

Woodpigeon

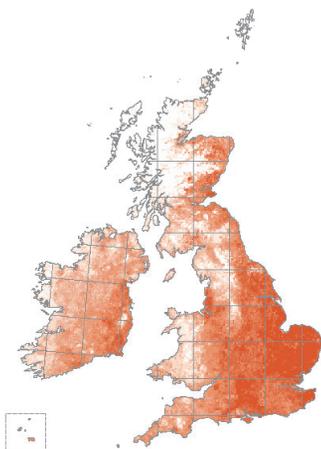
Species focus

by Mike Toms



Woodpigeon, by John Harding

Love them or hate them, you cannot ignore the large numbers of Woodpigeons turning to garden feeding stations. Here they have shown their adaptability by tackling not just food provided on the ground or on bird tables, but also in hanging feeders. While some individuals have been reported flying into feeders to dislodge seed, others have been spotted clinging desperately to one perch while feeding from the one above it. The change in status of the Woodpigeon is one of the real stories to have emerged from your Garden BirdWatch observations.



▲ Although found across Britain and Ireland, the latest abundance map for Woodpigeon, shows that it occurs in the greatest numbers in East Anglia and the southern part of Britain.

Map reproduced from *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, which is a joint project between, BTO, BirdWatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.

STRAIGHT FROM THE FARM

The increase in our Woodpigeon populations has its roots on our farmland, the habitat with which it has traditionally been associated. It is thought that the spread of intensive winter cereal and oilseed rape cultivation has increased the amount of food available to Woodpigeons during the difficult winter months.

Unlike many other farmland species, which are almost entirely granivorous ('seed-eating'), the Woodpigeon is able to subsist on green vegetation. With more green plant material now available during the winter months, Woodpigeon survival is likely to have increased over the winter, removing one of the brakes on population growth and triggering the increase in numbers that we are now seeing. There is also increasing evidence that the availability of oilseed rape is actually driving an increase in the number of young produced.

It should be no surprise, therefore, to note that Woodpigeon populations in gardens have

increased most in East Anglia and the arable landscape of southern and eastern England. In many gardens (including those of a more urban nature) the Woodpigeon is now one of the most commonly reported species. Nationally, Woodpigeon now figures in the top-four most commonly reported garden birds, rising to number three at certain times of the year – which moves it above Robin.

FOODS AND FEEDING

In addition to the green plant material taken during the winter, Woodpigeons also take buds and berries, especially those of Ivy. Seeds are another important food source and Woodpigeons will take large quantities of beechmast during those autumns when the trees have produced a good crop. Examination of information from the BTO's Garden Bird Feeding Survey has revealed that garden use increases in those autumns when the beechmast crop has been poor, a pattern also seen in other beechmast-feeding birds like Chaffinch, Nuthatch and Great Tit.

One of the most unusual aspects of Woodpigeon diet is the 'crop-milk' used to feed its nestlings. In terms of composition, 'crop-milk' is rather similar to the milk produced by mammals. The 'milk' is produced in the bird's crop (hence the name) and comes from the formation of special cells lining the wall of the crop. The milk is the only nourishment received by a Woodpigeon chick during its first few days of life. A small number of other birds also produce 'crop-milk' for their developing young.

NESTS AND EGGS

The Woodpigeon breeding season is a long one, beginning as early as February in many urban and suburban areas and extending through to November or even December. There is some evidence that the start of the breeding season has become earlier because of the availability of oilseed rape and autumn-sown cereals during the winter months.

Woodpigeon nests are not elaborate constructions but instead consist of a simple platform constructed from sticks. Such platforms are easy to spot during the winter months, when the bushes and shrubs used are free from leaves. The birds have a habit of using old nests as places on which to rest or loaf about, so don't jump to the conclusion that a bird sitting on a nest is actually using it for nesting.

It is onto this rather precarious platform that the eggs will be laid. Woodpigeons, in common with our other pigeons and doves, almost invariably lay a clutch of just two eggs. Clutches of just a single egg may be found from time to time but clutches of three are exceptional. Both birds of the pair take turns to incubate the eggs, the female sitting for roughly 17 hours per day, the male covering the remainder, a shared responsibility that continues once the eggs hatch and through until the chicks are roughly a week of age.

