

PIGEONS & DOVES

WHO? Wood Pigeons, Collared Doves, Feral Pigeons (~Rock Doves), Stock Doves, Turtle Doves

QUICK HINTS: (This is not to replace bird identification books but to point out MAIN I.D. POINTS, and introduce you to bird folklore.) Right place? Right season? Right shape? Right noise? What to look for when you only have a glance...

Wood Pigeons: [Pigeon = Norman word > Latin (pipio: cheeping)]

Also known as: 'Dow' (Norfolk); 'Doo' or 'Quisty' (Suffolk) 'Too-Zoo' (Gloucs); 'Cushat' (Berks, Bucks, Westmorland); 'Clatter Dove' (Yorks); Ring Dove (general in the past)

When: *RESIDENT ALL YEAR. But large migrant population join us in winter months; leave Mar/Apr.*

Where: Very common: garden, fields (especially morning and evening), woodland.

Eats: grain, seeds, acorns (important in autumn), berries, buds, leaves, worms, insects,

Colour: pink & blue-grey, white neck, white wing patch; petrol-green on neck.

Shape: fat, sit in trees singularly or in nearby pairs like lumps (blobs)

Flight: slow to take off (hit on road as it's their runway); very fast when in flight; wings look diamond-shaped; can be confused with many birds including small birds-of-prey. V-Shaped display-flights in small flocks.

Sounds: Wings flap as take off in panic; but the clapping sound is also used for display flights.

Song: Sad Hooting: 'YOU BAD GIRL, SUKIE; YOU BAD GIRL, SUKIE; YOU BAD GIRL, SUKIE, YOU!' [Many other versions quoted in books, but this was the first I heard and it fits well!]

Call: Various '**WOO**' sounds at different levels of the scale – can be recognised individually.

Interesting Facts:

- It mates for life – a pigeon will mourn if mate is lost
- A pile of feathers on the lawn is usually Sparrowhawk kill and pluck (Hawks sometimes use a short 'plucking' post).
- The masses of pigeons seen in the fields are usually Continental migrants. Enemies of farmers.
- Good meat, therefore preyed on by raptors and man. Result VERY NERVOUS. Easily disturbed, often the first birds to fly up in the garden when you appear.
- Very fond of grain, so frequent bird-tables – such behaviour has allowed them to survive since farms don't have grain in their yards for free-range poultry and from threshing, any more.
- Quisty, Quest, Queece, etc, all mean lament from its mournful call.
- It produces 'crop milk' to feed the very young chicks.
- It does not have to tip its neck back to swallow water.
- It is possible to count her two glossy white eggs from below the flimsy stick nest.
- They can breed much of the year, but have usually ended by October.
- It weighs as much as 4 ½ Blackbirds, or 41 Blue Tits, and can eat as much as 12 sparrows can in a day.
- They eat quickly, store it in their crops and digest it in a secure roost.
- There are at least 3 million breeding pairs.
- They live about 3 years (oldest = 17+ years).

Collared Doves: [Dove = Old English (dufan = to dive – dove = past tense of dive (USA, Norfolk, and other countryside places still) = swooping courtship flights. Doo = Dove.]

When: *RESIDENT ALL YEAR.*

Where: Common: garden, fields, woodland.

Colour: pink, with black neck markings

Shape: small, dainty, with long tails, sit in trees singularly or with nearby mate, but not always so easy to see. Likes roof-tops

Flight: Faster take off; fast when in flight. Fans its tail in display flight.

Sounds: Wings flap as take off; lands with a 'WOO-HOO!' or 'FFEW!' repeated a few times.

Song: 'YOU BAD GIRL; YOU BAD GIRL; YOU BAD GIRL.'

Interesting Facts:

- It mates for life – will mourn if mate is lost
- It has had a remarkable breeding migration. First breeding in Norfolk in 1955. At time of first *Atlas of Breeding Birds* = 20,000; in millennium = 200,000! It has now spread throughout the country. From Birmingham upwards = dense city populations.
- Not usually seen in masses in Norfolk.
- Not quite so shy
- Eats grain and other seeds, so frequents bird-tables – adaptable.
- Main breeding time = mid-February to October, but have nested in Christmas trees.
- Male may keep watch from high roof-top, aerial, tree, lamp-post.
- Young leave the area, travelling many miles, but only about a third survive the first year.
- 2 white eggs, like woodpigeon.
- Just under 300,000 breeding pairs.
- Maximum age = 16 years, but usually fairly short.

Feral Pigeons: come from ROCK DOVES: Many were domesticated in Dovecotes and then became feral again but usually stayed tame around humans.

When: RESIDENT ALL YEAR.

Where: Common in towns and cities, places where humans congregate: *rarely* in gardens, fields, or woodland. They like a roost site, roof-tops, ledges on buildings or bridges (to replace cliffs). This is what annoys man with the resulting droppings.

