

Pest Fact sheet No 13 Feral Pigeons

Feral pigeons (*Columba livia*) are found in towns and cities throughout the world and their reliance on man for food has led to them becoming a serious pest in many situations. When food supply is plentiful then birds will congregate in large numbers and cause significant problems.



Feral Pigeons.

Biology and Habits

The feral pigeon is descended from domesticated strains of the rock dove and the wild breeding population is supplemented by escapees from pigeon lofts and racing pigeons. Their plumage can vary considerably from pure white to almost black with almost any variation in between. They are 300-350mm in length and weigh around 230-560g.

Both sexes take part in building a rather untidy nest in sheltered sites on buildings using any available materials, including twigs, grass, feathers and even plastic. Birds can breed throughout the year with up to 7 broods of two eggs each brood.

The young are ready to leave the nest at 30-35 days old, although the next batch of eggs may well be laid before they leave. They can start to breed at 6 months old and live for about 4 years.



Young Feral Pigeons (squabs).

Problems with Feral Pigeons

Feral pigeons are able to carry and spread a number of diseases that can affect human health. Around public catering areas they can contaminate food with food poisoning bacteria, including *Salmonella*, *E. coli* and *Campylobacter* species. Where droppings and nesting materials are allowed to build up, disease organisms causing diseases such as Psittacosis, which can lead to permanent lung damage, can occur. When the dust is disturbed it can be inhaled directly to the lungs.



Pigeon guano and spikes.

Pigeon droppings are also corrosive and can damage stone used in buildings as well as zinc, copper, lead, aluminium and iron. They can also be slippery and hazardous on wet surfaces.

Pigeon nests can support a host of insect species, many of which are major pests of museums and their contents. They include most of the fabric pests and many stored food pests. Urban birds also have a number of blood-feeding parasites that can also readily bite humans. These include fleas and bird mites. When birds die inside buildings they can become a significant source of food for carrion-eating insect species such as blowflies and, as the bodies dry out, carpet beetles and clothes moths. Wood enriched with nitrogen and moisture from bird droppings is more susceptible to attack from furniture beetle or 'woodworm'.



Pigeon carcass.

Feral pigeon nests are often built in gutters and down pipes causing blockages and leading to local damp problems in nearby rooms and damage to vulnerable items close by.



Roosting pigeons.

Management of Feral Pigeons

The Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 protects all wild birds in the UK so an understanding of this legislation is essential in order to comply with the requirements of the Act. Even if killing is allowed, (as it is in some circumstances), it is rarely a long term solution as replacement birds fill the vacuum and remaining birds breed more efficiently. Prevention is the only long term solution that has proved to be effective.

It is important to actively discourage visitors and staff from feeding birds with signs prominently displayed, particularly around outdoor eating areas. Do not sell bird food. Buildings need to be examined and proofed against bird entry and nesting. There are a wide range of materials now available which can deter birds from settling in a particular area, such as around or on chimney stacks. Make sure the upper storeys of buildings do not allow birds access to roof spaces or attics, particularly if these areas are rarely visited. Also pay attention to outbuildings.

Bird scaring devices rarely work against feral pigeons as they are used to human activity and noises. Imitation birds of prey also rarely work, but real birds of prey can be effective if regularly used. In some instances these can be incorporated into a public display and generate an income.

Other Bird Species

Depending on the locations of historic buildings, there are a number of other bird species that can cause problems. In coastal areas gulls can be nuisance and can even attack people during the nesting season. Starlings and house sparrows will try to nest in buildings and can cause similar problems to feral pigeons. If there is a large lake then Canadian geese can cause hygiene problems as their large droppings contaminate grassy areas and visitors' clothing.

In all circumstances advice should be sought and the legislation consulted before any action is taken against any species of bird. Most are fully protected, including their nests and eggs, and the punishments are severe.

Written by Dee Lauder, David Pinniger and Ed Allan.