



from  
the field . . . .

# Red-billed Pigeon

by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear  
San Antonio, Texas

The huge cypress trees overhung the Rio Corona with their giant arms. Nearly touching the water in places, they shaded the river from the harsh Mexican sun. Traveling down an obviously worn path, I arrived at the river's edge only to capture a parting glimpse of several wild muscovy ducks. Despite being the size of a goose they maneuvered the turns in the river like falcons. Bird watching generally isn't very productive during the mid-day hours so I spent more time looking for aquatic life than arboreal forms. A rustling in the trees, however, warranted attention and resulted in my introduction to the red-billed pigeon (*Columba flavirostris*).

The first thing you will likely notice about the pigeon is that its bill is not red! In fact, only the basal part of the bill is red. This 13-inch-long bird is frequently described as a large, dark



Photo by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear

*Red-billed pigeon photographed at the Belize Zoo, Belize, Central America.*

pigeon with maroon on its foreparts. The females are noted as being paler and duller (head, neck, breast and lesser wing coverts) while the young males are brighter than young females.

While several subspecies exist, the most frequently observed birds, *Columba flavirostris flavirostris*, occur from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas south to El Salvador. Additional subspecies inhabit suitable areas throughout the remainder of its range in Central America south to northern Costa Rica. As with many other bird

species, the various subspecies are only subtle changes in body size and/or coloration.

Paloma morada, as it is frequently called in Mexico, prefers semi-arid woodlands and river woods, but can be found up to 7,000 feet in the deforested mountain slopes of northwestern Costa Rica. Since it is generally closely associated with riverine areas, often below 3,500 feet, the range map published in Goodwin's *Pigeons and Doves of the World* overstates the species' actual range. Breeding records in the literature exist in every month from March until August. Like most other tropical pigeons, only a single egg is laid (recorded as being 40.5 x 26.6 mm and solid white in coloration). The incubating bird defends its nest fearlessly often allowing approach within inches before it departs. While I have never observed a nest, it is said to be of typical frail stick construction. An excellent photograph of a nest with egg can be found on page 108 of *Breeding Records of Land Birds in Oaxaca, Mexico* (Stuart Rowley, editor: *Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology*, publication No. 3, Vol. 2).

Nests of the red-billed pigeon have been discovered from five feet to 30 feet high in a variety of trees and shrubs from cypress, bull acacias, and sapling evergreens, to clumps of thorny pejibaye palms. Feeding upon small fruits, berries and acorns, the red-billed pigeon is often the bird one first encounters in the tropics. While many of us view pigeons of varied colorations, the simple beauty of the red-billed pigeon, in the wild, leaves a lasting impression of nature's perfection. Just remember not to look for the red bill! ●



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