

Domestic Pigeons (Rock Doves)

The domestic pigeon (*Columba livia*) (also called the rock dove or city pigeon) was originally found in Europe, Northern Africa, and India. Early settlers introduced it into the eastern United States as a domestic bird in the 1600s. Since then, it has expanded throughout the United States to Alaska, across southern Canada, and south into South America.

Pigeons originally lived in high places—cliffs, ledges, and caves near the sea—that provided them with safety. Over time they have adapted to roosting and nesting on windowsills, roofs, eaves, steeples, and other man-made structures.

Pigeons typically have a gray body with iridescent feathers around their neck, a broad black band on their tail, and salmon-colored feet (Fig. 1). Breeders have created color variations, so the body color may also be white, tan, black, or a combination of several colors. Pigeons have a strutting walk and their call is a long, drawn-out *coo* that can be heard quite easily. When they take off, their wing-tips touch, making a characteristic clicking sound.

Washington's band-tailed pigeon (*Columba fasciata*) is sometimes confused with the domestic pigeon. Band-tailed pigeons are similar in size but have a purplish head and breast, a dark-tipped yellow bill, yellow feet, and a small white crescent on top of the neck.

Facts about Pigeons

Food and Feeding Habits

- Domestic pigeons mainly eat seeds and grains.
- Pigeons also eat insects, fruit, and vegetation, and scavenge food people provide for them—intentionally or unintentionally.
- While young birds of other species are fed a high-protein diet of insects, young pigeons are fed “pigeon milk”—a milky-white fatty substance regurgitated from both parents’ crops.
- Pigeons feed on open ground such as that found in parks and squares, on rooftops, at food-loading docks and garbage dumps, and wherever people eat outdoors. They seem to prefer open feeding areas that permit a speedy getaway if a threat is detected.
- Unlike most birds that must tip their heads back to swallow water, pigeons can drink by sucking water directly from a puddle or other water source.

Nesting and Roosting Sites

- Nesting and roosting sites are protected from the elements and are situated on houses, barns, stadiums, and grain elevators, as well as bridges, wharfs, and cliffs.
- Nests in continual use become solid with droppings, feathers, and other debris.

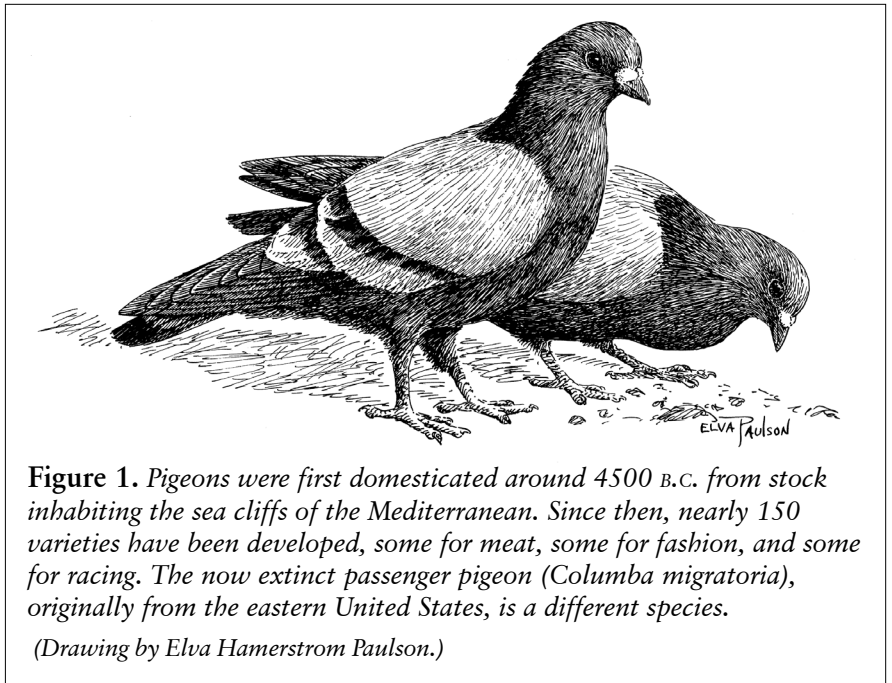


Figure 1. Pigeons were first domesticated around 4500 B.C. from stock inhabiting the sea cliffs of the Mediterranean. Since then, nearly 150 varieties have been developed, some for meat, some for fashion, and some for racing. The now extinct passenger pigeon (*Columba migratoria*), originally from the eastern United States, is a different species.
(Drawing by Elva Hamerstrom Paulson.)

