

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE GREEN-WINGED PIGEON

Chalcophaps indica

By Josie Pyle

Introduction

The Green-winged Pigeon has a reputation of being an indifferent breeder in captivity. Many of these problems can be understood, and hopefully overcome, by a better appreciation of the species wild habits and conditions.

Distribution and Habitat

Known officially as the Emerald Ground-dove, the Green-winged Pigeon is basically a bird of wet sclerophyll (eucalypt) forests, rainforests, tropical and sub-tropical scrubs. However it may also be found in roadside and riverside vegetation, lantana thickets, regrowth areas and mangroves of its range throughout coastal northern and eastern Australia. As the name suggests, these birds spend a large amount of time on the ground, where they forage for seeds, fruits and insects. There are three races of the Green-winged Pigeon within Australia and other races are found throughout New Guinea, Indonesia, Philippines, South-east Asia and India. It has also been introduced onto Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island. The race found in aviculture is *C. i. chrysochlora*, which is found in the southern part of the birds range within Australia. The important points to note from the habitat description above is that this species lives in habitats with dense cover and with a higher (and more stable) ambient temperature than may be found in Adelaide, especially during late autumn to early spring.

Description

A plump looking pigeon about the size of a Barbary Dove, the Green-winged Pigeon gets its name from the emerald green colouration of the centre back and upper surface of the



wings of both sexes. The cock bird has a "wine-red" neck and breast, a black rump and upper tail and an obvious white patch on the "shoulder" of the wing. His lower back is crossed by two purplish bands. The breast and neck of the hen is more rufous brown, her rump and upper tail chocolate brown with less distinct bands and the white patch on the shoulder less obvious or absent (except for the northern race of the species), in which the hen has an obvious white shoulder patch). Both sexes have a red bill with a darker base. Some texts suggest that the bill of the cock bird is brighter in colour, but Brown states that this feature is not consistent and variation in bill colour may be a result of racial, dietary or genetic effects. Juvenile birds have a brown body colour with heavy scalloping and barring of darker brown and emerald green on the back and wings. Sexing can be done at approximately 3 months of age, when the wine-red breast colour starts to develop in the young males.

Avicultural Notes

Compatibility

The Green-winged Pigeon is usually not aggressive to other species and may be kept in mixed aviaries, especially with softbills, finches, quail, non-aggressive parrots and even other pigeons/doves. One text suggested care should be taken mixing this species with some doves, especially the New Guinea White-fronted Dove. Within the species, cock birds will be aggressive towards other cocks and therefore only one pair should be kept per aviary.

Aviary

As a ground dwelling species of forested areas, Green-winged Pigeons will do best in a planted aviary (especially shrubs and grasses) with plenty of cover, but will also appreciate open areas to sunbathe. An aviary which is too open can cause the birds to become flighty but in a planted aviary, birds tend to settle down well and may become reasonably tame.

Feeding

The Green-winged Pigeon has a mixed diet, taking seed, fruit and insects in the wild. While they will survive on a pure seed diet in captivity (Finch or Budgie Mix), this is not an optimal diet. Pigeon Mix, sprouted beans, sweet corn, peas, diced carrot and apple will all be taken as well as live food such

as mealworms and termites. Other foods such as quail/chicken pellets or crumbles, dry cat food, Madeira cake, seeding grasses and egg and biscuit mix may also be appreciated.

Breeding

Green-winged Pigeons may nest at any time of the year but the most successful breeding period is during spring and summer. The male courts the female by cooing to attract her and then performing a bobbing display. In this display the male faces the female with his neck extended and bobs up and down a few times, without further cooing. If she is receptive, the hen will then squat to allow mating to occur. As with most pigeons, nest building consists of a few twigs or sticks laid together to form a flimsy platform. In the wild, nests are built at a height of 4 to 11m from the ground in shrubs ferns and palms. In the aviary situation, birds should be encouraged to use wire trays as nests are notoriously prone to collapsing. Wire trays made with wire mesh and lined with felt or carpet underlay to provide warmth should be placed in areas where the birds seem inclined to make a nest. The birds should be provided with suitable nesting material such as small sticks and straw. Birds will often return to the same nesting site for future clutches. Two off-white eggs comprise a normal clutch and are incubated by both parents for 14 to 16 days. The female incubates during the night and the male during the day. I know when the chicks have hatched as both parents will sit on the nest for most of the time. The parents remove the broken egg shell from the nest shortly after hatching and drop it elsewhere in the aviary. Birds will sit tightly on the nest during routine feeding/watering changes but my pair does not tolerate close nest inspection. If disturbed too often, they can desert the nest. Chicks hatch with dark skin and almost no down. This later feature makes them very susceptible to cold. Pin feathers start to appear at approximately 5 days but full feathering does not usually occur until 16 days. The parents tend to brood the chick tightly until just over a week of age but then leave it during the day; although the female will usually return to the nest at night until the chick fledges at between 12 days to 3 weeks. Fledging occurs earlier if the weather is warmer, even before the chick can fly. Young are independent at 3 to 4 weeks after fledging. Brown states that newly weaned chicks need to be offered food in large open bowls, otherwise they may gorge themselves on grit or dirt, leading to crop impaction. No one has ever accused pigeons, particularly squabs, of being too intelligent! A good breeding pair will start

to nest again shortly after the chicks fledge. Some pairs will go through a period of unsuccessful nesting attempts following several successful nests. This is thought to be a way for the birds to have a break from breeding and tend to resume successful breeding in 4 to 6 months.

