



This feral hen nests on the ledge of an old church building.



This feral has had the bad experience of being maimed. Birds like this are often left crippled in attempts to escape pigeon traps.



In San Francisco's Chinatown, white pigeons await purchase and a stew pot.



San Juan Capistrano has become a sanctuary for many feral pigeons.



Ferals are interested in cleanliness, delighting in the opportunity to bathe in the run-off from a fountain.

Feral Pigeons

Life's Tough All Over

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Feral: 1. Existing in a wild or untamed state; 2. Having escaped from domestication and become wild

Noise, crowds and traffic jams are as much a part of the urban scene as cement and steel. Not a pretty picture perhaps, but a way of life for millions of people. It's also a living for millions of pigeons — a hard one.

The feral pigeon has been given many names. It's been referred to by some as a park bird, by others as a "commie." Still by others as a "spoogie." The names, however, aren't really descriptive of the bird. They don't tell us a thing about the personality or the plight of these, the descendants of the wild blue rock dove. It's a shame, too. Because there's quite a lot to be said for those gunmetal gray creatures we all know as city pigeons.

First of all, feral pigeons are home oriented birds. If the same blue and gray pigeon weren't a city dweller, he and his mate would more than likely choose their roosting place in rocks or cliffs, sheltered from the elements. San Francisco can't offer a cliff dwelling, but like all large cities, there are an abundance of old buildings, window ledges and air ducts which make adequate substitute housing. The pigeon desires nothing fancy. He merely wants a place to escape

the rain and draughts. A place where, in the warm months, he and his mate can build a nest and raise their young. Walk along a busy city street and look up from time to time. Study the archways and the windowsills. You're sure to spot a pigeon's roost.

Setting up housekeeping may not be a tough job for a pigeon, granted. But getting enough to eat is quite another matter. Pigeons peck at nearly everything they see. At least that's the way it has always seemed to me. (And I'm not your casual observer. I'm the law-breaker, the criminal type who ignores the "Please Don't Feed The Pigeons" signs.) Some of those signs threaten hefty fines and/or jail sentences. But serious pigeon feeders pay little heed to these threats and rarely cause a "flap." Unfortunately, pigeons don't truly benefit from the benevolence of most bird feeders. Salted popcorn, crackers and bread just don't make up an adequate diet for birds — even those living at a near starvation level. Without an occasional chicken bone to pick off of, some cheese discarded from your "Big Mac" or some honest-to-goodness grain, these feral pigeons become targets for parasites and disease. Life expectancy for these birds is little more than three years.

A walk down city streets is proof enough that pigeons don't leave all the messes.

Still, one must marvel at the tenacity of the city pigeon. Despite the difficulties of their livelihood, their numbers increase. In some cities the increase has caused concern. The concern, unjustifiable fears that the birds may transmit disease to humans. (There is no scientific proof that pigeons cause any more health hazards than do dogs or cats.) The bird, nonetheless has been viewed as a pest in the eyes of many city dwellers.

Various means have been enlisted to eradicate or at least cut down drastically, the numbers of ferals in urban areas. The methods range from poisoning to trapping, to providing a birth control product designed to inhibit ovulation in the female and effect the production of estrogen in the male. Most methods, and particularly the chemosterilant, prove costly in terms of dollars and time. But many cities have made marked progress in controlling the numbers. In Portland, Oregon, a city which once had a large pigeon populace, one seldom sees the birds. And, whether it be wise or not, I can't help but feel perhaps the pest control fanatics have gone a bit too far in their hyped-up concern for cleanliness. After all, the vast majority of the filth one sees in our cities is *not* caused by pigeons. ●



This flock of pigeons has discovered a feast in someone's discarded chicken bones.