

Pigeon Fact Sheet

Pigeons are the quintessential urban bird, considered both an endearing part of city life and an aggravation. Either way, almost everyone recognizes this wild neighbor. Like so many Americans, the pigeon—also known as the rock dove—is a European immigrant. Early settlers brought pigeons to North America, where they soon flourished. You can now find them in almost any city, town, or suburb on the continent.

In the Old World, these birds inhabited cliffs and rock ledges, nesting in such inaccessible places and foraging on the ground below. Imported to this continent to serve as food animals and as message carriers, some pigeons escaped captivity and found shelter in the artificial "mountain ranges" of cities.

The pigeon's diet consists primarily of grains and seeds, along with insects and some greens. They aren't terribly picky though, and they'll happily accept human food scraps and leftovers when available.

Pigeons live in groups called flocks, and show a strong affinity for human-built structures. A courting male pursues his intended mate on the ground, circling her with neck feathers inflated and tail spread, bowing and cooing all the while. Pigeons mate for life, but if one partner dies, the survivor generally will attempt to find another mate. Pigeons breed throughout the year, even during winter, and can raise four or five broods annually. Haphazard nests of twigs, leaves, and a few feathers are built on window ledges, behind signs, and under bridges.

Parents take turns incubating the clutch of one or two white eggs for between 16 and 19 days. Both parents feed the newly hatched young—called squabs—a secretion known as "crop milk." Produced from the lining of the crop—a saclike food-storage organ unique to birds—crop milk is highly nutritious. Squabs can fly at four to six weeks of age, but remain dependent on their parents for as long as the adults will tolerate them—generally another one or two weeks.

Pigeons range throughout all of the United States and most of Canada, and are found in almost all metropolitan areas. Inhabitants of city parks and open spaces, they are highly tolerant of industrial and heavily developed areas. The Egyptians sent news of the coronation of Ramses III in all directions using homing pigeons—more than three thousand years before the United States was founded.