This widely known pigeon is a native of Australia and closely related to the Phaps and Geophaps family. The scientific name is *Ocyphaps lophotes*. In English it is called 'the Australian Crested pigeon'; in French 'Colombe lophote'; in German 'Schopftaube' and in Dutch 'Australische Kuifduif'. Apart from the nominate species whose habitat is in central and eastern Australia, there is also a sub-species, the *O.l. whitlocki* that lives in west-central Australia. This sub-species has more defined striping on the wings and less white at the end of the tail.

The Crested Pigeon is a common sight in lightly wooded grasslands where there is water as it has to drink every day. When it is very dry, they are also found in urban areas in groups in the vicinity of water. Being birds of open grassland they are not found in denser forests. They are very active birds that eat various seeds found on the ground, with a preference for the seeds of Acacia trees. The Crested pigeon is slightly smaller than the Barbary (Ringneck). It is typified by its thin upright crest, small bill, long, narrow tail and rather short wings. The head, chest and underparts are pale grey. It has a slender, black spike on top of head, which is mostly carried erect. The back of the neck, back and coverts are brown
with a bronze sheen. The sides of the neck and breast are pinkish with the shoulders and small wing coverts being brownish-yellow with black striping. The larger wing coverts are bronzed blue and green with white lacing. The primary feathers have colourful areas of brown, purple, blue and green, which creates a beautiful speculum. The tail is a dark colour; the two middle feathers having a greenish sheen and ending with narrow white lacing. The outer feathers are a dark colour with a blue-green purple sheen with broad white ends.

The third primary feather of the wing is somewhat shorter and narrow. The bird’s characteristic whistling flight is caused by air passing over this modified feather.

The bill is black with a grey cere and the eyes are yellow or orange to red encircled by a pinkish-red ring. The legs are pinkish-red. The plumage of the female is similar to the male, so at first sight they look identical. Upon closer inspection however, we notice that the male has more rose in the neck and more olive green at the lower back, whereas the female shows a more brownish colour. Immature birds have duller colours, no bronzing on the wings or tail and a much less developed crest. Their bill is horn coloured and their legs are not as rosy.

Upon landing on a bough, the pigeon always swings its tail high in the air, keeping the head somewhat backwards. Their voice is a repeated and melodious ‘kuu-uu’.

The display of the cock starts with a nodding of the head, his crest tight, spreading the tail feathers into a fan shape and making single ‘whoop’ sounds. During this display he opens his wings somewhat, showing the colourful speculum to his hen. This really is a beautiful passion-play, which somewhat resembles a peacock’s display. The ceremony continues until the hen shows interest and starts billing. Mating then follows, sometimes being repeated several times. In his display flight, the cock jumps straight upwards beating his wings
loudly, then drops back down to his hen. In our aviaries this display is probably less impressive due to the lack of space, although this does not stop the birds from breeding.

In 1822, Temminck had already described this particular pigeon. First importations into Europe were in 1872 in the ‘Jardin d’acclimation’ at Paris, where the first youngsters were born. Later they were sent to the London Zoo and to several French fanciers and are nowadays, commonly seen in aviaries. Being rather aggressive pigeons, they are best housed in separate lofts and in fact, would be more suitably kept with pheasants or partridges, as these better tolerate each other.

The nest is a crude construction of twigs, made in a nest box or nest bowl and preferably hidden in a conifer or bush. Normally Crested Pigeons breed four times each year. The hen lays two eggs that are incubated over 18 days and after three weeks the young leave the nest though are still fed by the parents for several more weeks. The cock becomes aggressive towards the young after this time and it is better to then separate them from the parents.

They are often used as foster parents for other breeds, being excellent parents. The leg ring size for Crested Pigeons is 7mm.

Housing these birds is simple, as being quite hardy, a dry and draught-free loft will do during wintertime. Food consists mostly of a good seed mix, some greens with fruit or berries given occasionally.

These particularly active pigeons are well-suited for the novice pigeon keeper and fancier. According to Nicolai (1969), some fanciers let their birds fly freely in parks or large gardens, also allowing them to breed and nest in the wild. Others have a trap in their aviary through which the adult pigeons can get out when they are breeding or have youngsters. In this way these wild pigeons can become quite domesticated, seeking the comfort and shelter in our lofts during wintertime.
The following is the (German) Standard description for the Australian Crested Pigeon.

*Ocyphaps lophotes*

Common appearance: Larger than the Barbary (Ringneck) dove, but not as slender and elegant. Length is about 33cm. (13 inches).

Breed marks: The most striking breed marks are the slender, upright crest and the reddish ring around the eyes.

Bill: black.

Eye: red to yellow-orange.

Legs: rosy.

Plumage: Head and underside light grey; the crest is darker. Upper breast, back and sides are light brown with a bronze-green haze. Sides of the neck are salmon rose. Wing coverts brownish-yellow with black bars and white wing tips, forming a remarkable striping. The wing shields are bronzed, while the primary feathers have colourful areas of brown, purple, blue and green. The tail is dark with white lacing at the end.

Faults: Poor, thin or very short pigeon. Too small. Plumage without sheen. Lacking condition.
Greg Davies, our man in Australia, on the Crested Pigeon:

In South Australia, we never called them Crested Pigeons... they were always known as Topknots or more affectionately... “Toppies”. The colour description given is probably closer for aviary birds, as in the wild they appear as a lovely, soft French grey colour with little or no brown visible. Like most wild species kept in captivity, they seldom attain the brightness of colour as their wild cousins. The wing colouring is quite iridescent, like that of a Mallard drake. Wilfried’s description of the male display is quite accurate and yes... it is a lovely sight to see, especially when there is a small flock with a number of cocks all displaying at once! They are not widely kept in aviaries in Australia; I suppose seeing as they are so common here, they aren’t much of a novelty. They tend to hang around in flocks of up to 12-20 birds in the wild and often sit high up in the branches of dead trees or along overhead electricity lines. They have adapted very well to white settlement in Australia and their range has spread over the years from the more arid inland areas right into the coastal cities where they are now quite common in parks and on golf courses. They eat most grass seeds and love wheat, barley and other cultivated grain. When you see the nest of wild Crested Pigeons, you wonder how the eggs or babies ever stay in it. From underneath, you can sometimes see right through it, so crudely is it made... just a few dry twigs thrown together in a tree fork.

Did you know that as children we used to shoot those pigeons with pellet guns and trap them in wire cages... they are quite tasty to eat when baked slowly in an oven. Of course, it is illegal nowadays to catch them, as they are a protected species in the wild.

Of all the thousands of these birds I have seen around the country, I have never bothered to take a picture of any of them. It is funny how we take for granted those things we see as being common!

But I went out and I shot these for Aviculture Europe this afternoon. I had to carefully follow them around the field taking shots when I could get close enough.

Cheers from Queanbeyan, Australia.

At the next page:

Crested Pigeons in Australia.

Photos by Greg Davies.