



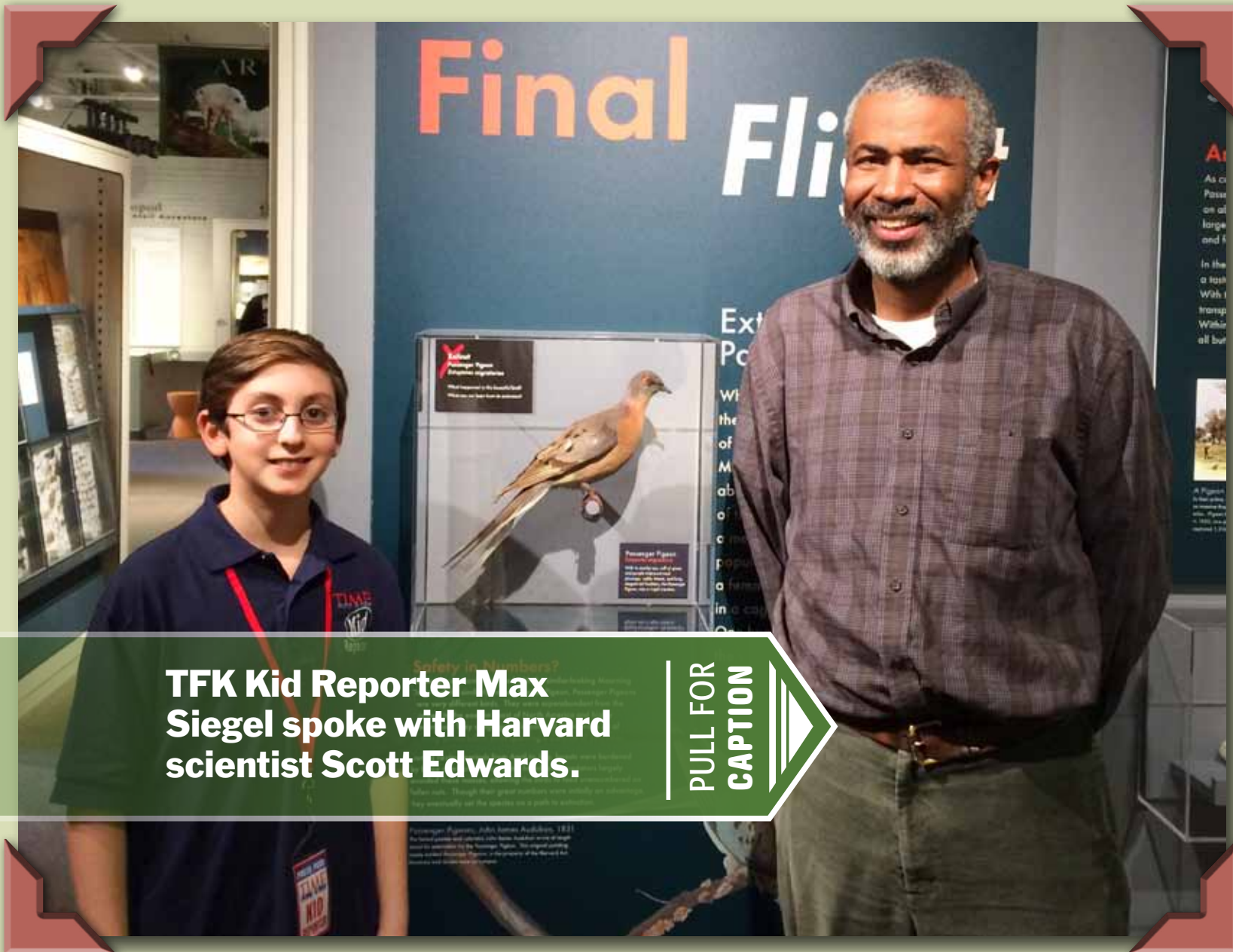
# THE LAST PASSENGER PIGEON



Martha, the last passenger pigeon, died on September 1, 1914, at the Cincinnati Zoo.

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It has been 100 years since the last passenger pigeon died. A new exhibit celebrates the species.



