



# Cape Doves

by Glen Holland  
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**T**he Cape Dove *Oena capensis* is also known as the Namaqua or Masked Dove. Personally I prefer the name Namaqua Dove – probably because of a liking of the rather unique dry Namaqualand area from which the name is derived.

They are distributed through most of Africa, avoiding the tropical, wet areas and also occur in Madagascar and southwestern Arabia. They naturally occur in hot dry thornveld country, particularly with short thorn scrub areas where they feed on the ground on the seed of various plants, weeds, and grasses.

When disturbed, they take off quickly showing two bands over the rump and the long tail, which is distinctive. They are extremely fast flyers and I have seen them hit a mist net with such speed that they are catapulted out again.

They are regular visitors to waterholes where they can arrive in numbers of up to 50 per hour and congregating in numbers up to several hundred. Their arrival is easily recognized by their hard, noisy wing beats.

Their call is a soft deep “*doowooo*” which rises towards the end and carries for some distance. When walking in their natural habitat breeding males can be heard calling from their territories – each answering each other, giving an echo type effect.

The Namaqua Dove is unique amongst the African doves, showing obvious sexual dimorphism. The female lacks the black facial mask of

the male and immatures are a grayish color with dark wavy barring over most of the plumage. Young males start to show the black feathers on the chest by three months.

They are gentle, quiet aviary inhabitants and in a large aviary more than one pair can be kept together but should bickering occur amongst the birds, this will reduce the productivity of pairs. In a flight, to avoid bickering, they must be housed in single pairs. They are best housed with small waxbills and finches but can be kept with other dove species provided sufficient space and nest sites are available.

Namaquas tend to sleep outside of sheltered areas and are particularly susceptible to disturbances at night. Disturbance by cats or other predators will soon be obvious as the doves will show damaged feathers on their heads and if the problem is not solved it may result in death due to a damaged skull.

The aviary should be lightly planted with sparse “twiggy” shrubs, avoiding dense moist vegetation which will not suit this species. The aviary floor should be covered in coarse sand with a few scattered rocks and stumps on which the birds will spend much of their time. As with most doves, they spend much of their time on the ground and regularly sun bathe in exposed sandy areas. Namaquas are rather delicate in cold wet climates. In their natural habitat overnight temperatures will drop below zero but the winter days are warm and dry. In severe climates they should be sheltered from the cold and wet, and when low temperatures continue for prolonged periods additional warmth should be provided.

I have bred this species outdoors in warm South African climates and the birds always looked in good condition and trim. In the cooler, wet New Zealand climate I have seen some rather poor looking specimens suggesting that in harsh climates they will benefit from being housed indoors during the cold and wet periods.

Namaqua Doves feed on finely crushed maize (corn), wheat, and a mixture of millets. Due to their habit of feeding on the ground, doves in general tend to become infected by worms and a deworming program should be

implemented every four months.

During courtship the male will sit on the nest calling, flitting his wings, bowing his head and at the same time raising his tail (without spreading it as do diamond doves) to attract his mate. Males will also perform the tail raised display on the ground.

Under the correct conditions a pair can prove to be prolific breeders. The nest is a tiny structure placed close to the ground in a dense shrub, or a thorn bush, and is constructed of a few small twigs with a few rootlets and/or grass as a lining. In the natural state the average nest height above the ground is one meter.

Photo by Nico Myburgh



Male Cape Dove sitting on a nest.

In aviculture they will also build a flimsy nest in a basket, or on a wire platform. The nest is used for several consecutive broods. The female builds while the male supplies the materials. In a cold climate it is recommended to separate the sexes during winter as few chicks will survive the cold and the birds can be exhausted while their efforts will be wasted. Both sexes incubate the clutch which consists of two cream colored eggs which hatch in 14 days and the chicks fledge after 14 - 16 days. As incubation commences with the first egg, the chicks hatch on successive days. They are often multiple brooded, raising four or five broods before taking a break.

These are very charming doves that are an attraction in any aviary. 