Territory

- Domestic pigeons don't migrate, but if removed from a nesting area, they have a good homing ability and can return from long distances. It is thought that this ability evolved to help them find their own nests on cliffs covered with large colonies of similar looking nests.
- Pigeons are gregarious and eat, roost, and nest in each other's company whenever possible.
- Usually only the immediate area around the nest site is defended against intruders.
- When pigeons are not involved in courtship behavior, caring for young, or eating, their day is spent cooing, preening, and sunbathing at their loafing and roosting sites. Sunbathing is common on cool mornings.

Reproduction

- Domestic pigeons mate for life unless separated by death or accident.
- Females usually lay two cream-colored eggs in a nest loosely constructed from twigs, feathers, and debris.
- Both male and female incubate the eggs, which hatch after 18 days.
- The young are independent at four to five weeks of age.
- Pigeons can raise four to five broods annually. Under optimal conditions, new eggs are laid even before the previous clutch has left the nest.

Mortality and Longevity

- Domestic cats are the main urban predators of pigeons, but opossums, raccoons, foxes, weasels, and rats all eat pigeons when they can access nests or catch adults.
- Urban-dwelling pigeons can also be an important food for peregrine falcons and Cooper's hawks. Crows sometimes eat juvenile pigeons.
- In captivity, pigeons commonly live up to 15 years, sometimes longer. In the wild (including urban areas) pigeons seldom live more than three years.

Preventing Conflicts

Many people find pleasure in viewing pigeons. Because they are one of the few animals that tolerate the environmental conditions of an inner city, pigeons (and house sparrows) may be the only wildlife observed by many people living there. Look for flocks of pigeons in city parks and other places where the birds are accustomed to humans and gather to feed. Within minutes of watching a large active flock of pigeons, you are bound to see several characteristic displays associated with courtship.

Most people don't object to pigeons unless they are present in large numbers. In such cases, their droppings may ruin vegetation, produce an objectionable odor, and damage property such as park benches, statues, cars, and buildings. Large accumulations of droppings have been implicated in causing several fungal diseases (see "Public Health Concerns"). Droppings combined with nest materials and feathers may block downspouts and vents on buildings. Finally, pigeons carry a variety of parasites such as mites and lice. When they nest near windows, these small pests can find their way into homes and bedding.

The most effective way to prevent conflicts with pigeons is to modify your home and property so as not to attract them. Limiting available food and water may help, but pigeons find food and water in many places, even far

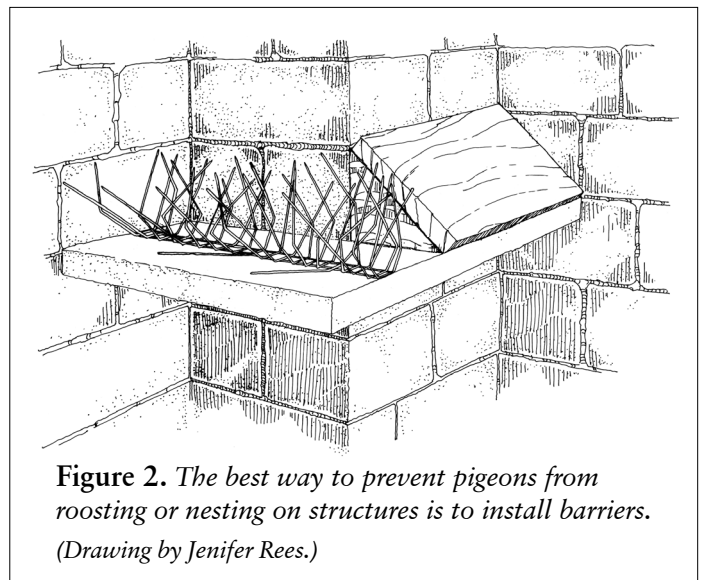


Figure 2. *The best way to prevent pigeons from roosting or nesting on structures is to install barriers.*
(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

from where they roost and nest. Where people feed pigeons in their backyards, parks, or lunch areas, education can help reduce the pigeons' food source; but this effort is often futile as there are always people who find the birds irresistible.