**TFK Kid Reporter Max Siegel spoke with Harvard scientist Scott Edwards.**

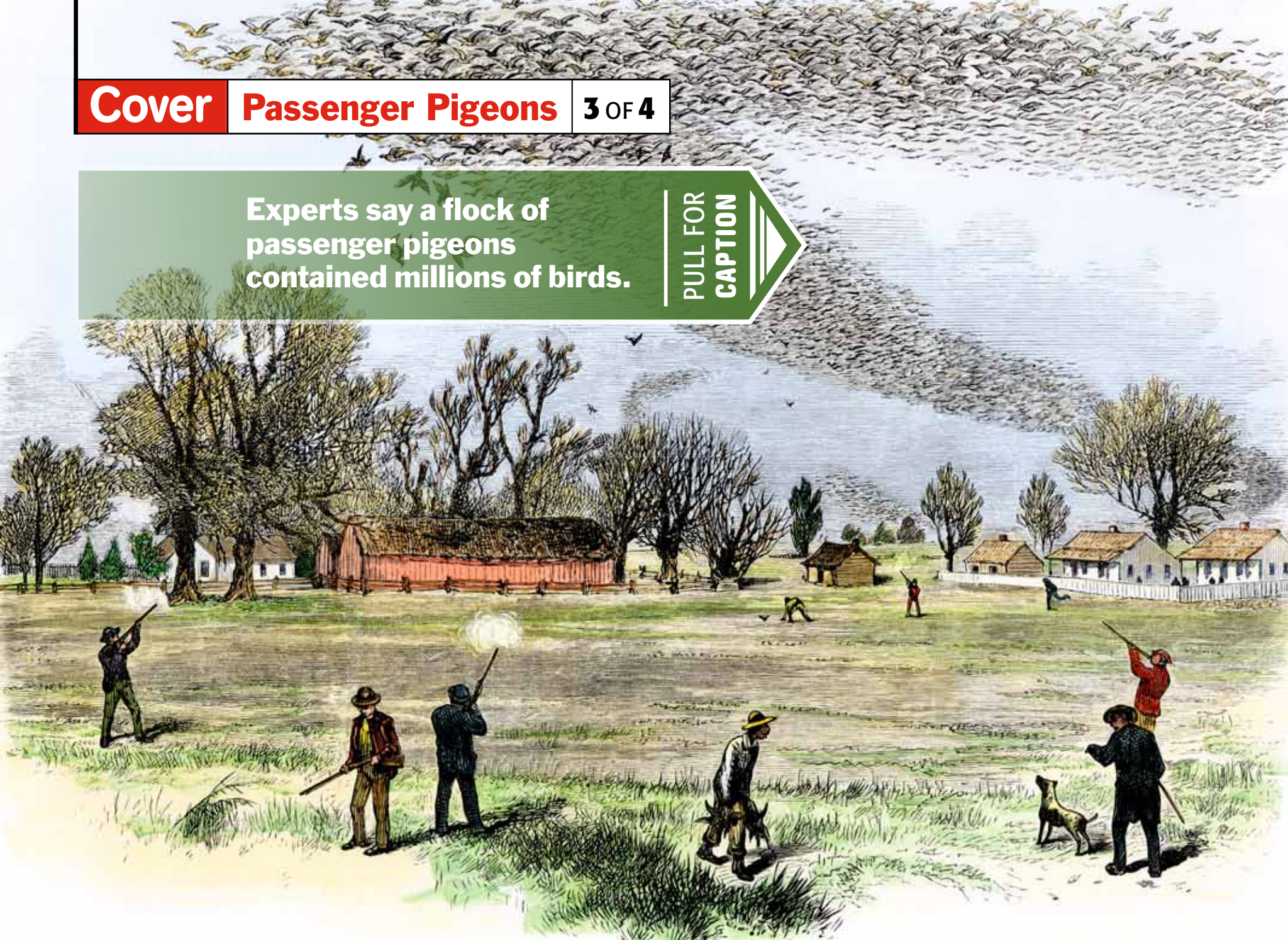
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Imagine a flock of pigeons so dense that the midday sky turns black as the birds pass overhead. It may sound like a scene from a scary movie. But in the early 19th century, it was not uncommon in North America for skies to go dark as millions of passenger pigeons flew by. Back then, there were about 5 billion of the birds. It was the most common bird species on the continent. But by 1910, there was only one passenger pigeon left—a bird named Martha. It lived at the Cincinnati Zoo, in Ohio. On September 1, 1914, Martha, the last of her species, died.

How could a species go from a population of billions to zero in such a short period of time? The new exhibit *Final Flight*, at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, explores that question.

Experts say a flock of passenger pigeons contained millions of birds.

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## Flight to Extinction

Experts say the main cause of the bird's extinction was hunting. According to Harvard scientist Scott Edwards, who helped plan the exhibit, passenger pigeons were once a major food source for many Americans. "Passenger pigeons were served in the best restaurants in New York City and the hillbilly shacks in the country," Edwards told TFK. "So everybody was eating them."

When Martha died, many Americans could not believe the once-common species was gone for good. People came up with theories to explain why the birds were no longer in sight. Some thought that perhaps the pigeons had simply fled

to another location. But with time, it became clear that the species was extinct.



## Saving Species

Four years after Martha's death, a law was passed to protect migrating birds. "It finally gave a lot of wild birds the

protection they needed," says Edwards. Unfortunately, it was too late for the passenger pigeon.

Edwards says the exhibit is meant to start a discussion about the importance of conservation. "Right now, we're basically reliving the same story, just with other species," he says. But this time, he adds, "we're trying to save them so that our children and grandchildren can appreciate and take care of them."

—By Suzanne Zimbler,  
with reporting by TFK  
Kid Reporter Max Siegel



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Starting on June 24, you can see Martha at Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, in Washington D.C.