My Experiences with the Green-winged Pigeon

I have kept a pair of Green-winged Pigeons for years. They are housed in an aviary 4m by 2m with a partition of 1m dividing the enclosed area (2m by 2m) from the open flight (2m by 2m). They are housed with Chestnut-breasted Mannikins, Emblemas, Elegant Parrots, wild type Budgies and Painted Button-quail. The pigeons have never shown any aggression to any other species, even when nesting. The mannikins have tried to intimidate the pigeons, despite an obvious size problem, but the pigeons seem quite happy to ignore them. One mannikin decided that, as he had the perch first, he was not moving out of the pigeons way. The mannikin tried to stop the pigeon with a threat posture but this was ignored and he wisely decided to move just as the pigeons foot came down on his head! As the aviary is not well planted, I created a shelf inside the enclosed area to hold brush and other branches. Behind this area I secured an open wire food tray to the aviary wall. Only once have the pigeons tried to make a nest in the branches, normally preferring to use the nesting tray offered. The Emblemas seem to like this set-up and frequently build nests on the shelf, under a branch. Even though their aviary is far from ideal, my birds are rarely flighty and, as they are offered supplementary foods on a regular basis, both birds have become quite tame and are very quick to come to the feeding tray as soon as I approach the aviary, especially if they are nesting. They are fed a basic Budgie Mix with access to Quail Crumble, Pigeon Mix and the supplementary foods detailed above.

Breeding Problems

If every chick hatched was successfully raised, aviculture would be a breeze! Unfortunately it would be truer to say that my birds have lost many more chicks than they have raised. They have lost chicks for three major reasons:

1. Falling out of the nest. I found it essential to remove nesting material from the tray to flatten the nest between clutches as the parents will continue to pile twigs higher and higher. Eggs and chicks on a high platform tended

to end up on the floor of the aviary.

2. Parents not brooding them. When a chick hatches, both parents will attempt to brood it. If the chick sits under the male (who is more likely to leave the nest), the female will continue sitting on the nest, but not on the chick. I watched the male leave the nest and went in 15 minutes later to check the chick. I found a cold but alive chick sitting less than 5cm away from its mother who was happily brooding an empty nest. It may be that the tray size will have to be halved so that both parents cannot brood at the same time.

3. Chicks becoming cold. My birds leave their chick alone during the day from as young as 7 days. At this age they are naked, except for some wing primaries and tend to chill very quickly unless it is a warm day. At this years UBSSA Seminar, Dr Danny Brown pointed out that as this is a tropical species, this would not be a problem in their native habitat. The only solution I have found to this problem is to bring the chick in for hand raising. I have also attempted use Barbary Doves to raise Green-winged Pigeons. Although they will brood the eggs and chicks quite well, Barbary's also tend to leave the chicks at about one week of age, at which time hand-raising becomes necessary.

Hand Raising

Getting the parents or foster parents to raise the chicks throughout the first week makes hand-raising considerably easier than trying to raise a chick from the egg. At 1 week of age, I use "**Passwell** Hand Rearing Food" mixed as per the directions of the packet. For chicks under 1 week of age, "**Rowdybush** Squab Handfeeding Formula" would be a better choice. The formula is mixed fresh each feed and a small amount of apple puree added. The apple tends to make the crop shrink and encourages crop emptying. Chicks are fed three times daily until they are fully feathered and "fledge" (i.e. jump down from the table and run around the floor when taken out of the brooder to be fed) when feeds are reduced to twice daily. Chicks may be fed by either a crop tube or from a modified syringe. I use the second method, initially with a 5ml syringe with the tip cut off to widen the opening, increasing the size of the syringe as the chick grows. The chick learns quickly to put its beak inside the syringe and suck the formula. Disadvantages of this method include air in the crop, which can be removed

by gently stretching the chicks neck and massaging the crop, and formula spilling down the chicks front. It is important to clean the chick after each feed. Using a crop tube requires some practice but is certainly faster and cleaner. The brooder temperature should be reduced gradually, initially 0.5 to 1 degree per day but faster once the bird is fully feathered. Too rapid changes in temperature can lead to chilling, crop stasis and death. Weaning is achieved by leaving bowls of seed in the brooder once feeds are reduced to twice daily. When chicks are observed to be taking seed, formula feeds should be reduced to once daily. It is important to ensure that chicks are eating well before feeds are withdrawn completely. Once independent, chicks can be moved gradually out into an aviary, initially being brought in at night to check their weight and prevent chilling.

Summary

The Green-winged Pigeon is considered secure in aviculture, albeit in relatively low numbers. Its striking colours make it an attractive addition to any aviary, especially a mixed collection in a well planted habitat aviary. Unfortunately, while some pairs do breed consistently well, the nesting behaviour of other pairs can make it a challenging and sometimes frustrating species to keep.

References

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