Following the suggestions below can reduce problems caused by pigeons roosting or nesting in and around buildings.

Occasionally a pigeon will get caught in a building. If this happens, turn off all inside lights and open all windows and other exits. The bird should leave on its own. If necessary, a broom or long pole with a T-shirt at the end can be used to direct the bird out an exit, or tire it to a point where it can be caught in a towel or similar item. If these methods fail or are impractical, a wildlife damage control company can be called to assist in the removal process. Call your local wildlife office for contact information or look under "Animal Control," "Pest Control," or "Wildlife Control" in your local phone book.

Other situations where it is wise to hire such a professional to remedy pigeon problems include: removing a large quantity of droppings from an old or well-used roost or nesting site, and installing netting or other barriers high on buildings.

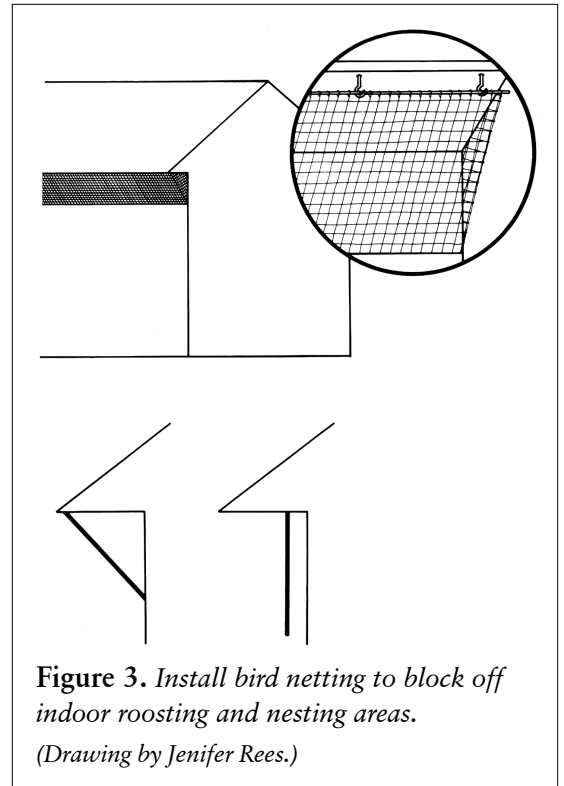


Figure 3. Install bird netting to block off indoor roosting and nesting areas.

(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

Install Barriers

The best way to keep pigeons from occupying ledges, window air-conditioning units, and similar sites is to install barriers. There are various ways to achieve this. **Note:** Established pigeons will fight any type of barrier put in place, especially if it is a popular nesting site. In such cases, the removal of pigeons prior to installing barriers is most effective.

- Install sheet metal, wood, Styrofoam blocks, or other materials at a 60-degree angle (Fig. 2).
- Place an outstretched slinky toy or a rolled-up piece of plastic mesh netting or chicken wire over the area.
- Place metal or plastic spikes, such as Catclaw®, Bird-B-Gone®, and Nixalite® (porcupine wire) where problems are severe or pigeons are persistent (Fig. 2). Metal coils (e.g., Bird Barrier®) function similarly. Electrified systems (Avi-Away®, Flock-Shock®, Flyaway®, VRS®) are designed to shock birds without killing them and thus exclude them from specific locations. These are commercial products available from farm supply centers and bird-control supply companies on the Internet.
- Tightly string single-strand steel wire (16-18 gauge) or monofilament line (80-pound test) between L-brackets installed at each end of the area used by pigeons. For increased tension, attach the wire to the L-brackets with turnbuckles. Install the wire so it will come to the belly of the bird—about 2 inches high.
- Install bird netting to block off indoor roosting and nesting areas. If you can't reach a ledge from inside a building, netting can be attached to the roof, draped across the front of the structure, and then tightly secured to the base and sides of the building. Such netting is available from nurseries and hardware stores; professional quality material and associated hardware is available from bird-control companies and over the Internet. Two-inch mesh netting works well for pigeons, and it isn't as likely to trap small songbirds as the light, small mesh material. Install the netting so window washers can remove it or work under it.
- Cover the underside of rafters with bird netting to prevent pigeons from gaining access to roosting spots (Fig. 4). Previously used bird netting may be available, as well as used gill netting from fishermen or fish hatcheries. The cost of new netting makes seeking out an alternative worthwhile.
- Holes in buildings can be boarded up or covered with quarter-inch galvanized wire mesh.
- Commercially available sticky products are not recommended. They attract dirt and may melt during hot weather. In addition to people's failure to use and monitor sticky products properly, these products can cause pigeons and smaller birds to suffer unnecessarily when they get stuck in them.

