

Pigeons in the City

Columba livia

Identification:

Rock pigeons or rock doves in Colorado are generally known just as “pigeons”. They are extremely variable in coloration, with all shades of grays, whites, and browns and black. Rock pigeons have a white diamond-shaped patch just above the tail feathers. In white birds the white rump blends with the general body color. Many pigeons have retained the ancestral rock dove coloration: gray body, darker gray head and neck, white rump, dark band on the end of tail, dark wing tips, and two black stripes running along the back edge of each wing. Both the males and females look similar.



Natural history:

Pigeons are feral birds that have bred from escaped domestic pigeons brought to the U.S. by European immigrants. Originally from western and southern Europe, North Africa, and into South Asia, they are now found throughout the globe. The first pigeon was brought in North America in 1606, to Nova Scotia, and they have since spread throughout the continent. The pigeon is found throughout Colorado, congregating in urban, suburban, and rural agricultural areas. Rock doves nest on protected cliffs and inside caves. Our cities are made of artificial cliffs (buildings) and caves (attics, abandoned buildings, or open warehouses), so pigeons of today feel right at home and flourish in our cities and towns.

Diet:

Pigeons feed primarily on seeds and grain, but in urban areas they also eat food scraps like bread crumbs, pizza, garbage, or other food materials provided for them intentionally or unintentionally by people. Bird feeders provide a primary food source for pigeons in urban and suburban areas. Pigeons are especially fond of cracked corn and sorghum or Milo seeds found in general bird seed mixes. In agricultural areas pigeons eat or contaminate large amounts of livestock feed. Pigeons are not picky about their food: they are often seen picking undigested seeds from the feces of livestock.

Breeding:

Monogamous, with only one mate at a time, pigeons may breed during all seasons, but peak reproduction is in the spring or fall. Pigeons commonly nest on man-made structures: window ledges, balconies, under bridges, in barns and open warehouses, on or behind signs, and in soffits and attics of houses. The male cares for and guards the female and the nest. Eight to twelve days after mating, the female lays 1 or 2 eggs. The incubation period is 16-18 days. The young leave the nest at 4 to 6 weeks of age. A mating pair can produce 4 to 6 broods annually.



Approximately 10 days old

Behavior in an urban environment:

Social and adaptable, pigeons congregate in large numbers in cities where resources are plentiful. Intentional and unintentional feeding both allows for large numbers and bold behavior, and pigeons often quite comfortably learn to approach people.

Benefits:

Pigeons are part of the food chain for many urban predators. A large variety of animals hunt pigeons and eat pigeon eggs in cities, including hawks, owls, coyotes, foxes, and raccoons. They are also considered “flying street cleaners” by removing a lot of food waste people throw on the ground.

Problems:

The most common concern is accumulation of bird droppings underneath perching and nesting locations. The uric acid in droppings can damage finishes and cause wear on buildings, vehicles and statues. A common misconception is that pigeons **often** spread or cause human disease. There are several fungal diseases, histoplasmosis cryptococcus which can grow in nutrient rich bird droppings, and if breathed in large amounts can affect people with compromised immune systems. The fungi already exist in the soil, and use the droppings to grow, but are not found in fresh droppings. Typically general clean up does not cause any health problems, but making sure droppings do not accumulate is important. Psittacosis is another infectious disease that can effect pigeons, but is more commonly associated with pet birds. (for more information about diseases people can catch from wild animals see Zoonotic disease page). Frequent cleaning can help prevent many health issues.



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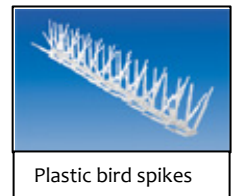
Safety when removing bird droppings:

1. Reduce chances of breathing in spores that may have grown in accumulated droppings. Before sweeping or shoveling dry droppings wet the surface or add a surfactant. Commercial product: Poop Off © bird poop remover and others can be found in any pet supply store.
2. Use an industrial vacuum cleaner with a high-efficiency (HEPA) filter.
3. Double bag droppings in heavy weight garbage bags, store outside or sealed until pick up.
4. Small amounts of droppings can be safely cleaned with soap and water.
5. Wear disposable gloves.
6. If concerned, wear respirator or mask.
7. After clean up, alter perching area to prevent continued accumulation of droppings.

Clean up should be done by healthy people, the very old, young or immune compromised should avoid contact with excessive bird droppings.

Keeping pigeons from perching or nesting:

1. Use plastic raptors, rubber snakes, hang plastic or cloth streamers, plastic windmills.
2. Commercial products to keep pigeons from comfortably landing on ledges. Many can be duplicated with everyday items. (see bird be gone reference page for photos)
3. Bird spikes
4. String 2-3 layers of wire over perch
5. Bird “spider” wire “legs” constantly move with breeze
6. Bird netting/ chicken wire over ledges
7. Scarecrow©-motion activated, shoots compressed air



Plastic bird spikes

You may need to use a variety of exclusion techniques to keep birds away unless ledge accessibility is changed, birds will eventually get used to a single item or sound.

Removal of pigeons:

Feral pigeons are nonnative species and are not protected under state or federal law. Manner of removal must not effect any nontarget species and should be done by a qualified pest control company. Due to their abundance, be aware that if conditions of area are not modified they will quickly return. Exclusion techniques to keep pigeons away from undesired roosting locations is the best long term way to reduce conflict.

Resources

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_Pigeon
Cornell Lab of Ornithology: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pigeonwatch>
Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Control of Health Hazards Associated with Bird and Bat Droppings : <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/nas/RDRP/appendices/chapter6/a6-133.pdf>
Bird Be Gone: <http://www.birdbgone.com/products.htm>



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