Pigeons

Living in Harmony with Your Wild Neighbors

PIGEONS. Some folks consider them an endearing part of urban life, others see them as an aggravation, but everyone recognizes this familiar wild neighbor.

Like so many Americans, the rock dove, as the species also is known, is a European immigrant. Early settlers brought pigeons to North America, and the birds flourished—you'll find pigeons in almost any city, town, or suburb on the continent.

Their diet consists primarily of grains and seeds, along with insects and some greens. But pigeons aren't terribly picky, and they'll happily accept human food scraps and leftovers when available.

From a pigeon's point of view, city living can't be beat. Food and water are readily available. Predators are few and far between. Plus, there's plenty of free housing. Pigeons like to live in large groups; window ledges, rooftops, bridges, and warehouses offer room for whole flocks to rest or take shelter in close proximity.

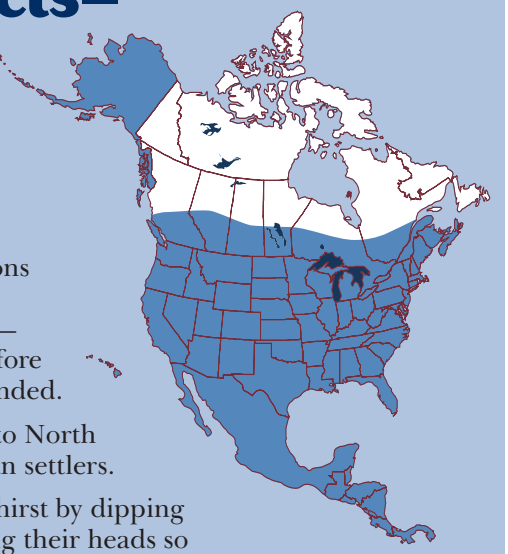
At first glance, the arrangement appears to be ideal. We provide room and board; in return the birds add a little warmth and color to our cold concrete canyons. So what's the problem? Droppings. Not only is pigeon poop unsightly, it can damage buildings, monuments, and automobiles. If allowed to accumulate, human health problems may arise. Consequently, conflicts also may arise between pigeons and people.

Luckily, a little patience and understanding go a long way toward resolving these problems. Removing the animals in question may seem like an obvious answer. Truth is, results are short-lived with this approach because removal simply creates a vacancy that other animals quickly fill. Humane conflict prevention and resolution is less expensive and more effective in the long run.

People can live in harmony with wildlife—you just have to know your wild neighbors!

Animals Animals/Earth Scenes

Pigeon Facts—GEE WHIZ



Pigeons may have been the first bird species to be domesticated, possibly as early as 6,500 years ago.

The Egyptians used pigeons to carry the news of the coronation of Ramses III—more than 3,000 years before the United States was founded.

Pigeons were introduced to North America by early European settlers.

Most birds quench their thirst by dipping their bills and then tipping their heads so water runs down their throats. Pigeons drink by sucking water into their bills.

Pigeon flocks have an equal number of male and female members.

Pigeons can reach flight speeds of 15 to 60 miles per hour.

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Vital Statistics

Description:
Variable; plump body, often gray with darker head and neck; dark wing and tail tip bands.

Range and Habitat:
Widespread throughout all of the United States, Mexico, and southern Canada; common in cities and suburbs; highly tolerant of industrial and heavily developed areas.

Diet:
Seeds, grains, greens, insects, and human food scraps.

Adult Size:
Length: 11 to 13 inches (28 to 33 cm); weight: 8.6 to 12.9 ounces (240 to 360 gm).

Activity:
Generally, diurnal; actively feeding during the day and returning to the roost at night or during the day to feed young.

Breeding:
One or two eggs; incubation lasts 16 to 19 days. Peak reproduction is in spring and fall but may breed any time of year.

Age When Independent:
Between six and eight weeks.

Call:
A soft coo-coo-coo-coooo.

Family Life

Animals Animals/Earth Scenes

PIGEONS live in groups called flocks and show a strong affinity for human-built structures. A courting male pursues his intended mate on the ground, circling her, with his neck feathers inflated and his tail spread, bowing and cooing all the while. Pigeons mate for life, but if one partner dies the survivor generally will attempt to find another mate.

Nests, a haphazard combination of twigs, leaves, and a few feathers, are built on window ledges, behind signs, and under bridges. Parents take turns incubating the clutch of one or two white, unmarked eggs for between 16 and 19 days.