The cost of installing barriers may render them impractical on large buildings with extensive roosting sites. However, barriers are valid options for smaller areas. Always use care when working high above the ground and ensure that the barriers can't fall and injure a passerby.

Check the covered areas as needed for accumulated debris or nest material. Regularly remove falling leaves and other matter that can cover the barrier and reduce its effectiveness.

If pigeons are likely to drop nest material and other debris on top of the newly installed barrier, add an additional barrier on the landing site above the installation.

Harassment Techniques

Noisemaking devices and scare tactics have little permanent effect on pigeons, particularly at well-established roosting and nesting sites. However, harassment methods can be effective when installed before pigeons become accustomed to using an area. They may also be effective on small groups of pigeons. Various harassment techniques include:

- Continually remove pigeon nests to discourage the birds from nesting. Pigeons will leave an area after several unsuccessful attempts at nest building. This approach is most effective after barriers have been installed. When using a high-pressure spray, make sure the contaminated water doesn't spray where people are present. See "Public Health Concerns" for information on safely cleaning up bird droppings. When spraying is not possible, use a hook fastened to a long pole to remove the nests.
- Install a sprinkler in the roost tree or other roosting site or light up the interior of the roost with bright fluorescent lights.
- Contact your local falconer's association to have a falconer come out to train their falcons weekly (search the Internet for "Falconers Association"). Trained falcons are especially effective at dispersing large flocks of pigeons and catching individual birds in large buildings. Most falconers will be reluctant to use their birds of prey near highways and other high-traffic areas.
- Ultrasonic devices have been tested by university, government, and private independent researchers, and were found to have no effect on pigeons.

Lethal Control

If all efforts to dissuade problem pigeons fail and they continue to be a human safety concern, they may have to be trapped. Trapping is rarely a permanent solution since other pigeons are likely to move in if attractive roosting and nesting sites are still available.

Small-scale traps are available from the Purple Martin Conservation Association and other enterprises over the Internet. Check the trap at least twice a day for non-targeted birds.

Do not trap pigeons and release them elsewhere, because they will easily return or cause problems somewhere else. If you cannot humanely kill them yourself, find a falconer or wildlife rehabilitation center that will accept live pigeons to feed to hawks.

Shooting has been effective in eliminating small isolated groups of pigeons. For safety considerations, shooting is generally limited to rural situations and is considered too hazardous in more populated areas, even if legal. Where shooting is legal and safe, .22 CB caps work well, so does any semi high-powered pellet rifle with a pellet velocity of 800 fps or more.

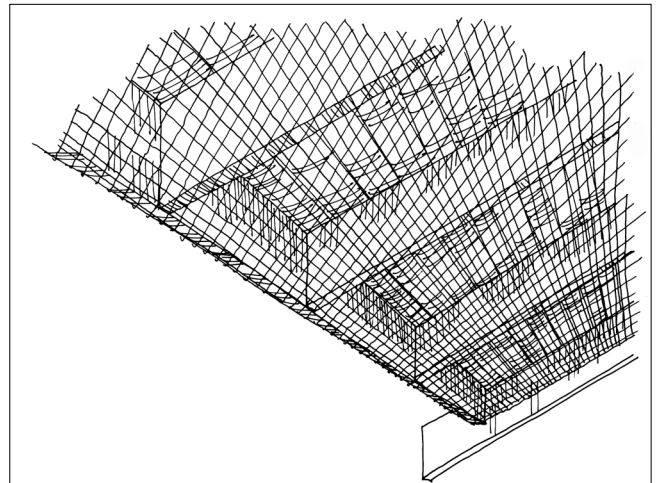


Figure 4. *The undersides of rafters can be covered with bird netting to prevent pigeons from gaining access to roosting spots.*

