

COLLARED DOVE: Out of India



Collared Dove by Steve Round



By Mike Toms
Head of Garden Ecology

I am one of a generation of birdwatchers for whom the Collared Dove has always been part of the birdwatching experience, a familiar species encountered in suburban gardens across most of lowland Britain. Some of you, however, will remember a time before this delicate dove became established here; you might even have the date of its arrival in your own garden scribbled in an old diary or notebook. The story of the Collared Dove in Britain is an amazing one and it is incredible to think that it only became established here as a breeding species as recently as 1955. With a population now estimated at 280,000 pairs, it has been a highly successful colonist and one whose story is well worth telling.

A TIDE THAT WON'T BE TURNED

The Collared Dove has its origins in India, from where its populations have spread west over many generations. We know, from documentary evidence, that it had reached Turkey by the 16th Century and that it had certainly colonised the Balkans by the 1900s, if not significantly earlier.

What is remarkable, however, is the speed of spread that then took place from the 1930s to 1960s (see map on page 16). Over this period, a wave of colonisation took place that brought the species to Hungary in 1932, Germany in 1945, the Netherlands in 1947, France and Switzerland in 1952 and Britain in 1955. It has been calculated that over this period of accelerated colonisation, the Collared Dove underwent a range expansion that averaged 44 km per year (or 27 miles per year in old money).

The first directly observed evidence of breeding in England came in 1956, when Michael Seago (a stalwart of the Norfolk ornithological scene) heard an unfamiliar trisyllabic cooing from the large walled garden of a house in North Norfolk. Views of one of the birds, coupled with neatly taken field notes, allowed him to confirm his identification as Collared Dove by comparison with recently published descriptions. Over that summer, Michael – together with Richard Richardson and A C Church – were able to follow the breeding attempts of this and another pair

and to confirm the Collared Dove as a new breeding species for Britain. Subsequent work by these authors turned up evidence that the doves had actually bred successfully the previous year. By 1966, the species had bred at least once in all the English counties and, following a first attempt in Moray & Nairn in 1959, it had colonised all the Scottish counties by 1970. The main period of colonisation in Wales took place in the 1960s and the first breeding attempt in Ireland was recorded in Dublin in 1959.

Although the reasons behind the sudden range expansion are unclear, it is likely that the high reproductive potential, coupled with long-distance dispersal of immature birds, had supported the wave of colonisation.

A PERSISTENT BREEDER

Although Collared Doves have been recorded breeding in every month of the year, the core breeding season extends from mid-February to mid-October. Like other pigeons and doves, their nests are rather simple constructions, typically just a pathetic platform of sticks. These are collected by the male but nest construction itself is carried out by the female. Most of the nests are placed in trees or shrubs but some are placed on buildings: on ledges, in guttering or tucked behind security lights and satellite dishes.

Nesting attempts almost invariably involve just two eggs, although clutches of three eggs have been recorded and single egg clutches are more commonly reported towards the end of the breeding season. Both sexes share the incubation duties, the male incubating by day and the female by night. Nesting attempts may overlap with one another, the female sometimes seen feeding the young of one attempt during her break from incubating the eggs of another.

Young Collared Doves beg for food with a shrill and rather feeble 'weep' call. The young from early breeding attempts often form together in flocks that may be seen feeding on cereals or weed seeds, often visiting garden feeding stations to take advantage of the food on offer there.

FOLKLORE OLD AND NEW

The scientific name of the Collared Dove is *Streptopelia decaocto*, the first part of which (the generic name) comes from the Greek 'streptos', which means 'collar' and 'peleia', which means 'dove'. The second part of the scientific name (the species name) comes from the Latin 'deca', which means 'ten' and 'octo', which means 'eight'. While the generic name has an obvious association with the bird (it is a

FACTBOX : Collared Dove

Common Name: Collared Dove

Scientific Name: *Streptopelia decaocto*

'streptos'=collar + 'peleia'=dove and 'deca'=10 + 'octo'=8

Family: Columbidae

World distribution:

BREEDS: Europe, C&S Asia, NE Africa (introduced N America)

WINTERS: as above

Habitat in Britain : Open woodland, scrub and gardens

Diet: Cereal grain, weed seeds, shoots and invertebrates

Population:

Breeding: 284,000 territories

Winter: unknown

Conservation Status: GREEN

Migratory Status: Resident

BREEDING ECOLOGY:

Clutch Size: 2 eggs

Incubation: 16–17 days

Young in nest: 17–19 days

Number of broods: 3–6

Age at first breeding: 1 year

Typical lifespan: 3 years

Maximum recorded lifespan: 16 years 10 months



Collared Dove by Steve Round

PRETTY IN PINK: A casual glance at a Collared Dove may leave you with the impression that it is a rather drab brown bird. Look closely, however, and you will see (in adults) a pinkish flush to the breast, a vivid red iris and purple-red feet. Immature birds have a brown iris and red-brown feet.



Collared Dove by Mike Toms

www.bto.org/birdfacts

COLLARED DOVE



The rapid spread of the Collared Dove across Europe can be readily traced through bird reports. The dates here show the year of first reported breeding.

dove and it has a collar!) the species name seems a little odd – why use a number? The number ‘18’ actually refers to a myth, recounted to the Hungarian naturalist Frivaldszky, who named the bird.

The myth relates to a maid who was servant to a hard-hearted mistress. The mistress gave the maid a very hard time and only paid her eighteen pieces a year, a lowly sum and poor recompense for such a hard-working girl. The maid prayed to the Gods, asking them to make it known to the world how

cruel her mistress was. Zeus answered the prayer, creating a dove whose song proclaims the lowly sum paid, ‘deca-octo’, throughout its range. To my ear, the pattern of the Collared Dove’s call is tri-syllabic, with the emphasis on the second syllable, which means that ‘deca-octo’ is a poor fit. I cannot help but hear a rather flat ‘un-it-ed’, the sound of a rather miserable football fan!

In Germany, the Collared Dove has acquired something of a modern folk name. Here it is called ‘Die Fernsehtaube’ or ‘television dove’ because it is so often seen sitting on television aerials!

CHANGING TIMES?

While the story of the Collared Dove in Britain & Ireland has been one of a bird expanding its range and increasing in numbers, there is a suggestion from both Garden BirdWatch and the Garden Bird Feeding Survey, that things might be changing. Both surveys show a recent decline in Collared Dove populations within gardens. This might be linked to the recent increase in Woodpigeon populations, the more delicate Collared Dove losing out to its larger and more dominant cousin. However, it is also possible that the recent outbreak of Trichomonosis in Greenfinches and other garden birds (see page 5) may be having an impact on Collared Doves – this is something that requires further study.

While not every Garden BirdWatcher welcomes the Collared Dove into their garden, most will admit to a grudging respect of this remarkable colonist. Some may even come to appreciate its undoubted beauty if they look a little harder. ■

Collared Doves by Steve Round