After the eggs hatch, both parents feed the baby pigeons, or squabs, a crop secretion called "pigeon milk," which is produced from the lining of the crop, a saclike food storage chamber located under the bird's esophagus. The milk is a highly nutritious and efficient way of feeding young. Squabs fledge at four to six weeks of age but remain dependent on their parents for as long as the adults will tolerate them—generally another one or two weeks. Individuals may be capable of breeding at six months of age.

Injured or Orphaned Animals

WILDLIFE rehabilitation centers provide care for injured and orphaned wildlife until the animal can be released back to the wild. In most states, wildlife rehabilitation can be practiced only with a state and/or federal license.

Adult pigeons may suffer from broken bones, parasite infestations, and diseases, some of which may present a human health hazard. Without proper intervention, these birds may die from their injuries or be permanently disabled. Rehabilitators receive the special training needed to assess these problems and offer appropriate aid.

Robert Belland

Baby pigeons look so vulnerable and fragile you might consider trying to raise them yourself. They may be covered with sparse, fuzzy down or spiky, emerging feathers, and their beaks can look rather deformed. Like all other infants, squabs have unique nutritional requirements. Baby bird diets available at pet stores may claim to be appropriate for all birds, but this is simply not true. Furthermore, squabs must be fed through a tube inserted into their crop several times a day—a risky procedure even for experienced wildlife rehabilitators. Problems that result from an inappropriate diet, such as metabolic bone disease (also known as rickets), can debilitate an animal for life.

If you've found a pigeon in need of assistance, ask your local humane society or animal control agency to recommend a wildlife rehabilitator in your area.

Control and Damage Prevention

PIGEONS are so common and easily recognized that the first step in most wildlife conflict situations—identification of the species in question—usually can be skipped. Pigeons leave their nesting and roosting sites during daylight hours to search for food, but they return at night, as well as periodically during the day when raising young.

Because pigeons prefer to live in flocks, their accumulated droppings can create aesthetic, economic, and public safety concerns. Uric acid (the white material in the droppings) can damage the finish on buildings and vehicles. When feces are allowed to accumulate, a potential for human health risk may occur.

Exclusion is the most effective and humane way to prevent or solve most conflicts between people and wildlife. Trapping and relocation is definitely a short-term approach because pigeons can easily fly considerable distances and return to their original location. Lethal methods such as shooting and poisons may endanger nontarget species, companion animals, and even people. So while exclusion may initially involve a bit more patience and expense, ultimately it provides the best long-term solution.

Screens and Netting

Attics and soffit vents should be properly screened to keep pigeons and other wildlife out. In barns, warehouses, and other large open structures, close off the space above the rafters with industrial bird netting to prevent roosting and nesting. Nesting inside or behind signs can be averted by sealing the edges with hardware cloth and silicone caulk or with bird netting. It is imperative not to seal birds or nestlings in when applying these strategies.

Exclusion

Deter pigeons from roosting on railings and pipes by installing a single-strand wire barrier one to two inches above the center of the surface, so that birds will be off balance when they attempt to perch. Other devices that work to exclude birds from perching include wire coils, spikes (usually described as "porcupine wire"), and electrified wires. Pigeons can be discouraged from roosting on flat surfaces such as ledges and light fixtures by using boards or sheet metal to create a 45 degree or greater slope.

Tactile Repellents

Sticky substances (polybutenes) are marketed to discourage pigeons and other birds from landing on treated surfaces, but we do not recommend these because they can adhere to and foul the feathers of any bird who comes into contact with them, and may be harmful to smaller species.

Sound Repellents

Sound has been used effectively to scare away some types of birds but, more than others, pigeons seem to quickly learn to ignore loud noises. In addition, municipal noise ordinances must be considered when using firearms or pyrotechnics.

Scare Devices

Scarecrows or effigies of one kind or another often are used to control birds. Models of owls, hawks, snakes, and cats are available from many suppliers and vary greatly in effectiveness, depending on how realistic they are and how often they are moved. Pigeons seem to adjust rapidly to effigies and rarely seem to respond to them. Mylar tape streamers can be effective when used near roost sites.

Resources

Many of the materials for pigeon control products can be obtained locally, at hardware or garden supply stores. If you are unable to locate supplies locally or need more information, visit The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) website, *www.hsus.org,* and its Wild Neighbors™ pages, *www.wildneighbors.org,* for specific manufacturers and suppliers.

