

# Pigeons

## The Most Misunderstood Bird

By Elizabeth Mack

On a recent spring walk through downtown Omaha, I watched a small flock of pigeons roam about the city sidewalk. As I approached, they toddled across my path, pecking at scraps of stale bread and other trash, seemingly unaware of my presence. I enjoyed watching the cooing meanderers go about their daily routine, but other walkers winced at their presence and

shooed them away. I have often heard pigeons described as “rats with wings,” but I’ve never understood why they’re held in such low esteem.

When I told my husband we had pigeons roosting in our backyard, he informed me they were doves and offered to shoot them. “Good eating,” he promised. I passed on the offer.

Depending on who is asked, the distinction between pigeons and doves is imprecise. “Pigeon” is a French translation of the English word “dove,” but a hunter will tell you doves make a good meal while pigeons are meant to be exterminated.

The old adage that all pigeons are doves but not all doves are pigeons is correct – both come from the same family of birds, *Columbidae*, which in turn forms the order *Columbiformes*. There are some 300 species in this order, most of which live tropically, and only 16 of which inhabit Europe, Asia and North America. The only wild pigeon species found in Nebraska is the *Columba livia* or rock pigeon, sometimes called the rock dove. Very loosely translated, the Latin name means “lead-colored bird that bobs its head.” The rock pigeon’s coloring is extremely variable, but is usually distinguished from other pigeon species by its short tail, black-barred

long wings, pale to mid-grey plumage, and white underwings. Other members of this family include the mourning dove, turtle dove, wood pigeon and the now-extinct passenger pigeon. Tracing

the lineage will find that rock pigeons are related to dodo birds, also extinct.

Pigeons feed mainly on seeds and fruits, though some species are known to feed on invertebrates such as worms, small snails and insect larvae. Most city-dwelling pigeons feed on scraps of pizza crust or bread. Few species of pigeons migrate, but they will travel to locate food sources. Rock pigeons are not native to Nebraska and considered pests by many.

Although there is a dove hunting

season in the fall, there is no pigeon season, as pigeons are not protected under Nebraska game law and can be hunted throughout the year. Peregrine falcons are natural predators of pigeons and are now being introduced in some cities as a natural pigeon control, but man remains the most voracious predator known to pigeons.

This fervent hatred of the pigeon is a relatively new phenomenon, according to Andrew D. Blechman, author of *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the*

*World’s Most Revered and Reviled Bird*. In his book Blechman states that “[Pigeons have] been worshipped as fertility goddesses, representations of the Christian Holy Ghost, and symbols of peace.” A pigeon delivered results of the first Olympics in 776 B.C., Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, and gave Darwin insight into his theory of evolution. Julius Caesar used pigeons to relay messages from the battles of Gaul, and the emperor of China used to receive messages from his provinces by

way of pigeon. The Reuters news agency began delivering its news via carrier pigeon in the mid-1800s, and the pigeon played a major role in both World Wars: With a 98 percent success rate, the pigeon swiftly transmitted critical battlefield communications in World War I. By World War II, pigeons were trained and bred to fly faster and twice as far, and had an uncanny ability to identify visual patterns. Although their use dwindled after WWII, the American military began using pigeons



PHOTO BY BILL HAGER

A common enough sight in cities that they usually go unseen or ignored by most people, the rock pigeon (aka rock dove) is an ancient and amazing species. In the past pigeons have been used as everything from messengers to important sources of protein for the hungry.



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again in the Gulf and Iraqi wars, accompanying troops as an early-warning sign of chemical attack. According to Blechman, rumors abound of Saddam Hussein's reliance on pigeon couriers after the U.S. destroyed his communications. Army personnel have reported finding flocks of homing pigeons in abandoned Iraqi bunkers, and insurgents are said to rely heavily on pigeons to transport covert communications.

The utility of the rock pigeon is of little surprise when we understand how they are built – pigeons are engineered for speed and endurance, with hollow bones housing vast supplies of oxygen, large breast muscles that account for one third of its body mass, and the ability to function without sleep for long periods of time (Researchers have found that pigeons can make up for this lost sleep at a later time by simply sleeping more deeply). In short, pigeons are designed for both speed and sustained flight – not to flit around in backyard trees – and their innate navigation system is as mysterious as it is remarkable. German scientists recently uncovered iron-containing structures in the beaks of homing pigeons, which may act as sensors to enable the birds to fly long distances without getting lost, using the earth's magnetic field for navigation.