(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

Public Health Concerns

The most common health concerns associated with starlings, crows, and pigeons involve disease that could result from inhalation exposure to large accumulations of droppings. **Histoplasmosis** cases are not reported in the Pacific Northwest, but do occur in other parts of the United States. **Psittacosis**, caused by the organism *Chlamydia psittaci*, can be related to exposure to pigeons or their droppings.

When working in or cleaning up areas where large amounts of bird (or bat) droppings occur, follow these precautions to minimize risk from disease organisms in the droppings:

- Wear a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) approved full-face respirator with a high-efficiency particle air (HEPA) filter for screening particles down to 0.3 microns in size. Simple dust and particle masks will not provide adequate protection. Make sure the respirator is properly fitted to your face before work starts. Contact the manufacturer for specific information. Respirators are available for purchase in larger hardware, paint, and home supply outlets.
- Wear disposable protective gloves, a hat, coveralls, and boots. When finished, and while still wearing the respirator, remove this protective clothing and place it in a plastic bag. If you wear nondisposable coveralls, be sure to put them in a plastic bag after you are finished wearing them, and keep the bag tied until you are ready to wash them. Wash the coveralls separately from other clothing before you wear them again.
- Wet down the droppings to keep spores from becoming airborne, and keep the droppings damp for as long as you are working with them.
- Put droppings into sealed plastic garbage bags.
- Dispose of trash bags (disposal should be permissible through standard trash pickup).
- Wash or shower after you have removed your protective clothing.

Legal Status

Rock doves are exempt from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918, which was passed for the protection of migratory birds. Their nests, eggs, young, and/or adults may be removed or destroyed at any time. No permit is required.

Pigeons and Bird Feeders

Because domestic pigeons are relatively large birds, you can discourage them by using tube-type feeders that have small perches, and small feeding ports.

Some commercially available caged feeders designed to frustrate squirrels will let smaller birds in but also keep pigeons out. Wire mesh placed over a platform feeder prevents larger birds such as jays, starlings, and pigeons from accessing seeds (Fig. 5).

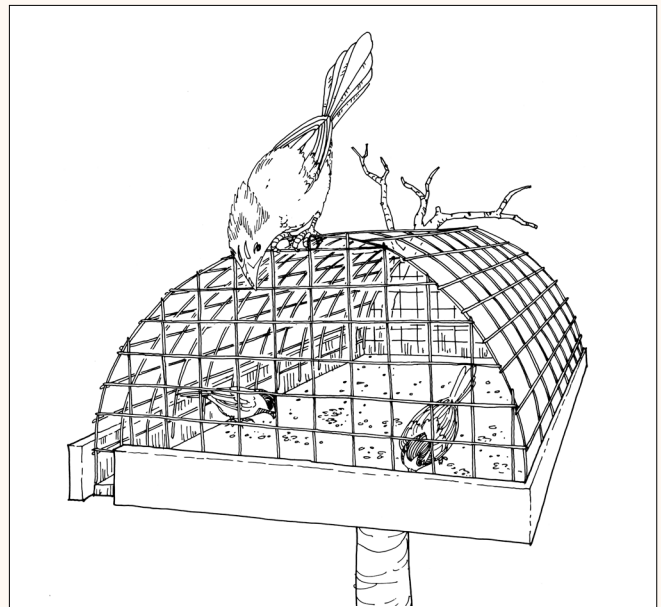


Figure 5. Wire placed over a platform feeder to allow small birds in and keep large birds out.

(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

Additional Information

Internet Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage: wildlifedamage.unl.edu/handbook/handbook/

Seattle Audubon's Birds of Washington State: www.birdweb.org/birdweb/

Vertebrate Management Links: www.snohomish.wsu.edu/verturl.htm

Wildlife Control Supplies: www.wildlifecontrolsupplies.com/

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