

# Focus on the Collared Dove

Until 1955, the only small dove in Britain was the migratory Turtle Dove, not a species that you would expect to see in a suburban garden. But that has all changed with the arrival of the all-conquering Collared Dove. A species new to these islands has crashed into the garden bird 'top ten' in only 45 years. *Chris Mead.*

This noisy little brownish-grey dove is the bird population success story of the 20th century. About 100 years ago they started to move across Europe from Asia Minor, first breeding in Britain when they reached Norfolk in 1955. By 1957 they were in Kent and Lincolnshire and a few had even been seen in Scotland. Ireland was colonised two years later with birds breeding in Dublin and a few far to the west, in Galway. It is staggering to think that they had been no nearer than Hungary in 1932. By 1970 there may have been as many as 25,000 pairs in Britain and Ireland. The BTO's Common Birds Census index, which is biased towards the southern and eastern areas that were colonised early on, increased five fold between 1972 and 1996. Collared Doves now breed over most of the British Isles wherever there are human settlements. However, they are still rather less common in the far west, on islands and on high ground.

The reason for their sudden spread is not understood but it may have been just a very slight change in their behaviour. It appears that the general direction of their seasonal movements is genetically controlled. A slight mutation in the genes involved may have caused the general northwesterly population drift which is quite clear from ringing recoveries. Grain made available by humans may have driven the population explosion, once they had arrived. Certainly the first few birds observed in our islands just loved backyard chicken runs. Gardens with chickens or other sources of split grain were among the first habitats to be used. But the birds were also very forward in exploiting food provided for other garden species.

Their characteristic and repetitive song of 'Coo COO cuk' is not the most charming bird sound and they also produce a most peculiar flight call as they glide towards our chimney or TV aerial. In fact the arrival of this bird caused quite a rumpus amongst light sleepers, before it got so common as to be ubiquitous. The song and calls of the Collared Dove can now be heard regularly in TV costume dramas set hundreds of years before the birds arrived. Incidentally, there is a story that the first record for West Yorkshire was actually made by a birdwatcher in Middlesex. He was listening to the Headingley test match on the radio!

Now the Collared Dove looks set to over-run the United States of America. According to reports from Florida, a breeding outpost was established in 1982 and by 1996, the bird was present at 46 out of 56 sites surveyed. This amazing rate of increase is just what happened in Europe. In America it seems that the birds have been released or escaped in several different areas. The birds in Florida possibly came across from the Bahamas where they have been established for some time following damage to an aviary. Unlike Britain, where there were only four native doves and pigeons before the Collared arrived, there are at least a dozen native species of dove in North America. The closest to the Collared Dove is the slightly smaller and rather more elegant Mourning Dove. This is very common and is an important game bird with incredible numbers shot annually, over 40,000,000! Collared Doves may yet displace their smaller cousins from their ecological niche, just as other

European birds such as the Starling have badly affected native American species by taking their food and nest sites. Still, the shooters may well prefer the meatier imports!



Collared Doves by Tommy Holden © BTO

## Collared Dove Fascinating Facts

### Well-feathered friend

Chunky and conspicuous, Collared Doves are popular with predators. Gardeners quite often find their lawn totally carpeted with Collared Dove feathers, where a cat or Sparrowhawk has done its worst. To wrongly paraphrase Macbeth 'Who would have thought a bird had so many feathers!' Dove feathers are very conspicuous and they have exceptionally many 'fluffy' body feathers. Also, these birds are relatively large and they fight back hard, often dragging a predator over quite a wide area before succumbing. In fact, a healthy adult Collared Dove can lose huge numbers of feathers and still keep hold of its life! Pigeon expert Derek Goodwin believes that efficient escape behaviour is one of the secrets of their success.

### Heavy breeding

Ask not the length of the Collared Dove's breeding season or when it starts or finishes. It goes on and on and on. Basically, while there is food available the birds are likely to carry on and there are places where nesting in mid-winter is quite normal, for example at places like the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge where the Collared Doves pinch the food put out for the ducks or around docks where grain is spilt every day. If the weather is mild and food continuously available, they might even be doing it around your garden!

### What the window-cleaner saw

Doves and pigeons have very dusty feathers – in fact sensible pigeon keepers wear masks, to avoid 'pigeon-fanciers' lung'. The dust can produce fantastically detailed prints on a window, if they should fly into one. These can show the details of the individual feathers, the beak and even the eyelids! They are best viewed with a dark surface behind and can be easily photographed. If not cleaned off the window they can last for several months, as the dust is oily and quite sticky.