

urban antics

by John Hunter



Pigeon or dove?

My spring season in the western coastal suburbs during the 1940s was all colour and sound. For a suburb with relatively few people, Scarborough and its surrounding area was a wonderland of wildflowers and birdlife in a superb forest of eucalypts, banksias and prickly bush undergrowth.

It is said, however, that 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' and I now concur, for it was that holiday once a month with my grandparents in Subiaco where I learned of other things such as trains, trams, bakers' carts, chooks and... pigeons and doves.

Most cities and suburbs of the world have pigeons and doves except those areas of the polar regions or the driest areas of the Sahara Desert. In the case of Perth, the obvious are two introduced species and, until modern times, our suburbs were also a regular haunt for about three native species.

Doves and pigeons are from the bird family Columbidae and are really one-and-the-same. Generally, 'pigeon' refers to the larger bodied bird and 'dove' the smaller.

The Columbidae are generally stout bodied birds with short

necks, and have short slender bills with a fleshy cere. Like a few wild creatures, these birds readily adapt to living alongside humans where they can take advantage of food scraps, pet food and handouts. They also love to build their nests on and in our homes and business premises.

Like most children, it was a pleasure for me in times past to have granddad entice a chubby round-faced, red-legged wild bird onto the handrail of a sun-drenched back verandah and be fascinated with the up-close feverish performance of a handful of budgie seed being devoured.

It was fine, until one day there were lots more 'doves', especially bigger ones, in a feathered frenzy of feasting and pooing. The downside then, was it became

my job to clean up the mess and restrict what had become bad practice.

Unfortunately, we humans are still attracting the introduced species of laughing dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) and its bigger cousin the spotted dove (*S. chinensis*) along with its even bigger relative the European domestic pigeon (*Columba livia*).

The feral European or rock pigeon has the largest territory in the world. Originally trained by the Egyptians more than five thousand years ago, it has grown with the spread of humanity and the availability of grain food and water. It is now causing pollution, damage and disease in cities and areas where numbers are out of control or where access is gained to internal structures for roosting and nesting by even a few pairs.

What is important, is that those local native pigeon species—the crested (*Ocyphaps lophotes*), brush bronzewing (*Phaps elegans*) and common bronzewing (*P. chalcopetra*)—although very shy of human development, are not forced further away due to displacement by their introduced cousins.

Because of hand feeding and uncontrolled availability of pet food, a build-up of introduced bird numbers could subject other native bird species as well as humans to the risk of disease and parasite transmission.

It would not be our wish for our native doves to go the way of their larger extinct cousins, the dodo and the solitary bird.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Doves/pigeons are generally divided into two groups: the colourful plumaged fruit eaters that eat in trees and the somewhat drab seed eaters which are predominantly ground dwellers.
- The rock pigeon has been bred into several varieties by hobbyists, of which the best known is the homing or racing pigeon.
- If there are problems in your area, a feral pigeon control brochure is available from the Department of Health, or contact a licensed pest control operator or your Local Environmental Health Officer.

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Publishing credits

Executive editor Madeleine Clews.

Editors Joanna Moore, Rhianna King.

Scientific/technical advice Kevin Thiele, Paul Jones, Keith Morris, Michael Rule.

Design and production Maria Duthie, Lauren Tyrrell, Peter Nicholas, Gooitzen van der Meer.

Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.

Cartography Promaco Geodraft.

Marketing Estelle de San Miguel.

Phone (08) 9334 0296 Fax (08) 9334 0432.

Subscription enquiries

Phone (08) 9334 0481 or (08) 9334 0437.

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