The rock pigeon has inhabited Earth for over 30 million years, populating every continent except Antarctica. Fossil evidence shows the pigeon originated in Asia, moving across northern Africa and Europe. The pigeon was domesticated as early as ten thousand years ago, making it arguably the world's first domesticated bird. Ancient Mesopotamian tablets mention domesticating pigeons, as do Egyptian hieroglyphics more than five thousand years ago. Rock doves were raised for their meat as far back as the time of ancient Egyptians – the same reason why French settlers imported the rock pigeon to the New World in the 1600s. Since that time the rock pigeon has spread across almost every country and urban city since its introduction. As humans moved to the cities, so followed the pigeon, as they are well adapted to the urban environment. Pigeons can be found in city buildings, bridges, feed mills and farmyards. They don't live in trees but prefer nesting on rocky ledges or cliffs. Pigeons are easily trained to eat out of your hand, and so docile and well mannered that if you open your door, one may well walk right in and sit down for a leftover dinner.

So why do pigeons get such a bad rap? Some say bad press. We have become a population of germaphobes, and pigeons

are often accused of carrying bacteria and disease. The recent scares from West Nile virus and avian flu are also to blame, and we are quick to point our fingers at pigeons and their, well, poop, which the average pigeon produces 20 pounds of a year. Some research, however, has shown that pigeons do not carry nor transmit West Nile virus, as their body temperature is too high to house the bacteria, and other research shows that pigeons are resistant or minimally susceptible to avian influenza. Dave Oates, Wildlife Disease Specialist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said that while pigeons are known to carry some diseases, their danger to humans is overstated and that pigeons don't necessarily harbor any more diseases than any other animal.

However, Nebraska bird expert and enthusiast Clem Klaphake, Professor of Environmental Sociology at Bellevue University, is more cautious and believes that pigeons, especially in large, confined roosting flocks, can carry a number of bacterial and fungal diseases. One such disease is avian chlamydiosis, which in humans can result in severe pneumonia, and possibly even death.

Since feral pigeons are descendants of cliff dwellers, tall buildings and bridges are a natural fit for today's birds. As a result, apart from disease concerns, pigeon excrement has also been blamed in the destruction of automobiles, buildings and monuments. Most recently, pigeon dung is suspected to be partially to blame for the collapse of the large bridge in Minneapolis in 2007 – pigeons produce slightly acidic excrement that can dissolve concrete and cause steel bridge beams to rust, so the sheer amount excreted over a long period of time could conceivably cause such destruction.

So what would happen to our ecosystem if pigeons suddenly disappeared? Nothing, according to Klaphake: "I don't think any ecosystem would be impacted since they primarily live in cities and are not really part of any bigger ecosystem. Those living in barns and other farm outbuildings don't really play any significant or crucial role in the rural scene either. If we went back to pre-human settlement, I'm not sure how well they would survive since they depend on humans

PHOTO BY PASQUALE MINGARELLI



A pigeon flies over a south Omaha neighborhood near 60th and L streets.

for food and shelter."

The pigeon is not protected under the Migratory Bird Act and is one of the small number of bird species that are considered a nuisance pest by the Environmental Protection Agency. According to Joel Jorgensen, Nongame Bird Program Manager for the Commission, pigeons are not protected by either federal or state laws: "There

is not a regulated [hunting] season for rock pigeons, so folks could collect (and eat if they desire) the birds as they please." Older pigeons, anything over a month old, are edible but require longer cooking to soften the tough meat. Once properly prepared, however, they make a delicious meal, as many from the Great Depression generation can attest. Nonetheless, you won't find many

hunters out for a day of pigeon hunting.

Although pigeons are loathed by many, there are some who revere them. Pigeon racing has millions of enthusiasts around the world and squab, or month-old pigeon, is a delicacy to many. But pigeon prejudice will no doubt continue. To date, 56 pigeon species around the world – almost 20 percent of all pigeon species – are in danger of becoming extinct. Of the large bird families around the world, few have as high a proportion of endangered species, and although various conservation efforts are in place to prevent extinction, the threat remains.

Despite that, the rock pigeon – love it or hate it – is still going strong. If you have any doubts about that fact, the next time you're in any downtown city, just look up – carefully. ■

*The author would like to note the historical and scientific information was taken from Andrew D. Blechman's book, Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird, and Gibbs, Barnes and Cox's Pigeons and Doves: A Guide to the Pigeons and Doves of the World.*



PHOTO BY BILL HAGER

Modern pigeons have readily traded the rocky ledges and cliffs their ancestors used as nesting and roosting sites for today's buildings of brick, steel and concrete.



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Pigeon droppings pile up beneath the 10th Street bridge along the Gene Leahy Mall in downtown Omaha. The birds like to roost in the bridge's steel beams.