

# PIGEONS & DOVES

## Part 2 – The Rock pigeon

By: Hein van Grouw



### ROCK PIGEON – *Columba livia*

Dutch: Rotsduif

French: Pigeon biset

German: Felsentaube

The scientific name *livia* comes from the Latin word *liveus* which means bluish-grey. With this name, the common colour of the pigeon is correctly indicated. *Columba* is also Latin and literally means 'pigeon' or 'dove'.

### General appearance

The nominate species of the Rock pigeon is the size of a small racing pigeon. The ground colour is a clear blue-grey, with two very distinctive black bars on the wing shield; any other colour or marking on the wing shield except from two black bars, indicates a crossing with domestic pigeons or feral pigeons. The throat and neck feathers have a metallic sheen: depending on the light reflection, giving a green or purple sheen. The upper tail-coverts are white, the same as the outer vanes of both outer tail feathers. The eyes are orange to red and the beak is black with fine, powdery white beak cere.



Above:  
In France they used to house pigeons in carefully built dwellings. The pigeons were kept for their droppings, which were used to fertilise the vines and of course,



pigeon meat is highly appreciated. The towers are still there, but most of them are bricked up.

Above left: Here near the beautiful village of Puy-L'Evêque in the French Department of Lot, you can encounter large flocks of feral pigeons in all colours, without a doubt the descendants of the pigeons that were kept in the 'Pigeon Towers' but also with the intermingled blood of the Rock pigeon and 'lost' racing pigeons that have 'gone wild'.



Urban pigeons in various colours.  
Photo: H.J.v.Grouw

### Range and Habitat

Their native habitat is the Sea-cliff of Ireland, Scotland and the Scottish Islands, stretching to the European shores of the Mediterranean, East Europe and even more eastwards up to many parts of Asia and the Middle East, and finally in North Africa, north of the equator. Within this area there are many sub-species, which all vary to a lesser or greater degree in colour and / or size.

The Rock pigeon is the wild ancestor of all domestic racing- and fancy pigeons. The Urban/Feral pigeon is a descendent of escapees and crosses with the wild population. Scientifically, the Rock pigeon and the urban pigeon are of the same species. Feral pigeons are found all over the world in urban and suburban areas, particularly in bigger cities.

The natural habitat of the Rock pigeon is mostly on the high rocks and cliffs. They nest on sheltered cliff-ledges and in holes and clefts in the rock.

To forage they need open field with little shrub growth. The pigeons often fly long distances to reach preferred feeding spots. They have a good homing ability and no matter how displaced from their nesting area, they can return from long distances. In the past, this 'homing ability' and the urge to rush back to the nest or roosting place, was used by men to transport messages. Strict human selection on 'homing ability' has evolved in the nowadays racing pigeon.

The urban pigeons changed the rocks and cliffs for high buildings. Here they find nest places as well. Just like the Rock pigeons, most urban pigeons fly long distances to forage outside the city, in suburban and agricultural environments.

## Care

The Rock pigeon is one of the few pigeon species that lives in groups all year long. That's why it is possible to keep more pairs together in one loft, even during the breeding time. In the wild, rock pigeons only have a very limited territory, just some square inches at a cliff-ledge. This is their permanent resting place, here they breed and bring up youngsters. This roosting and nesting place is vigorously defended. The remaining part of the area is for all the pigeons of the group.

That is why in the loft or aviary the number of roosting- and nesting places has to be taken into consideration. The pigeons must have enough space at their disposal or else there will be continuous fights and unrest.

It is not wise to put other wild pigeon species in the group of Rock pigeons, as their nesting habits are so different. The domestic varieties of *Columba livia* will not usually cause any problems though, as most will have similar nesting instincts.

Being long distance flyers by nature, they will require a greater amount of space than many domestic varieties. Or else you can allow them to free-fly. Rock Pigeons are just as faithful to their home as their domestic relations. To have them get used to free-flying, it is best start with youngsters that have been hatched and reared in the loft, eventually together with tame racing pigeons. It is almost impossible to train birds obtained as adults.

Rock pigeons are perfectly able to resist the winter climate in Holland.

A seeds and grain mixture for small fancy pigeons can make up most of the Rock Pigeons' diet. It is important to contain a sufficient amount of peas/legumes, with some protein pellets, or a higher protein mix during the nesting season. If you cannot free-fly and only keep in aviaries, some green food is needed as well.

## Breeding

A nest bowl, like the ones used for racing pigeons, is fine for the birds to use. Just as with the racing pigeons, they may be put into nest boxes. For nesting material, tobacco stems and fine twigs can be given.

The incubating time is 17 days and at about 4 weeks of age, the young leave the nest. The male will continue to feed them for some days.

Ring size: 7mm.

### IMPORTANT:

In The Netherlands, the Rock pigeon is under protection of the 'Flora and Fauna' law. This means that the pigeons must be ringed with an approved leg ring, approved by the Minister of LNV. These rings can be ordered by the various Bird Associations. It is illegal to keep Rock pigeons without approved rings.



Rock pigeons and urban pigeons often live together.

Photo: H.J. van Grouw

For more information [redactie@aviculture-europe.nl](mailto:redactie@aviculture-europe.nl)

Photo background: Dirk de Jong

French Photos: Archives Aviculture Europe

Copyright ©2006 Aviculture-Europe All rights reserved by VBC