

Fruit Pigeons & Doves... Glamour on the Wing

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pictures and inspiration from
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When it comes to beautiful birds, why is it hookbill people think they have the market cornered? It's true, you know. The breeders of parrots, macaws, conures and the like believe that nothing in the pigeon/dove world can even come close. But they haven't seen our fruit pigeons and other lovelies — the wild species whose gaudy plumage glistens like a crystal in the sun's rays. Birds adorned in pink, green, orange and yellow. Indeed, every color of the rainbow.

One rarely sees fruit pigeons and doves. They are not common avian specimens. And when a fancier does run across one of these beautiful species, he or she must be willing to spend a goodly sum of money for possession. Scarcity and difficulty of procreation equal dollar signs in this hobby. So those of us on fixed incomes must resort to picture books. We must read about men like Derek Goodwin and Jean Delacour, study the glossy plates, and dream.

Fruit pigeons and doves make up a special group of *Columbidae*. They are, as their name implies, fruit eaters rather than seed eaters, living and feeding in tropical or semi-tropical climates where figs, berries and nuts are prolific. Most varieties are found in Africa, southern and eastern Asia, Australia, Malaysia and the Philippines. They are normally found in flocks and do little wandering other than to search for the Banyan figs and nutmegs, two dietary staples.

There are probably many reasons why bird lovers avoid keeping these tropical beauties. Among these, of course, is the fact that they must be imported and successfully acclimated. Dietary needs are another consideration, as anyone who has even attempted feeding a mynah bird will admit that fruit eaters generally are messier than seed-eating species. Then, too, many of the beautiful pigeons and doves prove more challenging to breed. Duplicating, as much as possible, their original habitat takes a great deal of effort. Unlike the common ringneck doves and the petite diamond doves, the fruit pigeons and doves are extremely particular about their environment. A planted aviary is absolutely essential. A plywood nestbox hanging from chicken wire will not fool even

the most ardent pair.

The late Dr. Jean Delacour, dean of aviculturists, left us with some brief but interesting descriptions of many of the elegant fruit-eating pigeons and doves in his text, *Wild Pigeons and Doves*.¹ He supplied a few tips for successfully overcoming many of the drawbacks to rearing these lovelies, but indicated that his main objective was to simply draw attention to the breathtaking beauty of the fruit-eaters.

Another less common treatise is that of N. Kuroda, entitled *Birds of the Island of Java*, published in 1936. Kuroda's work featured colored plates. Of course, they only depict a few of the species, but enough, I believe, to prove that hookbills are not the only birds with gorgeous coloration.

Plate 28 features the wedge-tailed green pigeon (upper left-hand corner). This bird is somewhat smaller than a feral or "park" pigeon. It receives its name due to the fact that the tail is rather blunt and wedge-shaped. Though considered one of the "green" pigeons, this variety contains a delightful mixture of yellow, green and gold feathers. The outer secondaries and primaries are black. With close observation, one can note a salmon pink tinge to the upper breast feathers.

The three pigeons located upper right in plate 28 are other members of the green pigeon family. Though most of these have predominantly greenish plumage, you can see that many other hues add beauty and contrast to their countenance. The four pigeons shown in the lower half of plate 28 belong to the fruit pigeon family. The black-naped fruit dove, (lower right) is described in Derek Goodwin's *Pigeons and Doves of the World*,² as being slightly larger than a Barbary dove with a pale silver-grey head. The majority of this bird's plumage is bright green, often tinged with golden or bronze hues. Delacour indicated in his writings that this particular variety continues to enjoy popularity in Europe. But the Europeans have always been more adventuresome in their birdkeeping, or so it seems.

Kuroda shows us some other beauties in plate 29. The bird in the upper left hand corner is the green imperial pigeon, possibly the best known and most commonly kept of the species. The bird is actually a grayish-green with pale gray underside. Predominately found in India and the Philippines, this bird lays a single egg rather than the traditional two egg clutch common among our domesticated

