

# OBSERVATIONS ON THE DOVE FAMILY

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Three members of the dove family breed in Canada, namely, Band-tailed Pigeon, Mourning Dove and Rock Dove (feral pigeon). In this paper I deal mainly with the Mourning Dove and Rock Dove which breed in fairly large numbers all across southern Canada.<sup>7</sup> The Band-tailed Pigeon breeds west of the Coast Range in British Columbia.<sup>7</sup>

Over a period of years I have observed many nests of the Mourning Dove in Winnipeg and Whytewold (southern end of Lake Winnipeg). However, a few years ago I was especially attracted to this species because of its activities at our feeder at the cottage. It was interesting to watch how this "bird of peace" took over. Common Grackles and Blue Jays were fended off by the dove's defiant display of lowered breast, ruffled and erected neck feathers, glaring eyes and a low hiss. Wallace Craig mentions that this expression of fear is seen in all brooding birds.<sup>5</sup> Robert Nero goes into detail about a Red Squirrel's encounter with a Mourning Dove at a feeder. The dove finally won out.<sup>13</sup> Peeters also tells of the Band-tailed Pigeon's defense of its nest against a Fox Squirrel, with the squirrel retreating.<sup>14</sup> Robert Nero states this is also the case with owls.<sup>12</sup>

The late Elizabeth Cruickshank, writing under the pen-name "Liz Roley," refers to the pleasant melancholy cooing which begins with the Mourning Dove's arrival in early

May. "The soft and unobtrusive notes" of the Long-coo (*cooahcoo-coo-coo*) "carry far on a still day."<sup>15</sup> Billing and cooing and preening establish and strengthen the lifelong bond of this species. The male selects the nest site and gives the Short-coo. He may repeat this for several days until the female responds and flies up to him.<sup>17</sup> This is true not only of the Mourning Dove but of pigeons in general.<sup>5</sup>

When I observed White Rock Doves and Zebra Doves on my visits to Honolulu, I was able to observe the aforementioned habits at close range. The birds came up to me in large numbers when I sat on a bench in the Honolulu Zoo Park and fed them seeds and crumbs.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, the smaller Zebra Doves were so friendly that they climbed all over my arms and hands.

Mourning Doves usually build their nests in deciduous and coniferous trees, but nests have also been found on the ground.<sup>7,8</sup> Harrison mentions that Mourning Doves have also nested in Common Grackles' nests and in a Black-crowned Night-heron's nest.<sup>8</sup> I noticed one in a used robin's nest and also in a rough-edged top of a dead tree six feet from the ground. "Most doves nest singly, or with the nests too far apart to suggest any gregarious nesting habit."<sup>16</sup> In the Honolulu Zoo Park there are, however, hundreds of White Rock Doves which nest along the stout branches of the Banyan

trees and in various species of palm tree.<sup>2</sup> As with all doves, the male chooses the nest site; the female builds the nest but the male brings the straws or sticks which he has picked up very carefully; the female accepts the material in her beak and proceeds to construct the nest which is a fragile platform.<sup>17</sup> I was able to observe this procedure at close range with the Zebra Doves in Honolulu.<sup>3</sup>

In general, most species of birds raise one brood only per year, but the Mourning Dove raises at least two, commencing in early May.<sup>7,15</sup> However, they have been known to raise four broods in southern Manitoba in some years.<sup>9</sup>

Most members of the dove family commonly lay two white eggs, producing one male and one female young.<sup>15</sup> The incubation period lasts 15 days and incubation is undertaken by both sexes.<sup>7,16</sup> The male and female take regular daily turns, sitting on the eggs or young; the female sits from evening till morning, the male from morning till evening, "the exchanges taking place usually about 0830 and 1630 hr."<sup>5</sup> I have noticed that during the entire nesting period the parents are very quiet. The parents do not remove the feces of the squabs from the nest; this is unusual.<sup>16,17</sup>

The feeding of the squabs is done by both parents and it is fascinating to watch.<sup>15</sup> From my own observations of the White Rock Dove in Honolulu (in a coconut palm immediately below the lanai), I noticed that the young bird inserts its beak into the side of the parent's beak and then a tug-of-war begins. The adult bird, with a pumping motion of his or her body, regurgitates food from its crop and feeds the young what is

known as "pigeon's milk" and later regurgitates seeds.<sup>2,15</sup> "The entire process occupies about six minutes."<sup>16</sup> After several days I noticed the squab exercised its wings vigorously during this feeding procedure.<sup>2</sup> The nestlings fledge in 15 or 16 days.<sup>2,16</sup> Stokes records anywhere from two to three weeks to fledge.<sup>17</sup>

Adult doves are principally weed seed eaters.<sup>16</sup> They also often can be seen on gravel roads. In Honolulu I noticed many Zebra Doves on the sea beach. Sand and gravel aid digestion of seeds.<sup>16</sup> Water is also an essential element as it too aids the digestion of seeds. Hundreds of Zebra Doves can be seen in the Zoo Park in Honolulu where the grass is completely soaked early every morning. I found it interesting to observe the unique drinking habits; it is one of the few birds which does not lift its head up while drinking.<sup>1</sup>

Frequently Mourning Doves can be seen perched motionless on the wires along a highway or in the tree tops. They are rather shy and generally fly off before one can get too close. While the bird is in flight there is a sharp whistling sound of the dove's wings.

In September, after the breeding period is over, the large majority of Mourning Doves fly south as far as Panama and the West Indies.<sup>7</sup> However, occasionally they have attempted to overwinter around farms and grain elevators.<sup>11</sup>

While we have the Mourning Dove with us during the summer months, the Rock Dove (feral pigeon) stays with us the year round, no matter what the temperature.<sup>4,7</sup> They make their nests in various places, including on the ground.<sup>4</sup> I have observed their nests on ledges under bridges,

inside broken windows of deserted buildings, on ledges of high buildings in our downtown area, and on thick beams under overhangs on the pavilion in Assiniboine Park.

Although the family name of *Columbidae* has nothing to do with Christopher Columbus, it is reported that "Columbus, when he returned to the Caribbean in 1493 with 1500 eager Spanish colonists, he brought caged rock doves — the first birds of this Old World genus ever to coo and nest on New World shores."<sup>10</sup>

These birds have been used for centuries to carry messages, especially during war times. Today we have pigeon fanciers who spend time and money raising and training racing pigeons. While there is the White Rock Dove in Hawaii, research shows that there are hundreds of varieties which are different in colouring from their parent stock. Many are quite beautiful. The Rock Dove can be seen worldwide in temperate and tropical regions.<sup>1</sup>

Biblical literature reveals a great love, admiration and respect for the pigeon (Turtle Dove). Hear the words of David, the Psalmist, in his deep distress — "Oh that I had wings like a dove; for then I would fly away, and be at rest."

And so, from time immemorial doves have played an important part in the life of mankind.

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