

BIRD OF THE MONTH

COMMON & BRUSH BRONZEWING PIGEONS

By Josie Pyle

(See photographs in centre spread)

Introduction

Together with the Flock Bronzewing, the Common and Brush Bronzewings belong to the genus *Phaps*, a name taken from the Greek word for “wild pigeon”. All three species comprise large, bulky ground-dwelling pigeons that inhabit differing habitats within Australia; the Flock Bronzewing is a bird of the northern grassland plains; the Brush Bronzewing inhabits dense undergrowth of southern woodlands and heathlands; while the Common Bronzewing is found across the continent in a variety of habitats from farmlands, open forests, coastal forests to arid scrub. This article will confine itself to the latter two species.

Common Bronzewing *Phaps chalcoptera*

Habitat

The Common Bronzewing is a large, bulky, ground dwelling pigeon found in a variety of habitats across the continent, avoiding the densest and wettest of forests. In the wild it feeds on seeds of native shrubs and grasses, as well as cultivated grains and seeds of weeds. Insects are also taken. It is often seen foraging on the ground beneath trees either alone or in small parties. When disturbed birds fly rapidly up into tree foliage, where they sit and watch the intruder.

Description & Sexing (see photograph in centre spread)

The Common Bronzewing is distinguished by iridescent metallic green or bronze wing feathers, most obvious in bright sunlight when the colour changes with the angle of the light. Both sexes show a white cheek line, pale pinkish grey chest fading to grey on the abdomen and dark brown upperparts. The sexes are distinguished by the colour of the forehead, which is buff in males and grey in females, and the colour of the breast and neck – males show a deeper mauve colour on the breast and more blue on the sides of the neck.

Housing

A generally peaceable bird, the Common Bronzewing can be kept in mixed collections of finches, parrots, quail, softbills and even other pigeons or doves (although it should not be kept with other Bronzewing species due to a risk of hybridisation). A large, planted aviary with areas of open ground is preferred as the birds spend a considerable amount of time on the ground. As they tend to flush violently when frightened, care should be taken not to disturb birds suddenly, especially in smaller aviaries. Birds take a variety of large and small seeds, so a commercial finch or budgie mix supplemented by a pigeon mix is appropriate. Alternatively, birds do well on a pelleted diet such as Passwell™ Parrot Pellets. In the wild birds feed on the ground and they prefer this method in aviaries as well. In addition to seed, birds appreciate seeding grasses, greenfood and livefood such as mealworms.

Breeding

Nesting may occur at any time of the year, but peaks from August to February. A suitable nest site is chosen, which may be on the ground but is more often 1.5 to 2m high in dry brush or on an artificial platform. As with most pigeons, what passes as “suitable” for the birds can be extremely unsubstantial and, once the birds have chosen a site, an artificial nest platform may need to be provided. Courting often occurs with the male flying to the nest site and bowing and cooing to attract the hen. Both sexes help with nest building as well as incubation of the 2 cream or white eggs. Incubation takes 15 to 18 days, newly hatched chicks are initially covered in sandy coloured down, are fully feathered by 17 days and fledge at 16 to 20 days. Immature birds are duller versions of their parents and are independent at 4 weeks but, unless overt aggression is shown by the cock, young birds may be left with their parents for some time.

Brush Bronzewing *Phaps elegans*

Habitat

The Brush Bronzewing inhabits denser undergrowth than the Common and is restricted to a coastal band from lower Queensland to south-western West Australia. In the wild birds utilize both native and cultivated seeds although *Acacia* seeds tend to be preferred. Insects are also taken.

Description & Sexing (see photograph in centre spread)

The Brush Bronzewing is similar to the Common, but is smaller, darker and more colourful. As with the Common, birds reveal a rufous underwing

colour in flight. Both sexes show a grey crown, dark brown upperparts, grey underparts and iridescent wing feathers. Sexes are distinguished by the colour of throat, side of neck and forehead, which are all chestnut in cocks and grey in hens. In addition the white cheek line, although evident in both sexes, is more obvious in cocks than hens.

Housing

Similar to the Common Bronzewing, although more densely planted aviaries are preferred. In addition to the foods listed above, *Acacia* seeds may be used as a feeding supplement.

Breeding

Nesting may occur at any time of the year, but peaks in the warmer months. Nests may be built on the ground or up 2m high in dry brush or on an artificial platform. Again, nests may need to be supported. Courting occurs with the male bowing low to the hen with tail and wings spread, which accentuates the iridescent wing colours. Both sexes help with nest building as well as incubation of the 2 glossy white eggs. Incubation takes 16 days, and newly hatched chicks are initially covered in sandy coloured down, are fully feathered by 16 days and fledge at 16 to 20 days. Immature birds are duller versions of their parents and are independent at 4 weeks and should be removed if the parents want to re-nest as aggression can be a problem. Pairs are variable in their nesting success, with some showing poor fertility. Changing aviaries, increasing privacy or changing mates can help this problem. From personal experience, I find that one successful nest is followed by 2 or 3 failures before birds successfully nest again.

Summary

Both the Common and Brush Bronzewing are suited to larger, planted aviaries, have uncomplicated feeding requirements and are compatible with a range of other non-aggressive birds. They have even been kept in colonies, although aggression between cocks can be a problem in the breeding season. Both species are held in reasonable numbers in South Australia and breed well in the right situation.

References

- Brown, D. (1995) *A Guide to....Pigeons, Doves & Quail. Their Management, Care & Breeding*. Australian Birdkeeper.
- Morcombe, M. (2000) *Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Steve Parish Publishing Pty Ltd.