REGIONAL OFFICES:

CENTRAL STATES
Serves: IL, KY, MN, NC, TN, WI
800 West Fifth Ave., Suite 110
Naperville, IL 60563
630-357-7015, Fax: 630-357-5725

GREAT LAKES
Serves: IN, MI, OH, WV
745 Haskins St.
Bowling Green, OH 43402-1696
419-352-5141, Fax: 419-354-5351

MID-ATLANTIC
Serves: DE, NJ, NY, PA
Bartley Square
270 Route 206
Flanders, NJ 07836
973-927-5611, Fax: 973-927-5617

MIDWEST
Serves: IA, KS, MO, NE
1515 Linden St., Suite 220
Des Moines, IA 50309
515-283-1393, Fax: 515-283-1407

NEW ENGLAND
Serves: CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT
Route 112
P.O. Box 619 (mailing address)
Jacksonville, VT 05342-0619
802-368-2790, Fax: 802-368-2756

NORTHERN ROCKIES
Serves: AK, ID, MT, ND, SD, WY
490 North 31st St., Suite 215
Billings, MT 59101
406-255-7161, Fax: 406-255-7162

PACIFIC NORTHWEST
Serves: OR, WA
5200 University Way, NE, Suite 201
Seattle, WA 98105
206-526-0949, Fax: 206-526-0989

SOUTHEAST
Serves: AL, FL, GA, MS, SC
1624 Metropolitan Circle, Suite B
Tallahassee, FL 32308
850-386-3435, Fax: 850-386-4534

SOUTHWEST
Serves: AR, AZ, CO, LA, NM, OK, TX, UT
3001 LBJ Freeway, Suite 224
Dallas, TX 75234
972-488-2964, Fax: 972-488-2965

WEST COAST
Serves: CA, HI, NV
5301 Madison Avenue, Suite 202
P.O. Box 417220 (mailing address)
Sacramento, CA 95841-7220
916-344-1710, Fax: 916-344-1808

The HSUS provides fact sheets on a variety of topics. For additional information contact:

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES
2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037
202-452-1100 ■ Fax: 301-258-3080
www.hsus.org ■ www.wildneighbors.org

Consequences of Feeding

MANY people enjoy feeding pigeons, both in public spaces such as parks and at their homes. Unfortunately, feeding wild animals can quickly get out of control. The more food you provide, the more birds will arrive, and as their numbers increase, your pigeon visits may begin to feel like an invasion. As the cost of providing food for all of those hungry mouths becomes prohibitive, people may feel guilty about reducing the amount of food offered or discontinuing their feeding activities.

Keep in mind that while you may be thrilled by a daily visit from a pigeon flock your neighbors may not be as tolerant. Large gatherings of birds can lead to conflicts, not just with the birds but with people as well.

With these facts in mind, we recommend that pigeons not be regularly fed in ways that concentrate their numbers and activities and put the birds at risk for calls for lethal control. We do not wish to see feeding, begun as a kindhearted gesture, end up endangering the very creatures it is intended to help.

Human Health Concerns

While pigeons are susceptible to a number of diseases that affect people and domesticated animals, lack of proper sanitation and accumulation of feces pose the greatest public safety risk. The following diseases—which are easily preventable—are most often associated with potential threats to human health.

Salmonellosis
This bacterial disease is transmitted by ingestion of food contaminated by fecal matter. The presence of pigeons in areas where food is prepared or eaten, such as picnic areas and outdoor restaurants, can be a cause for concern about the spread of *Salmonella* bacteria. Proper sanitation in areas where pigeons congregate will aid in disease prevention.

Chlamydiosis
Chlamydia psittaci are bacteria-like organisms that occur worldwide and affect more than 100 avian species. When diagnosed in all birds (other than parrots) and humans the resulting disease is referred to as ornithosis. Transmission is primarily through inhalation of contaminated fecal dust, although human-to-human transmission can occur through saliva.

Histoplasmosis
The fungus *Histoplasma capsulatum* grows in soils enriched with avian manure or bat guano. Humans, livestock, and some companion animals are susceptible while birds are not. Transmission occurs by inhalation of spores. Most cases in humans are asymptomatic, but at least one form of the disease can be fatal if not treated. Prevention measures include wetting the area and wearing a face mask or respirator when working in suspect surroundings.

Information about humane prevention of pigeon conflicts was prepared by Kieran Lindsey, Natural Assets Consulting, and reviewed by Richard F. Johnston, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Natural History Museum, University of Kansas.