

Pigeons and Doves (Columbiformes)ⁱ

Diet and Care Recommendations



General Information

The order Columbiformes contains as many as 307 species in 10 families and subfamilies. There are some species that are currently threatened or endangered and some species have become extinct during the past few centuries (including the dodo bird). Although columbids share distinct physical features with each other there is still quite a bit of diversity within this group of birds. Some columbids are tropical forest dwellers subsisting on insects and fruit for large part of the diet whereas our more familiar species are primarily granivorous (eating seeds and grains). Some species are more similar to pheasants than to our classic idea of a pigeon (e.g., the common pigeon or rock dove). Common pigeons (domestic pigeons) usually lay 2 plain white eggs and incubate them for about 18 days. They are prolific breeders and can nest year-round if food is available. The nest is a loose collection of straw or sticks on ledge or, for some species, on a tree limb. Local (western Washington) wild species of columbids include the band-tail pigeon (*Patagioenas fasciata*) and, in some locales, mourning doves (*Zenaida macroura*).

Diet

Our most common species of pigeons and doves should be fed a seed and grain mix appropriate for the size of the bird. This can be supplemented with formulated pigeon pellets or parrot pellets (e.g., Harrison's Bird Diet Adult Lifetime). Because columbids swallow their food whole, they rely on powerful gizzard contractions and the presence of small stones in their stomach to grind their food. We recommend providing grit appropriate to the size of the bird. Oystershell grit or eggshell-supplementation for breeding or growing birds is also suggested. Fruits, such as berries, may be offered also. Greens and vegetables can be provided for variety although many captive birds may ignore them.

Husbandry

Most pigeons and doves can be maintained outdoors in lowland western Washington. A flight cage is recommended but the birds should also have an enclosure to escape wind and rain. A light bulb or ceramic bulb can be provided in the winter for particularly cold weather. Increased quantities of cracked corn, sunflower seed, or other higher fat-containing grain can also be helpful in cold weather to provide extra calories for maintaining body temperature. Ventilation is important within lofts, particularly with large flocks. Ventilation should include floor and rafter openings to encourage dissipation of ammonia vapors from droppings and to encourage drying of fecal material. The floor of lofts should be elevated at least 12" off the ground to also discourage moisture and vermin. Use of straw, except within nest boxes, is discouraged as it provides a good medium for fungal growth. For small indoor dove cages, plain newspaper is a great substrate and should be changed daily. For outdoor lofts, bare wood, sand, or very small, washed, pea gravel can be used. Wood can be scraped clean while sand and gravel can be raked and scooped regularly. This should be performed on at least a weekly basis particularly in damp conditions or with large flocks.

Pigeons produce powder down from special feathers on their sides. People who are regularly exposed to this powder down can be at risk for developing a serious allergic reaction to it. This is becoming a leading health problem for persons owning pigeons and other powder-down producing bird species. We recommend wearing a mask when cleaning pigeon and dove enclosures. Birds kept indoors should preferably be housed in a room separate from where people sleep and with good ventilation or air filtration.



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Medical Concerns

Indoor doves and pigeons from reputable, clean aviaries are generally free from disease. Outdoor pigeons, particularly those allowed to fly free, are at more risk for disease. Whenever acquiring new birds for your flock, we encourage you to quarantine the new birds for at least 40 days in a separate enclosure. An examination, fecal evaluation, and, in some cases, bloodwork are recommended on new birds. Some potential pathogens in all columbids include Psittacosis (*Chlamydophila psittici* infection), pigeon herpesvirus, trichomoniasis (also known as canker), paratyphoid (*Salmonella* infection), and intestinal parasites such as acarids.

Zoonoses (Diseases contagious to people)

- Psittacosis (*Chlamydophila psittici*)
- Histoplasmosis and Cryptococcus (fungi that prefer to grow in accumulated pigeon droppings)
- Allergic alveolitis (see above under husbandry)

ⁱ This information is intended primarily for members of the genera *Columba* (includes common pigeon or rock dove and all breeds thereof), *Streptopelia* (ring-necked and related doves), and *Geopelia* (diamond and related doves).



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