

DOVES IN A NATAL GARDEN

By L. Gibson (Oregon)

These few notes are on a pair of Laughing Doves *Streptopelia senegalensis*, and two pairs of Red-eyed Doves *S. semitorquata* which were resident in our garden in Durban, Natal. Just about every morning of the year we were wakened by a pair of the former species which sat outside the window in a 20 ft. Rubber Tree *Ficus elastica*, to warm themselves in the sun's first rays. Their soft, accelerating cadence of coos was pleasant enough, except in summer when they began at about 4.30 in the morning (no-one in South Africa having the wit to make the great leap into the 20th century and introduce Daylight Saving Time)!

A further year-round inconvenience arising from this was that it became dark between 5.00 and 7.00 pm, leaving no time to enjoy outdoor activities - such as attending to the aviary - during the working week. The cooing figured in our daily existence more than we realised for when a Laughing Dove began to call on TV here, our old dog jumped up from its slumbers and headed for the door. A previous hobby of his had been running down the doves, with limited success, and old habits die hard.

Commencing on 4 June, the doves built their usual fragile-looking, sparse platform of twigs in an exposed position right on top of a Bougainvillea bush, conveniently situated just below the kitchen window. It was completed in two days. Various plants in the garden that had thorns were utilised by assorted nesting birds - the motivating force seeming to be the fear of tree snakes.

On the first day of building there were uncharacteristic heavy downpours and gales blew throughout the following day. But the little apology for a nest -built in a sheltered spot against the household firmly, while half the nests elsewhere blew out of the trees during a prolonged gale.

The winter is usually one long spell of cool nights and pleasantly warm, rain-free days, and no doubt this is why the doves choose to nest at this time. Being right on the seaside, the weather was marred by sporadic strong winds, both in mid-winter and mid-summer.

With very neat timing, an egg was laid the day after the nest was completed, followed by another the following day, 7 June. Two squabs hatched on 20 June, almost exactly on the winter solstice.

During incubation and brooding, the day temperature was between 22° - 25°C. (72° - 75°F.), and 11° - 16° C. (52° - 61°F.) at night. The chicks were covered with long, widely-spaced, tawny down, and soon their crops were bulging with pigeon's milk.

The temperature always reached 21°C. (70° F.) by about 10.30 am each day, at which time the hen often left the nest to sunbathe on an adjacent shed roof. The parents foraged mostly in the large garden, lining up every morning for the daily bread handout, along with the resident pairs of Yellow-vented Bulbuls, Indian Mynahs and Red-eyed Doves - as well as two House Sparrows from over the wall, where they lived on spilled seed from an outdoor battery of canary cages.

On the 13th day the chicks were perching on the edge of the twig platform. On 5 July, the 15th day, they left the nest, probably because I was gardening underneath it. This was about a day premature. One landed in a nearby tree, while the other found its way to a tree in a neighbouring garden. They were not checked the next day, but on 7 July both were back on the nest.

The following day, both had gone by noon. They stayed on an exposed branch of an adjacent Norfolk pine for the next two days, leaving to disappear into denser branches when the garden was buffeted by a fierce squall. They remained hidden and did not move from the spot for another five days, during which time the wind blew hard - up to 90 m.p.h.. Both parents were still in attendance when the young doves finally left the vicinity on the 25th day. They were fed throughout that time.

Soon afterwards another nest was built in a small lemon tree, also below the window, and one chick was hatched. On the second night the hen was scared off the nest and did not return in the darkness. The chick was brought indoors and put back in the nest the following morning, long after it was light. The hen reappeared and commenced brooding and feeding as though nothing had happened.

The doves foraged mostly on the ground for weed and grass seeds, also taking hard berries that had fallen from trees. Sometimes they collected half ripe berries directly from the tree, but were not seen to eat soft berries or fruit.

It was difficult to see if they picked up the occasional insect, but were thought not to do so. However, there was one exception to this. Several times a year, day or night and irrespective of weather conditions, termites swarmed by the millions - in spite of the tradition that they only do so in the damp.