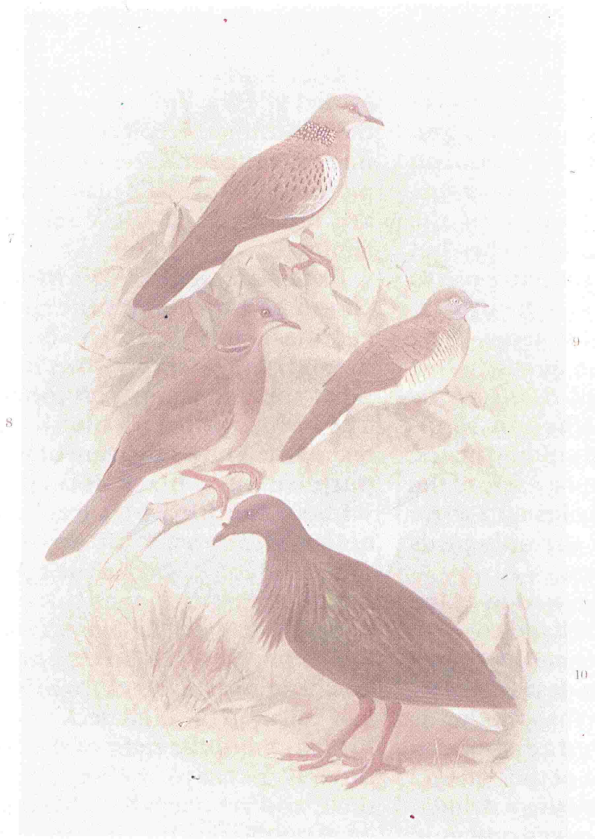
pigeons and doves. The pure white bird with black flights and tailfeathers is known as a nutmeg pigeon. However, it goes by other names including the white imperial pigeon and the pied imperial pigeon. The other varieties pictured in Kuroda's plate number 29 are members of the cuckoo dove family.

Plate 30 from Kuroda's *Birds of the Island of Java* depicts the spotted or pearlneck dove (top). This bird, about the size of the Barbary dove, has somewhat shorter wings and longer tail. The head is actually a bluish gray, the rest of the body a mixture of buff, and purplish pink. Black dots adorn the wings. The bird pictured directly below the spotted or pearlneck is called the collared dove and consists of fawn coloration, though this may vary depending upon the form. Of course, the hallmark of this breed is its distinguishing broad, black, white-edged half collar on the hind neck.

Pictured to the right of the collared dove is, perhaps, a less spectacular dove, and yet one which has met with great popularity. It is the barred ground dove, often referred to as the zebra dove. This little bird, predominantly found in Indio-Malaysia and Australian regions, has proven adaptable and yet rather difficult to breed in captivity. Muted color is the best description for this variety, with pale bluish-gray and mauve tones being apparent and black fringes on the feathers lending the barred effect. Though Delacour has stated that the subspecies of the barred ground dove, the zebra, is naturally tame, I have not found this to be the case in my own aviary. The few pairs I have attempted to breed have proven rather quarrelsome with my other dove varieties and have not seemed eager to share space with diamonds or ringnecks. (If others have had better luck, I would enjoy hearing about your methods.)

The pigeon in the lower middle of the plate with the vulture-like stance is called the Nicobar or hackled pigeon. Now before you hookbill breeders begin to laugh, let me at least point out that this bird proves there is tremendous variety within the pigeon and dove world. After all, who is to say what is beautiful? Variety in itself can be beautiful. This particular pigeon is aglow with color. While the underparts are an iridescent green, the shiny hackles about the neck form a silvery-gray fringe with purplish bloom. The green upper parts are frequently streaked with a coppery red and dark

Courtesy of Dr. Willard Hollander, Ames, Iowa



Three forms of Doves (figs. 7-9),
and a Nicobar Pigeon (fig. 10).

blue. A small black knob sits at the base of the beak, near the forehead. A little prehistoric looking? Perhaps. But what a contrast to the stark white of a sacred dove! Like the others, the nicobar pigeon feasts on fruits and seeds and, according to Derek Goodwin's text, probably consumes some invertebrates. This pigeon is not as small as the others you have seen in Kuroda's plates. In fact, it is similar in size to a large bantam chicken.

You and I may visit aviaries the rest of our lives and never get to view one of these elegant specimens. We may occasionally find a pair for sale at prices we can ill-afford. We may hear stories of one breeder's success and another's failure. With luck, more and more aviculturists will succeed in keeping and breeding these gorgeous wild species. And, in time, perhaps the dreamers will be able to see them in flesh and feathers. Until then, let us be thankful for Kuroda's color prints.

REFERENCES

1. *Wild Pigeons & Doves*, Delacour, Jean, copyright 1980, TFH Publications, Inc.
2. *Pigeons & Doves of the World*, Goodwin, Derek, copyright 1970, Staples Printers, Ltd., British Museum of Natural History, London. ●



Imperial Pigeon (fig. 1), Nutmeg Pigeon (fig. 2),
and three forms of Cuckoo-Doves (figs. 3-6).



Seven forms of Fruit-Pigeons.

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