigeons occurred on P.E.I. in large flocks although according to MacSwain (1908) the last was seen here in 1857. Bain (1891) however, reported that rare stragglers were seen even at the time of his writing. No one knows for certain when the last Passenger Pigeon flew over P.E.I. but, certainly by the time Bain wrote, the species was in serious trouble. Unfortunately, protection came everywhere too little and too late. They were slaughtered by the millions throughout their range for human and livestock food. Even when the precipitous decline began, people refused to believe that extinction of this abun-



PILEATED WOODPECKERS