PALUMBUS TORQUATUS.

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Wood-Pigeon or Cushat.

Columba palumbus, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 75.

——— *torquata*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Brit. Mus., p. 26.

Palumbus ———, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 107.

If the draining of our marshes and the reclaiming of our estuaries have been the means of destroying or driving away many native birds, the progress of agricultural science and the increase in our plantations have tended to the multiplication of others, and of none more than the Wood-Pigeon. No one, I imagine, who knew England and Scotland fifty years ago, but must admit that the entire face of those countries has been greatly altered—high cultivation and the planting of ornamental belts of firs and other trees having effected a remarkable difference in its appearance. If this great change had resulted in the increase of a more useful bird, we might consider ourselves fortunate; but in the case of the Wood-Pigeon this is very questionable, and I therefore take up my pen to write its history with less pleasure than when similarly engaged on the other members of our avifauna. To quote more than a few of the numerous articles which have from time to time appeared in the public papers respecting its destructive propensities would be futile, since they must be well known to all my readers; but I shall attempt to place before them both the sunny and the shady side of the bird's history, and allow them to draw their own conclusions as to whether the pleasing traits in its character do or do not counterbalance the injuries it inflicts. With regard to its distribution a few words will suffice. During winter the Wood-Pigeon is spread over every part of the British Islands, either in small companies or in immense flocks, which betake themselves to the open fields in the daytime, and at sundown retire to roost in woods, and plantations of fir and other trees. At this season it is shy, wild, and distrustful; and few birds know better how to keep out of harm's way. It now feeds on cereals, the seeds of wild plants, acorns, beech-mast, and berries, particularly those of the ivy, on the leaves and roots of turnips, their ravages upon which plant often occasion a very great diminution in the value of the crop. In the spring the flocks are broken up, and their members retire in pairs to woods, plantations, shaws, hedgerows, and shrubberies for the purpose of reproduction. A wonderful change in the disposition of the Wood Pigeon now takes place; for it becomes as tame and confiding as it was formerly shy and distrustful. It no longer fears the approach of man, but, on the contrary, seeks his protection, and courts his intimacy, frequently constructing its nest in his garden, perhaps in the ornamental cedar that overshadows his house, and solacing him with its pleasing *coo-coo-roo* in the morning, and its beautiful aerial evolutions during the other portions of the day. Such is its conduct during the season of reproduction, and all right-minded persons will not, I am sure, allow its confidence to be misplaced, but will permit it to remain unmolested until the period arrives when it will return to the fields and open country, and at once resume its usual craftiness. While writing the above passage, a letter has reached me, from the Rev. Edwin Sidney, of Cornard, near Sudbury, in Suffolk, in which he says:—"I have two or three pairs of Wood-Pigeons and Turtle Doves which breed in the trees round this house. They are never disturbed; and the former have become very saucy and mischievous, plucking up the young peas in the face of the gardener, and provoking him greatly. How well these creatures know that they are safe!"

I now proceed to the cloudy side of the Cushat's character, by giving some further details of the immense injuries it inflicts upon our crops, and the baneful effects produced by these birds to any district in which they may take up their abode.

To show in what vast numbers the bird is sometimes seen, I extract the following passage from a letter sent to me by Mr. J. Illsey, dated Daylingworth, in Gloucestershire, February 2, 1866:—"What has astonished me more than anything else is the vast flocks of Wood-Pigeons we have here this winter. I have seen several, of fully a mile in length, pass overhead to the beech-woods, early in the morning. The people call them 'foresters.'"

Now, if the country be suddenly covered with snow, and the favourite beech-mast, acorns, and wild seeds are not to be obtained, the havoc such a flight would make among a field of turnips, to which they would certainly descend, must be immense: on this head, a writer in 'Land and Water' says:—"They settle on the turnip-fields in hundreds. They begin by eating the young tender leaves from the centre of the turnip; the water lodges, the frost gets in, and it rots. If you shoot a Wood-Pigeon in the winter when returning to roost, his crop generally bursts with the fall, so full is it. Sometimes, if he has been gleaning, there may be some corn or beans; but far oftener there is nothing but a 'gowpen' (a double handful) of turnip-leaves. I have seen part of a turnip-field so punished by Wood-Pigeons that I can compare it to nothing but a gooseberry-

garden suffering from caterpillars—merely the strong centre ribs of the leaves left sticking out. Perhaps you will say that this was bad farming, and that the turnips should have been lifted and stored; but on arable farms in Scotland, in the regular rotation of crops, one-seventh of the farm is probably under turnips. If the crop has been good, this is more than the farmer requires; and the extra turnips are let to some butcher or sheep-farmer, and consumed by his sheep on the ground.”