Colour: Original dark grey tail and neck, light grey back, pink breast, with beautiful florescent green-blue neck patch, two black bars on wings. But can be almost any colour. Apparently seven different colour forms.

Shape: medium size pigeon. Male often larger than female. He will fluff himself up, extend his crop and strut to attract her, bowing and bubbling coos, dragging fanned tail.

Flight: flapping on take-off; fast when in flight. If unnerved, will often circle as a flock and then settle again.

Sounds: Wings flap at take off.

Song: ‘CUC-COO, COO, VRUC-CROO.’ Also ‘BUCKET-A-COO’, repeated.

Interesting Facts:

- First homing pigeons used by Ancient Egyptians.
- Lost racing pigeons join feral groups.
- British Army used them in WWII; some won medals for bravery.
- It is oblivious of our cars and huge roaring lorries, but (unlike woodpigeons) rarely gets hit.
- The Czech Carol ‘*The Birds*’ – Verse 2: ‘*A pigeon flew over Galilee, Vrecroo; He strutted and cooed and was full of glee, Vrecroo; and showed with jewelled wings unfurled, his joy that Christ was in the world, Vrecroo, Vrecroo, Vrecroo.*’ So which pigeon does this refer to? Sounds like Feral Pigeons.
- To come so close to human feet gives some children their first close encounter with wildlife.
- Breeds all year in urban areas. Some 100,000 pairs.

Rock Doves: The Ancestors of the Feral Pigeon [Sea Pigeon (Ireland); Doo (N. Scotland) = ‘Dove’]

When: RESIDENT ALL YEAR.

Where: VERY RARE: clifftops on rocky coasts, mainly FAR North of UK. Even then, Feral Pigeons can be mistaken for them.

Colour: pink-grey, black wingbars, white lower back, petrol-green on necks.

Shape: As for feral pigeons.

Flight: faster take off; fast when in flight.

Sounds: Sombre cooing: ‘DOOO-ROO-DOOO’

Stock Doves: [CUSHAT = Old English: *cuscite* = 'cu' (call) + *sceotan* (flies like an arrow); **Stock** = tall tree-stump, where it may nest; also **Bush Dove**; **Blue Pouter** (Suffolk), it can inflate its crop = pouting; **Wood Dove** (Scotland); **Burrow Pigeon** (Yorks), it will nest in rabbit burrows.]

When: *SOME RESIDENT ALL YEAR; SOME MIGRATE.*

Where: Not common, but around still, often unseen: large gardens, open woodland, parks.

Colour: Similar to Feral Pigeons, no black wing bars; blue-green neck patches. Pink-grey.

Shape: smaller than Woodpigeons, shorter tail, but not easy to see. Listen for them!

Flight: faster than Woodpigeons, steadier; fast when in flight.

Sounds: Wings flap as take off; lands with a 'WOO-HOO!'

Song: Male: Like a loud dynamo winding up, the sound starts quite low and gets higher and faster. 'OOU-O, OOU-O, OOU-O'. Can be repeated up to a dozen times.

Interesting Facts:

- STOCKS = tall stumps of trees (often with holes in them) – nothing to do with breeding stock.
- It nests in HOLES (buildings, boxes, stone walls, woodpecker holes)
- Also old rabbit burrows, and holes between rocks (Craig Doo – Crag Dove)
- Pouting = to inflate their crops to show off to their females (Feral Pigeons will also do it as they strut around).

Turtle Doves: [*'turtur'* = reference to their voice.]

When: *SUMMER VISITOR to South April-Sept. Passage migrant (Apr/May; Aug/Oct).*

Where: Sadly rare now and getting rarer: shrubs on heaths; scrubland, open woodland. Eastern England.

Colour: VERY SIMILAR TO Collared Doves; pink, with black neck markings, white edge to tail on take-off, pretty black speckled wings on tan.

Shape: small, dainty, sit in pairs in trees; not easy to see. Listen!

Flight: rocky, pitching flight.

Sounds: almost frog-like...

Song: soft purr: 'Vrecroo-vrecroo-vrecroo' or 'TOORR, TURR' The dove in the Czeck carol: '*The Birds*' Verse 3 = '*A dove settled down upon Nazareth, Tsucroo; and tenderly chanted with all his breath, Tsucroo...*'

Interesting Facts:

- It has been loved and mentioned by the ancients: *Pliny*; Poets in the '*Song of Solomon*': '*the winter is past, ...the time of singing birds has come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.*'
- *Chaucer*: '*The wedded turtle with hir herte trewe.*' = faithful in love.
- It is very fond of smoky-leaved *Fumitory*, and is often found near the wild flower.
- Thousands are shot on migration in Southern Europe and North Africa, despite legal protection.