When this happened, all sorts of creatures threw caution to the wind and appeared on roadways to gorge on the insects. Blue-headed Agama lizards jostled skinks and geckos, and even some small snakes, for a place among hordes of insect-eating birds ranging from Pied Crows to sunbirds. The Laughing Doves, as well as the larger Turtle Doves, all got in on the act.

Two pairs of much larger Red-eyed Doves nested in incredibly spiky date palms at opposite ends of the garden. The palm fronds were armed with stiff 3-inch spines and dead fronds fell from the tree at regular intervals. If you spotted one descending you learned quickly to leap out of the way - after your first lacerating!

The nests were thus totally inaccessible, so nothing was noted about them. The adults foraged, just like the Laughing Doves, presumably taking larger items. When approaching or leaving the nest, the parents often made a peculiar cat-like miaow, especially if they saw us, although it was some time before we associated this unpigeon-like noise with the doves.

These doves, along with bulbuls, gorged themselves on the little dates that were about 20% fruit and 80% stone. How the bulbuls managed to pass these big hard seeds was a mystery. The Laughing Doves may have eaten them, but were not seen to do so.

Nestling Laughing Doves suffered much from tree snake predation, and occasionally from a passing crow, but the Red-eyed Doves were more secure, deep in the crown of the lethally-spiked palm. Snakes were able to move freely among thorns, because most of the native trees were so armed - but the palms stood separate from other trees and this helped.

Some of the Laughing Doves had a much pinker tinge than others during the breeding season. It should not be difficult for some enterprising person to breed this easily-managed species into a permanent pink pigeon mutation - if they haven't done so already. The same remarks applied to the blue on the Red-eyed Doves, with one cock having noticeably more and brighter powder blue on the head and neck than rival cocks.

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NOTES ON BREEDING THE BLACK-THROATED LAUGHING THRUSH

By Michael E. Mace (San Diego Wild Animal Park)

Black-throated Laughing Thrushes *Garrulax chinensis* are endemic to Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Hong Kong. Their habitat is secondary growth consisting of thickets, bamboo stands and forest understory below 1,200 m (King et. al., 1975). There are 48 recognized species of *Garrulax* currently listed that can be found in Asia (Howard and Moore, 1991). The Black-throated Laughing Thrush is a monomorphic species.

Upon arrival in the collection, each bird goes through a customary 30-day quarantine period. During this time they are subjected to a few tests to determine their health status. Towards the end of the quarantine a laparoscopy procedure was used as a method to accurately determine the gender of each bird which fortunately proved to be an adult pair.

The Wild Animal Park has kept Black-throated Laughing Thrushes from 1988 until 1992. During this period the birds have been successfully bred in two vastly different styles of aviaries, hatching a total of 15 chicks.

The first breeding occurred in an open air, public walk-through aviary that measured 43 x 33 x 12m. The exhibit was well planted and housed 35 species of birds consisting of 107 specimens. Of this grouping, six other *Garrulax* species were kept with *G. chinensis*. They were Tickell's Laughing Thrush *G. streptians*, White-throated Laughing Thrush *G. albogularis*, White-browed Laughing Thrush *G. sannio*, Yellow-throated Laughing Thrush *G. galbanus*, Red-winged Laughing Thrush *G. formosus*, and Red-tailed Laughing Thrush *G. milnei*. The first four species listed have also successfully produced chicks in this exhibit.

The second aviary measured 6 x 1.2 x 3m and was adequately planted with Purple-leafed Plum *Prunus blireiana*, Podocarpus, *Podocarpus gracilior* and Russian Olive, *Elaeagnus angustifolia*.

The cage mates in this aviary were a pair of Golden-breasted Starling *Cosmopsarus regius* and a pair of Celebes Quail Doves *Gallicolumba tristmata*.

The birds nested in the tallest available plant in this aviary which was the Purple-leafed Plum. One difference in the nesting in this aviary was that the Laughing Thrushes would only build the



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