

# Doves & Pigeons

Genus *Columba*



**LIFE SPAN:** 12+ years

**AVERAGE SIZE:** 7 ½ - 12 inches and 140 to 215 grams.



written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a board-certified avian veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified avian veterinarian, go to [www.AAV.org](http://www.AAV.org).

**WILD AND DOMESTIC HISTORY:** Pigeons and doves are found all over the world, with the exception of the high Arctic, Antarctica, and some extremely arid desert regions. The words pigeon and dove are often used interchangeably; the birds are very similar animals. However, ornithologists choose to call the larger birds pigeons, and the smaller ones, doves.

At least ten *Columba* species have become extinct due to the actions of humans, including the dodo bird of Mauritius. Human introduction of predator species (cats, rats, and other mammals) to some islands that were once rich with *Columba* species were one cause of population decreases. Another reason is the destruction of natural habitat. *Columba* have been used in history to perform such important tasks as delivering the name of the winner of the Olympics, delivering word of incoming invading troops in early wars, delivering news in Europe by Reuter's News Agency founder Paul Reuter, and carrying tiny cameras and delivering messages for the U.S. and the U.K. during World Wars I and II.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** Pigeons and doves have smooth, stout bodies with short necks and small heads. The wings and tail are long and broad. The bill is short, and is not sharp. Most pigeon and doves have small eyes surrounded by an area of bare skin. Pigeons and doves are passerines; this means their feet have the pattern of three toes forward and one toe back. North American pigeon and dove species are basically tan, cream or gray in color. However, many tropical species have more brightly colored feathers. Age of sexual maturity is usually around 6 months.

Doves and pigeons are not sexually dimorphic, which means males and females are not visually different. Experienced dove and pigeon keepers can often distinguish certain male or female specific behaviors or vocalizations. A proper DNA test by a qualified avian veterinarian can tell you whether your pet is a male or female.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** Birds are flock-oriented animals, and they do well with other birds in the home to communicate with. However, you and your family become part of your bird's flock as well. Doves and pigeons are intelligent, sweet, family birds.

Pigeons and doves do well when kept singly or with a partner, male or female. Do not house other bird species in the same enclosure as your dove or pigeon. The *Columba* beak is not designed to help them protect themselves and an aggressive cage mate can easily injure them.

**DIET:** A high quality dove/ pigeon feed with 14% to 18% protein and at least 4% fat is best. Your bird should also be offered fresh vegetables (especially leafy greens), fruit and grain daily. Be sure to chop up your fresh fruits & vegetables well for your dove or pigeon. Be sure to remove any fresh foods that have not been eaten within a 24-hour period.

Doves and pigeons benefit from a good quality pellet diet in addition to their seed mix. A seed-only diet can result in nutrient deficiency and diseases such as liver, kidney and heart disease, as well as obesity, all of which can severely shorten the life expectancy of your pet. Pelleted diets that are available for small parrots can be a great addition to your bird's menu. If your bird is not used to pellets, they can be mixed with seed. As time goes on, you can slowly convert your bird to a majority of pellet and fresh food diet.

A millet spray clipped to the side of the cage is a fabulous treat. Never feed your dove or pigeon chocolate, sugary/fried foods, avocado, or junk food. See our **Avian Nutrition Handout** for more information!

**SUPPLEMENTS:** The only supplement that should be necessary if you are feeding your dove or pigeon properly is calcium grit. Calcium grit can be offered in a small dish in the form of oyster shell grit or pigeon/dove grit. Be sure it has beneficial calcium as an ingredient. Do not toss the grit on the floor of the cage. Your bird may mistakenly pick up feces along with the grit, which can cause illness. Place it in a small bowl inside the cage. For optimal calcium metabolism, your bird will need some UVB exposure for at least 3-4 hours a day. Careful outdoor sun exposure or indoor UV lighting is recommended (see our **UV Lighting** handout).

**WATER:** Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

Because your bird will often even bathe or dunk food in its water, it must be checked/changed several times a day. It is recommended that the bowl be wiped clean with a paper towel at every change to prevent a slimy film (bacteria) from collecting on the inside of the bowl. Thoroughly wash the bowl with a mild dishwashing detergent and water at least once a day.

**HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT:** Doves and pigeons need a clean, warm, roomy cage where they can spread their wings and stretch out. They spend the majority of their time on low

perches or on the ground. A single bird or a pair should have a cage no smaller than 28" x 24" by 36." The basic rule of thumb is always - the bigger the better! The spacing between the bars of the cage should be no wider than ¾" to 1" wide.

The cage should be placed in a family- centered room where the bird will feel like a part of the "flock"; however, the back of the cage should be positioned against a wall to provide security. Avoid drafty areas and any placement that will get too much direct sun for any portion of the day. If your bird spends time out of its cage, make sure that any ceiling fans are off. Do not place your bird's cage in the kitchen, as cooking fumes and even a small amount of smoke can be fatal. Average room temperature will be fine for your bird, not to exceed 80 degrees. Be careful of drafts from air conditioning, especially when bathing and misting.

Perches of varying materials and types should be included in the cage, such as wood dowel, natural branch type, cotton rope or a cement perch. Having different sizes will exercise the feet and prevent sores and foot-related health issues. We do not recommend sandpaper covered perches as they are too abrasive for bird feet. A raised flat ledge or surface will also be appreciated by your dove or pigeon, and this could be placed anywhere in the mid to upper portion of the cage.

At least four clean bowls should be ready for use: one for fresh water, one for dry pellets/seed, one for fresh foods and one for grit .

Use newspapers to line the bottom of the cage. It is easy to change and you can monitor your bird's feces daily. We do not recommend sandpaper floor paper or corn cob bedding. Corn cob can be ingested and cause obstructions and can grow molds on moist foods and feces.

We recommend against using mite protectors due to the potential for respiratory irritation (fortunately feather mites are not common in pet doves and pigeons). In addition, a smoke-free household is best for bird and owner!

Your bird may appreciate a cage cover for nighttime. The cover can block out any extraneous light and create a more secure sleeping place. Be careful not to use any fabrics for your cover that your bird might catch its claws or beak in, or that it might pull strings from and ingest.

Doves and pigeons will enjoy picking at small toys made of leather strips or sturdy string.

#### RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Perches
- Dishes
- Toys
- Misting bottle and/or dish for birdbath
- Nail clipper & styptic powder
- Pellet diet
- Millet spray
- Calcium supplement
- Fluorescent UVB Bulb and housing
- Cage cover

**CAGE MAINTENANCE:** Your *Columba's* cage should be checked daily. Feces and spoiled food should be wiped clean of perches, cups and cage bars consistently to prevent health problems. Cage paper can be changed every to every-other day.

The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

**GROOMING & HYGIENE:** All birds should be gently misted with a water bottle dedicated to this use only. In addition to misting, a shallow dish (2-3 inches deep) for bird bath should be offered to your bird at least twice weekly.

Be sure to take your bird to your avian veterinarian for regular nail trims. *Never* use styptic powder on your bird's skin-nails only!

**SIGNS OF A HEALTHY BIRD:** A healthy bird should be perky, active and alert with bright, clear eyes, and nostrils. You should observe your bird eating and drinking throughout the day. Your bird should appear well groomed with neat, bright feathers. The feathers should be mostly smoothed to the body at rest - not continually fluffed. The feet and legs should be smooth and free of lumps, scabs and rough scales. *Columba* are quiet but do coo and grunt at times. Your bird should be interested in vocalizing, but may be shy or intimidated around new people or in new environments. A healthy bird is confident and inquisitive, although cautious and aware as well. We recommend your bird be seen by an avian vet for yearly health exams.

#### SOME COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:

- Fluffed feathers, missing patches of feathers, feathers being purposely plucked.
- Evidence that your bird has stopped grooming.
- Bird sitting still and low on perch with a puffed-up appearance, drooping wings; may also stay at bottom of cage.
- Beak swelling or unusual marks on cere.
- Nasal discharge, eye discharge, wheezing or coughing.
- Any change in stools including color or consistency.
- Loss of appetite.
- Favoring of one foot, holding a wing differently, presence of any blood.

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