KEEP THE NOISE DOWN

The repetitive call of the Woodpigeon can prove rather tiresome if you are (un)fortunate enough to have a pair nesting close to your bedroom window. The familiar aide-memoire of 'take two cows taf-fy' is used by many birdwatchers to identify a calling Woodpigeon and to separate it from the similar 'u-ni-ted' call of Collared Dove and 'oooh-uh' call of Stock Dove.

The Woodpigeon call is used to advertise territory ownership, though the species may nest semi-socially on occasion, and may be reinforced by a characteristic display flight. During the display flight, which is usually given near the nest, the male bird flies up, gaining height quickly to reach a peak. At this point he will give one or more wing claps mid-air before descending in a rather steep glide. The entire performance may be repeated half a dozen times before the male lands. Some individuals tend to rely more on the advertising call than they do the display flight.

ON THE MOVE

Because you see Woodpigeons throughout the year it is easy to think of them as rather sedentary or 'stay at home' birds that don't do a great deal. Interestingly, while British and Irish Woodpigeons are sedentary, those living elsewhere in Europe (particularly in the north and east of Europe) are migratory. It is some of these birds that probably feature in some of the

FACTBOX: Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*



Woodpigeon, by John Harding; Woodpigeon egg, by Paul Sierny/NPL

Population:

Breeding: 5.3 million breeding pairs

Conservation status: GREEN-LISTED

Diet: Seeds, leaves, fruit (esp. of Ivy), buds and root crops. Young are fed on 'crop-milk'.

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 3 years

Max recorded lifespan: 17 years, 8 months and 19 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 2 eggs

Number of broods: 1-2

Incubation: 17 days

Young in nest: 33-34 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year



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large flocks that are seen by birdwatchers along Britain's southern and eastern coasts during the spring and autumn months.

The movements of Fennoscandian birds down through Denmark, the Netherlands and France sees birds pass on to the Pyrenees, where large numbers are shot or trapped. Many of these migratory individuals appear to be heading for the oak woodlands of northern Spain, where they can take advantage of the autumn acorn crop. As we have already noted, beechmast may be another important food, influencing where birds move to feed.

THE GARDEN CLOWN

Because of their accessible nature, garden-visiting Woodpigeons provide us Garden BirdWatchers with ample opportunity to watch and improve our understanding of bird behaviour. The interactions between individuals in a breeding pair can be particularly engaging to watch, especially when the birds indulge in allo-preening – where one bird preens another (usually its mate). Such behaviour is thought to reinforce the pair bond. Woodpigeons, by the way, are monogamous for the breeding season, so maintaining the pair bond is an important component of a successful breeding season. Males will also indulge in a bit of showing off, often adopting an upright stance, chest out, in an attempt to impress upon a female that he is a suitable partner.

Bathing Woodpigeons are also well worth watching, their antics sometimes sufficiently comedic to raise a chuckle from the watcher. Individual Woodpigeons will often stand with one wing raised while bathing, a behaviour repeated during periods of summer rainfall, when several birds may be seen, sat in newly-formed puddles, each with a wing raised.

Woodpigeons tend to spend a lot of time loafing around, resting between bouts of feeding activity or social interaction. Resting birds often fluff up their plumage and draw their head in, adopting a posture that may sometimes be mistaken for signs of ill health. Such behaviour can occupy as much as 50% of the daylight hours at certain times of the year (notably during early winter) but at other times of the year the birds will be busy securing sufficient food or looking after the needs of their nestlings.

Whatever you think of the Woodpigeon there is no doubt that it has character. While it may prove the scourge of your garden bird table – 'hoovering' up large quantities of expensive seed mix – it is possible to reduce the impact by careful choice of the mixes used and tweaks to how it is presented. Hanging feeders are still a challenge for Woodpigeons and 'feeder guardians' restrict access to bird tables and ground feeding stations. Do leave some feeding opportunities for the visiting Woodpigeons though, as I'm sure they deserve it. ■

Identification

White wing bar obvious in flight, less obvious on perched bird.

Bright yellow eye stands out from face

White patch on side of neck in adult – absent in young birds.

Stock Dove looks like a smaller, darker version of a Woodpigeon. Note the lack of a white wing bar and white neck collar. Neck patches in Stock Dove are iridescent green; eye is dark and wings have short narrow black wing bar.

Woodpigeons, by Paul Sterry; Stock Dove, by Roger Tidman – both © (www.naturephotographers.co.uk)