

## Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*



**Folk Name:** Pigeon, Rock Dove

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Common to Abundant

**Habitat:** Urban areas, underpasses and ledges, farms, industrial sites—bare ground and short grass

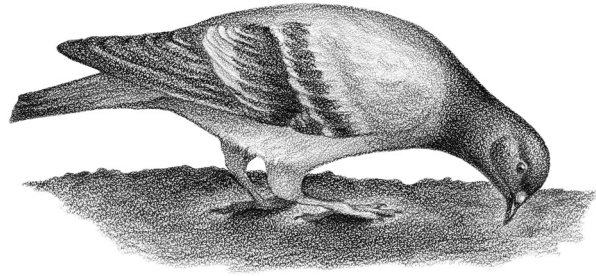
Rock Pigeons are one of the most widespread species of birds in the world. They inhabit urban areas, agricultural areas, and even some remote “wild” habitats around the globe. These birds were introduced in North America about the time of the first European settlers, and, later, feral pigeons (wild offspring of domesticated birds) expanded across the continent. Rock Pigeons are certainly one of the most commonly recognized birds in the Carolinas, and most people just simply call them “pigeons.”

Pigeons are almost ubiquitous throughout our towns and cities. They are regularly encountered year-round on streets, at parks, greenways, bridges, malls, restaurants, office buildings, and most industrial settings. Hundreds can be seen at a time. They are rarely seen in forest or woodland habitats, but are regularly encountered on farms in more rural areas of the region. They can nest every month of the year, and their population can grow fast. In some areas, populations are so large that they are considered a nuisance species.

“Two little boys that I happen to know of managed to get hold of three or four pairs of squabs about fifteen months ago, and now they have a flock of about eighty



Rock Pigeon. (Gary P. Carter)



pigeons. A hungry hawk managed to slip up on the pigeons one morning. Singling out Brownie, he made a dart for the veteran. Brownie flew directly at the window of the little boy’s room, followed by the hawk. At the window the pigeon made a turn of indescribable swiftness and the hawk went crashing through the window pane.”

—*The Gastonia Gazette*, March 18, 1887

Pigeons have been domesticated for hundreds of years. During the early 1900s, Pigeon breeding was an extremely popular hobby in this region. Local pigeon “fanciers” showed thousands of pigeons at county fairs and other contests held in Charlotte and around both Carolinas. The city’s *Evening Chronicle* newspaper regularly carried the results of both state and local competitions. On September 7, 1912, the newspaper emphasized the fact that all of the varieties of beautiful birds featured in these shows were descended from one bird species—our common street pigeon: “*Columba livia*, called by the English the blue rock dove and by the French, the bizet and by the Germans the Feldtaube. ...There is nobility in the labor of raising fowls. ...Truly the mysteries and wonders of color breeding are just being found out. This then is the science of our hobby.”

The non-native Rock Pigeon has long been established as a naturalized breeding bird in the Carolinas, but it was utterly ignored on official North Carolina bird lists prepared by state ornithologists until the 1960s. In fact, the Rock Pigeon was not listed in the first, second, or third edition of *Birds of North Carolina* or on the “Birds of North Carolina Bird Record and Checklist” published by the North Carolina State Museum in 1960. The authors of these publications considered the Rock Pigeon to be a feral species, an “escapee” from captivity, rather than an established, non-native breeding bird.

In 1964, John Grey, a founder of the Carolina Bird Club and first editor of *The Chat*, formally recommended

that the “Rock Dove” be included on the North Carolina state bird list. He cited a recent decision by the American Ornithologists’ Union to include it in their 5th edition of the *AOU Check-list of North American Birds* published in 1957. The first official state bird record committee (established by the Carolina Bird Club in 1964) followed his recommendation and included Rock Dove on their first published list with a designation of “introduced.”

Elizabeth Clarkson followed suit and added Rock Dove to the Mecklenburg County Bird Checklist in her second edition, published in 1965, with a designation of “permanent resident.” The first pigeon officially recorded on a Charlotte Spring Bird Count was on May 6, 1967, despite the fact that these annual counts had been conducted since 1940 and that these birds were abundant in the city.

