



WILDLIFE NOTES

Rock dove

Found on all continents and in all large cities, the rock dove, commonly known as the domestic pigeon (*Columba livia*), is native to few of these places. As people moved across oceans to the New World, they took pigeons with them. Many became feral but continued to live in proximity to people. It's estimated that there are about five million pigeons in New York City alone.

Though people like to watch the birds' aerial acrobatics, pigeons can be dangerous pests as well. Excrement piles up in air shafts and below roosting ledges. Some masonry can be gradually eroded by pigeon dung, combined with the effects of urban air pollution. Dung dust carries a fungus that can cause a disease similar to bronchitis or tuberculosis. Pigeons may also carry other diseases, such as parrot fever.

A demand from some quarters to exterminate the pigeon has met with resistance from pigeon lovers, so secretive trapping in early hours has occurred in some cities. Attempts to scare birds away have been most unsuccessful. Birth control drugs and an odoriferous chemical have

been tried. The best method seems to be to stop feeding pigeons, but that, too, produces marginal results, considering human nature.

The pigeon's original homeland was in mountainous regions of Europe and Asia. Pigeons needed steep cliffs where their eggs could be safe from predators, and green valleys nearby for food and water. These existed in Mesopotamia, where people started farming river valleys thousands of years ago, providing extra food for pigeons.

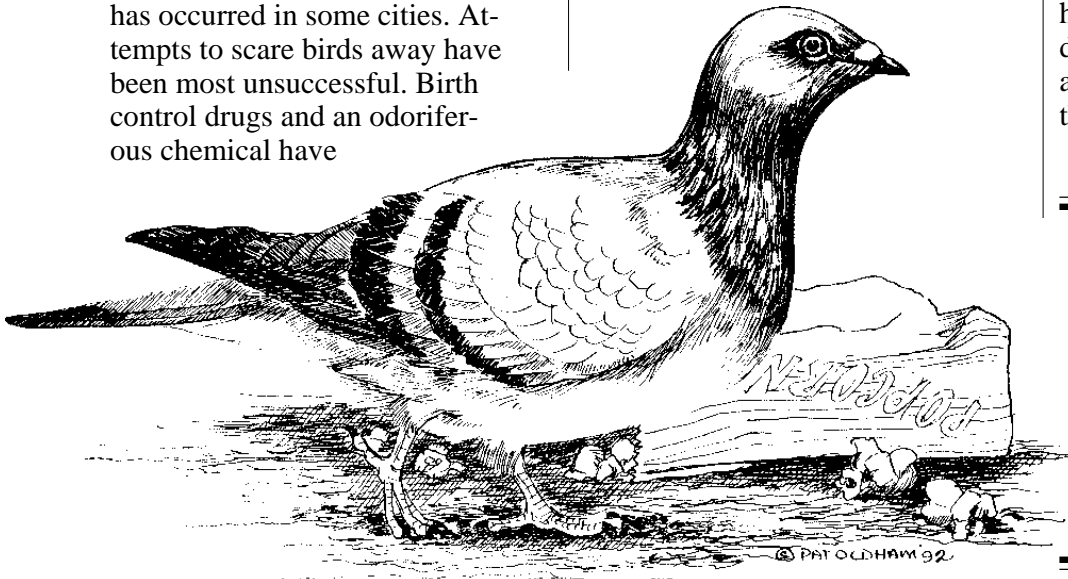
The birds eventually found life easier if they built nests in human structures. They became temple birds, since these buildings were the tallest structures, and the birds were considered sacred: They were consulted by priests who wanted to augur the future; Christians later considered them birds of peace and love.

They are also food supplies themselves, easily cared for: People ate pigeons as early as 4500 B.C.,

as shown by bones in excavations. A "dovecote" method of rearing included a stone tower, with nesting holes and ledges. Eggs and young birds (squabs) could be taken easily by the owners. Romans introduced the pigeon to all conquered lands, and dovecote culture continued through the Middle Ages.

The bird's homing instinct was used early in ancient history by Egyptians and Greeks. News of Caesar's victories in Gaul was sent to Rome by carrier pigeon. A Baghdad sultan is said to have set up the first pigeon mail around A.D. 1150. Pigeons were used extensively at the front in World War I. Pigeon racing has become a worldwide sport, the birds usually flying at about 50 mph.

Pigeons are prolific. They lay only two eggs at a time, in a nest scraped together from a few sticks, but eggs hatch in 18 days. In another month the birds are almost ready to fly. The male and female help raise the young, feeding them digested food from their crops, then adding half-digested grains until the young can eat whole grains.



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