

# **THE SPINFEX PIGEON**

## ***Geophaps plumifera***

By Josie Pyle

### **Introduction**

The Spinifex Pigeon is an immediately striking bird; on first contact you are immediately impressed by the bird's vibrant colour, striking outline and overall demeanour. In the aviary they are an interesting and active species with relatively simple requirements. It is somewhat surprising that they are not kept more commonly than is currently the case.

Spinifex Pigeons are birds of the arid inland, where their ochre colouring blends well with the red desert sand. My first contact with this species was in a car park at an attraction south of Alice Springs. Obviously used to human contact, birds wandered around visitors and their cars with a complete lack of fear. A few years later I saw them again in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Looking down at a dry river bed, I suddenly realised that some of the "rocks" were moving! So perfect was their camouflage that without this movement they would have been virtually undetectable.

On both occasions the birds I saw were the nominate race – the White-bellied Spinifex Pigeon *Geophaps plumifera plumifera*, which is found in the arid regions of north western, northern, eastern and central Australia. The second race, the Red-bellied Spinifex Pigeon *Geophaps plumifera ferruginea*, inhabits the Pilbara region of Western Australia, north to the southern part of Dampier Land.

### **Habitat**

In the wild the Spinifex Pigeon lives in stony country with low woodlands and spinifex grasses. Unlike many other arid land birds, the Spinifex Pigeon is sedentary rather than nomadic and is more dependent on a permanent water supply than most arid species.

### **Aviculture**

As the Spinifex Pigeon is a terrestrial species, it is best suited to an open planted aviary with a selection of grasses and low shrubs. Rocks and logs provide not only attractive aviary furniture but also additional sources of

cover for nesting birds. In addition rocks and other high spots (such as a hill of sand) are often used as look-out points by the male.

## **Food**

My Spinifex Pigeons are fed with a commercial Budgie seed mix, supplemented by Passwell™ Quail Crumbles, seeding grasses and other greens and livefood in the form of fly pupae or maggots. Like many other species, they are opportunistic insect eaters, especially when breeding. The wild diet of the Spinifex Pigeon includes native legumes, a plant with high calcium content. Common problems with aviary birds such as the laying of thin-shelled eggs and egg eating may be due to lack of sufficient calcium in the diet, so supplements such as a grit mix should be available.

## **Compatibility**

The Spinifex Pigeon is compatible with a mixed aviary collection of finches and parrots but with the caution that they can become extremely protective of both eggs and young, even to the extent of killing young birds of other species unable to get out of the way. No other terrestrial species should be kept in the same aviary and under no circumstances should more than one male Spinifex Pigeon be housed per aviary. Should more than male be present, they will fight to the death. If male Spinifex Pigeons are housed in adjacent aviaries, kick plates are essential as, with visual competitors, males will constantly patrol the perimeter to the exclusion of all else.

Occasionally a male Spinifex Pigeon will become aggressive towards its mate. This is a difficult situation as separating the pair can cause considerable long term difficulties in re-uniting them, even if the male is the bird removed. Other options include either clipping the male's wings (so that the female can fly up to a higher perch – NB: food should be supplied at this level) or providing the male with 2 or 3 females (although aggression amongst the females can be an issue).

Despite the above statements (which are taken from the published literature), my birds have never shown exceptional aggression and, from discussion with other Spinifex Pigeon enthusiasts, the overly aggressive male seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Budding Spinifex Pigeon keepers are advised to buy unrelated young birds that can be introduced to a neutral aviary together and grow to maturity together.

## **Breeding**

Sexing the Spinifex Pigeon on appearance alone may be difficult. Cock birds are generally larger and plumper in overall appearance, with brighter colouration of the facial skin. However, cocks can usually be easily recognised by their courtship display, which some birds (especially hand-



raised ones) will perform to their owner's feet! The cock bows repeatedly to the hen with wings and tail slightly spread "cooing" seductively. He will then approach closer to the hen and repeat the display.

Once the nest site is selected, both birds arrange grasses and sticks around a shallow depression. Nests will usually be built up against a solid object such as a rock or log (or the door of the aviary!) and filled with two eggs which are incubated by both sexes for 16 days.

After hatching the chicks are brooded tightly for the first few days, but become mobile after just 1 week. From then on, the nest is wherever the chicks happen to settle as they wander around the aviary, followed closely by their diligent parents. The chicks are fully feathered by 15 days, and can be removed from their parents at just 3 weeks after fledging.

## Problems

In his book *A Guide to ...Pigeons Doves & Quail*, Danny Brown writes "Although egg laying may be achieved quite easily, the progression from egg to chick can be fraught with frustration." Problems which prevent this progression include:

- Egg eating or piercing. Usually done by the male, this is thought to be a response to calcium deficiency in the diet. Remedies include supplying a variety of calcium supplements and supplying tainted or dummy eggs.

- Nest desertion. Care should be taken not to disturb the sitting bird, especially in the first week.
- Egg laying without nest construction. Both aviary modification to provide more suitable sites for nesting and mice control are suggested to solve this problem.

This is another reason to be wary of buying adult pairs, unless their breeding history is well known.

While trying to solve these problems, many keepers have been left with eggs to care for.