It wasn’t until 1973 that the National Audubon Society finally relented and added the Rock Dove to official count lists for their annual Christmas Bird Counts. They received many comments about this decision with one birder writing “I am glad to see the Rock Dove is actually a bird after all!” A photograph of pigeons was featured on the cover of the 74th Christmas Bird Count issue of *American Birds* to highlight this change, and, the following count year, the first one was officially recorded on a Charlotte CBC on December 28, 1974.

In January 1981, *Charlotte Observer* columnist John Vaughn addressed growing concern from citizens about pigeons in the city and requesting their removal. Vaughn wrote:

[T]his town is a-flutter with pigeons. ...Some local people don’t like pigeons, of course. “Nasty dirty things!” they say. “Flying rats!” they say. And it’s true our street pigeon (*Columba livia*) is messy. He has the bathroom habits of an infant. His roosts leak feathers and straw. And he’s no architect: His nest is so clumsily built that the eggs often roll out in springtime and splatter on the sidewalk.

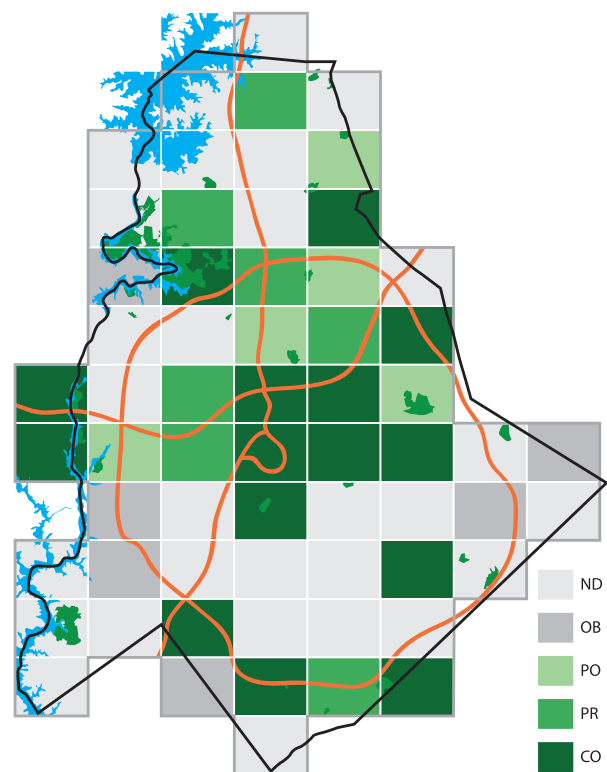
However, Vaughn supported the continued presence of these pigeons and noted they don’t actually spread disease; they clean up after people’s lunches, they are fun to watch, and they are “capable at moments of unexpected grace.” He ended with a plea that in cities, “[p]eople need something to look at besides buildings and other people.”

In 1996, Kim Garrett, a talented naturalist and Environmental Educator, partnered with the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology to implement the lab’s Project PigeonWatch citizen science study in Charlotte. The objective of the project was to capitalize on the natural curiosity of inner-city youth by involving them in hands-on experiential science activities that contribute to

real-world science studies. Participants observed flocks of pigeons in their own neighborhoods and followed protocols to collect data on the wide variations in pigeon color. They recorded the different color types present in the local flocks and the colors and behaviors of pairs of courting birds. Completed data sheets were sent to Cornell for analysis. These city kids were able to get outside and learn about science, and Cornell was able to have free labor for its study, resulting in a win-win for all. The Charlotte study was so successful it was featured on the front page of the national Laboratory of Ornithology newsletter in 1997.

Occasionally, strange pigeons are reported showing up at local backyard feeder stations after a storm has passed. These pigeons have colored bands on their legs and may appear to be somewhat tame. These are Racing Pigeons, or Homing Pigeons, that are temporarily weather delayed and will usually move on once the atmosphere has settled. If you are able to read the bands, you can report these lost birds online at: [www.pigeon.org](http://www.pigeon.org).

*Note: The presence of Rock Pigeon is believed to be underrepresented by this Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas Map. Birders sometimes fail to pay attention to these feral birds.*



**Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**  
*Fairly Widespread (PR/7, CO/15)*