“During the severe weather of January 1867,” says Mr. Cordeaux,” hundreds of these birds daily frequented the turnip-fields in North Lincolnshire, feeding on the green tops of the swedes and common turnips; they appear, however, to give a decided preference to the latter plant. In two contiguous fields, the one swedes, the other the common globe turnip, they invariably congregated in much greater numbers on the white turnips, to the comparative neglect of the swedes. They drilled holes with their bills into the bulbs, which is surprising, considering they were frozen as hard as stones; they thus often do considerable damage to the root. As a *general rule* I found that the outer skin of the swedes thus operated upon was previously more or less injured, either by the bite of hares or rabbits, or the puncture of some insect.”—*Zoologist*, 1867, p. 690.

That the Wood-Pigeon is equally destructive in the cornfields seems certain; for “Scoticus” says:—“In the autumn, when the wheat is just turning yellow, the Wood-Pigeons are very destructive. First one or two leave the wood and settle, generally in the centre of the field; then ensues a constant stream in the same direction of every pigeon within ken, until some hundreds may be assembled. They don’t settle, like the partridge, at the foot of the stalk on the ground, but try to alight on the standing stalks of corn; the straw breaks with their weight, and never recovers; it is not merely bent as from heavy rain. Of course they eat some grain; but in this case their actual weight is more destructive than their appetite; the corn lies matted, and, if the weather be warm and damp, begins to sprout. But it is in winter that the Wood-Pigeon is most destructive.”

The following instance of the voracity of the Wood-Pigeon appeared in the ‘Times’ of Oct. 22, 1857:—

“There was shot lately in the neighbourhood of Inverness a Wood-Pigeon, in which was found the enormous quantity of 1,100 grains of wheat, barley, and oats (together with 40 peas), the barley-grains predominating. This seems to be no unusual case. In another, killed on a neighbouring farm, was found seventy peas, and a very large quantity of the grains above mentioned, but they were not counted; it was stated, however, that the bird was full to the very bill. The quantity a flock of 100 or 200 of these destructive birds would devour in the course of a harvest season must be very considerable.”—*Inverness Courier*.

In the ‘Field’ for Jan. 1860, a Guildford subscriber writes:—“On the 17th inst. I shot, close to my own house, a fine Wood-Pigeon, and on reaching home, finding it had an immense crop, I took out its contents, which were composed of 690 berries of the ivy, also some portion of the rape-leaf, which I suppose was eaten to digest the ivy-berries.”

As a set-off to all this mischief, St. John remarks,—“Although without doubt a consumer of great quantities of grain, at some seasons the Wood-Pigeon must feed for many months wholly on the seeds of weeds, which, if left to grow, would injure the farmer’s crops to a very serious extent.”

It is a mooted question whether there be not a great influx of these birds from the Continent during the months of autumn. For my own part, I am inclined to think that there is; for how otherwise are we to account for such streams of them as those described by Mr. Illsey? That their wing-power is sufficient to enable them to cross the German ocean there can be no doubt. That great migratory movements are natural to the Pigeon tribe we have abundant evidence; but it will only be necessary to cite the case of the Passenger Pigeon of America, which excites the astonishment of every one who beholds it during its transit from north to south, or *vice versa*. Besides England, Scotland, and Ireland, the Wood-Pigeon is found over all the temperate parts of Europe; it also occurs in North Africa, Palestine, and, according to Mr. Jerdon, in Western Asia.

The breeding of this familiar species is so well known that it is scarcely necessary to allude to it. Its two oblong white eggs may be seen any day during the spring and summer months on its slight platform of sticks by any person who will seek for it in the woods and shrubberies. The nest is usually placed on the horizontal branch of a fir, or in the middle of a mass of ivy growing on large trees. It rears two, and sometimes three broods in a year. It often commences laying early in April; and its ugly squabs of a later hatching may be seen sitting side by side on their slight and flat platform as late as September and October. The male and female sit by turns.

The two sexes are alike in colour; but the female is somewhat smaller than the male. The flesh of the Wood-Pigeon is both good and palatable, especially if they have not been feeding upon turnips.

The figure is of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Wood-Pigeon, or CuShat, *Palumbus torquatus* [Pl. 1]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323962>.

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