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Facts & Figures

Pigeons

a.k.a., Rock Pigeon, Feral Pigeon, Rock Dove, Domestic Pigeon

Genus & Species: *Columba livia*

Order: Columbiformes

Family: Columbidae

A common sight in urban areas throughout the world, the pigeon is not native to North America. Rather, pigeons were introduced into North America in the early 1600s. City buildings and window ledges mimic the rocky cliffs originally inhabited by their ancient ancestors in Europe.

The pigeon has a long history of association with humans, having been used for food and entertainment for over 5,000 years. Escaped pigeons from breeders readily form flocks, and other stray birds may join them, thus becoming a feral population. Because of their domestic roots, and because people have bred pigeons for many different colors and accessories, feral pigeons can have a variety of feathered looks¹.

The rock pigeon makes a flimsy nest, but it often reuses the same location repeatedly, even building a new nest on top of the last one. Because the pigeons do not try to remove the feces of their nestlings, the nest becomes a sturdy, mud-like mound that gets larger over time.

Homing pigeons, are well known for their ability to find their way back home from long distances and at high speed. Despite these demonstrated abilities, feral pigeons are rather sedentary and rarely leave their local areas. In fact, when relocated involuntarily, they can return – sometimes within hours – to their original location.

¹ Johnston, R. F. 1992. Rock Dove (*Columba livia*). In [The Birds of North America](#), No. 13 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

Description

- Size: 11-14 inches
- Wingspan: 20-26 inches
- Weight: 9 - 13 ounces
- Color variable, but wild birds are gray.
- White rump.
- Rounded tail, usually with dark tip.
- Pale gray wings have two black bars.

Damage and Risks

- Pigeon droppings deface and accelerate the deterioration of buildings and increase the cost of maintenance. Large amounts of droppings may kill vegetation and produce an objectionable odor. A single pigeon can produce up to 25 pounds of guano, annually.
- Pigeon manure deposited on park benches, statues, cars, and unwary pedestrians is an aesthetic problem. Around grain handling facilities, pigeons consume and can contaminate large quantities of food destined for human or livestock consumption.
- Pigeons can carry and spread diseases to people and livestock through their droppings. Additionally, under the right conditions, pigeon manure may harbor airborne spores of the causal agent of histoplasmosis, a systemic fungus disease that can infect humans.
- Pigeons located around airports can also be a threat to human safety because of potential bird-aircraft collisions, and are considered a medium priority hazard to jet aircraft by the US Air Force.

More Facts

- Pigeons are found to some extent in nearly all urban areas around the world. It is estimated that there are 400 million pigeons worldwide and that the population is growing rapidly together with increased urbanization. The population of pigeons in New York City alone is estimated to exceed 1 million birds.
- Sexes look nearly identical, although males are larger and have more iridescence on their neck.
- Juveniles are very similar in appearance to adults, but duller and with less iridescence.
- Pigeons are highly dependent on humans to provide them with food and sites for roosting, loafing, and nesting. They are commonly found around farm yards, grain elevators, feed mills, parks, city buildings, bridges, and other structures, although they can live anywhere where they have adequate access to food, water and shelter.
- Pigeons feed in flocks and will consume seeds, fruits and rarely invertebrates, although can subsist just fine on street scraps.

- Pigeons require about 1 ounce (30 ml) of water daily. They rely mostly on free-standing water but they can also use snow to obtain water.
- The average pigeon requires 30 grams of dry matter per day, roughly 10% of their body weight.

Reproduction

- Pigeons are monogamous and typically mate for life.
- Female pigeons can reach sexual maturity as early as 7 months of age.
- Pigeons build a flimsy platform nest of straw and sticks, put on ledge, under cover, often located on the window ledges of buildings.
- Eight to 12 days after mating, the females lay 1 to 3 (usually 2) white eggs which hatch after 18 days.
- Condition at Hatching: Helpless, with sparse yellow or white down.
- Chicks fledge (leave the nest) in 25-32 days (45 days in midwinter).
- The male provides nesting material and guards the female and the nest.
- The young are fed pigeon milk, a liquid/solid substance secreted in the crop of the adult (both male and female) which is regurgitated.
- More eggs are laid before the first clutch leaves the nest.
- Breeding may occur at all seasons, but peak reproduction occurs in the spring and fall. A population of pigeons usually consists of equal numbers of males and females. When populations suddenly decrease, pigeon production increases and will soon replenish the flock.
- In captivity, pigeons commonly live up to 15 years and sometimes longer. In urban populations, however, pigeons seldom live more than 3 or 4 years. Natural mortality factors, such as predation by mammals and other birds, diseases, and stress due to lack of food and water, reduce pigeon populations by approximately 30% annually.