

8 Birdlife In Your Garden

The subject of this month's column occurs in 60 per cent of Shropshire gardens and is the eleventh most frequently reported bird there. Fifty years ago, however, it would have driven rarity-seeking birdwatchers wild with anticipation and excitement. That bird is the Collared Dove!

The species' origins are Asian and, in Mediaeval times, it was probably confined to India and perhaps adjacent areas of China. By the sixteenth century, it had become firmly established in Turkey and those areas of the Balkans governed by the Ottoman Turks, where it was a popular and sometimes domesticated bird. This association persists in the name for this dove in many European languages. For example, in French it is *Tourterelle turque* ('Turkish Turtle Dove'). By 1838 it had spread to Bulgaria, from where it dispersed to Hungary (1932), Poland (1940), Germany (1945), the Netherlands (1947), France and Switzerland (1952), finally showing up in the UK (Norfolk) in 1953. By 1956 it was breeding in Britain. Its first appearance in Shropshire was in 1961 (Atcham) with breeding first confirmed two years later in Ludlow. It is now found throughout Europe, except at the highest elevations and latitudes. After its introduction into the Bahamas in the 1970s, it has now spread across much of North America. (I saw one of the first for Ohio in 1984!)

This is the fastest rate of dispersal ever recorded for any bird species, averaging out at about 80 km (50 miles) per year. Its cause is unclear, but may be related to a genetic mutation which enables it to exploit human-modified habitats more effectively. The actual mechanism seems to be driven by the behaviour of immature birds, which tend to disperse north and west of their birth sites to establish their own territories. (The adults tend to be sedentary in contrast.)

Collared Doves are an attractive species, smaller, sleeker, longer-tailed and more elegant than their relative, the Woodpigeon. The plumage is pale, mostly buff-grey with a pinkish tinge to the breast, and they have red and black eyes, red feet and a black neck collar, edged with white. The sexes are alike but juvenile birds either lack the neck collar or show a poorly-developed one. Adults are most often seen in pairs



Collared Doves are frequently seen in pairs. Note the diagnostic black and white collar (although this is lacking or indistinct in juvenile birds). (Photo: Jill Pakenham, BTO Library)

but may form larger flocks where food sources are abundant, especially in winter.

Most Collared Doves nest within a kilometre of buildings, as long as trees are present. The nest is flimsy, consisting of little more than a few crossed sticks on a tree branch or, occasionally, on a building ledge, wedged onto a lamp support or similar protrusion from a building. In this nest the female lays small clutches (usually two eggs) but three to four clutches per year are common and even larger numbers are not infrequent. The young are fed on 'crop milk', which is rich in protein and fat. Pairs often start a new family even before the previous one has fledged. Nesting is usually in the period from mid-February to October although nests have been found in every month of the year.

Collared Doves feed largely on grain and seeds but may also take shoots and berries and even caterpillars and aphids in spring. They are common on table feeders and are even learning to use hanging feeders. Their facility for exploiting human food sources has made them familiar in farmyards, chicken runs, parks, zoos, open-air cafes and anywhere else humans deliberately or inadvertently make food available.

The male's display flight is distinctive, consisting of a steep climb, followed by a long, often spiral, descent with wings held stiffly below the horizontal. Their call – a repetitive coo-COO-cuk – will also draw your attention: in fact, it can become quite monotonous at times. Look out for them in your garden throughout the year. *John Arnfield*

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. GBW needs more garden observers in this area. Would you like to help? If so, contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to arrange to receive an information pack and free book.



A Collared Dove in flight. This bird is slimmer and more elegant than its cousin, the Woodpigeon. The white tips to the tail feathers also distinguish it from the Woodpigeon. (Photo: Adrian Dancy, BTO Library)