



Factsheet

Feral pigeon control options

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Feral pigeons (*Columbia livia*) are the descendants of the domesticated form of the wild rock dove. These birds originally inhabited mainly coastal cliffs and rocky areas in the British Isles, the Mediterranean region and North Africa, and India. They were introduced into North, Central and South America, the West Indies, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Samoa, Fiji, the Hawaiian Islands, Australia, New Zealand and Mauritius. Feral populations are now found in these and other countries. This note describes the control options available and highlights the damage caused by pigeons.

Description

Pigeons are variable in colour from pinkish through browns to near-black, but primarily resembling the ancestral rock dove, which is blue-grey. The wings are often chequered black and white, or may have two distinctive dark bars across the closed wing. The neck often has iridescent purple and green display plumage. The cere (nose) is whitish and fleshy, the bill black, the eyes orange, the legs and feet are red or purple-red and the tail is tipped with a dark band.

Distribution, habitat and biology

Pigeons nest and roost almost exclusively in man-made structures such as buildings and bridges; they also use cliffs, caves and (infrequently) tree hollows. In Australia, breeding is year-round, but mostly in summer. Pigeons form monogamous relationships, and 8 to 12 days after mating the female lays one or two white eggs in a crude nest of sticks, grass, and twigs. The incubation period is 17 to 19 days. During nesting the male cares for and guards the female. The young leave the nest between the ages of four and six weeks. Often, more eggs are laid before these young leave the nest. An adult female can have 15 surviving young in a year. They can live for up to 15 years, although the average life span is three to four years.

Damage

Pigeon flocks are mobile, having different resting, roosting and feeding sites. They habitually congregate in open areas, especially where food supplies are available, such as parks and grain terminals, and in these areas they can foul buildings, statues, vehicles, trees, shrubs, lawns and fountains with their droppings. This can be a problem all year round. They are also generally regarded as potential health hazards to humans in urban environments, carrying such diseases as *Ornithosis* (sometimes called psittacosis or parrot fever), *Salmonellosis* (salmonella) and the fungal infection, *Cryptococcosis*, which may lead to meningitis. They also play some part in the transmission of such diseases as encephalitis and histoplasmosis. Sometimes dermatitis, caused by pigeon mites that migrate from nests and bite people, is a problem. While pigeons are not usually agricultural pests, they do occasionally interfere with crops.

Status and management

Pigeons are exempt from declaration under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*, administered by the Department of Agriculture. They are not covered under the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, administered by the Department of Conservation and Land Management. This means they may be controlled humanely without the need to seek approval from either organisation.

Control options

All control activities must comply with requirements under the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* so that animals are handled and euthanased humanely. Acceptable euthanasia techniques include the use of carbon dioxide or cervical dislocation (breaking the neck), but these techniques should only be applied by experienced and/or licensed operators. If you are unsure of how to cleanly euthanase the birds, or if you are reluctant to do so, seek veterinary assistance. **Captured pigeons should not be released back into the wild.**

Although it may not be possible to remove all the pigeons from an area, there are control options available that can reduce the population to a tolerable level. These may be divided into two categories (see table overleaf):

- permanent control (removal of the birds), and
- temporary control (exclusion and habitat alteration to reduce the impact of pigeons by preventing access to structures as nesting or roosting sites).

There is usually no single, simple solution to the problem, so using a number of techniques may be more effective (such as reducing numbers to a low level, then blocking house eaves).

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Option	Usage/advantages	Disadvantages
Permanent control	The most effective means of reducing numbers.	Most of these techniques are labour-intensive.
Shooting	Humane if properly carried out. Effective when used intensively to reduce numbers.	Must be applied intensively. May not be suitable in built-up areas or very small farms unless undertaken by a licensed pest control operator. There is a risk of birds suffering (being injured, not killed immediately) if unskilled operators are used.
Limiting the availability of food	Clean up spilt grain. Discourage feeding of birds. Can slow the rate of increase of populations.	Can lack effectiveness as pigeons have become well adapted to the many sources of food available in the urban environment.
Trapping	Various live-capture traps can be used. Advisable to trap sites in rotation to reduce trap shyness. May be effective in reducing high populations when coupled with other control options such as nest destruction.	Slow and labour-intensive.
Removal and destruction of nests and eggs	Has been used to effectively reduce pigeon populations.	Necessary to remove nests every two weeks to restrict increases in population. Accessing nests is often difficult.
Alphachloralose	The chemical is applied as a powder to grain and, when consumed, the birds soon become unconscious. Has successfully been used in many areas.	Non-target concerns, especially possible secondary poisoning of birds-of-prey. Control must be carried out by personnel authorised to use the chemical, such as a licensed pest control operator.
Temporary control – physical deterrents	Exclusion and habitat alteration are used extensively to minimise the impact of pigeons in many areas. The purpose is to deny them access to enter or use any structure as a nesting or roosting site.	
Plastic bird netting	Affixed in windows, vents or eaves to exclude pigeons and other birds from warehouses, factories or other areas.	High initial capital cost if large areas are to be covered.
Plastic strips or curtains	Hung in doorways to deter birds from entering buildings. Screening should also be used to restrict their access to water sources such as rooftop air conditioners.	High initial capital cost if large areas are to be covered.
Building alteration to remove roosting niches	Achieved by architectural design or remodelling.	High initial capital cost for building alteration.
Spikes and tightly-strung high tensile wires	Makes roosting niches permanently unusable by repelling the birds.	Spikes are useful only in inaccessible situations due to the risk of human injury. Cost may be high if large areas are to be treated.
Water cannon	Can be placed in areas where pigeons congregate and coupled with motion detectors to disperse them when they land.	High initial capital cost.
Naphthalene flakes	Effective in displacing pigeons from enclosed areas.	Care must be taken as vapours may be toxic. Ensure that it is used as directed on the label.
Polybutene	A non-hardening synthetic rubber compound applied to places where birds perch. Birds experience feeling of insecurity and discomfort because of the soft, pliable nature of this product and will not settle on treated areas.	All contamination must be removed before application; a sealer should also be applied on all porous surfaces before application. Must be replaced occasionally as it loses its effectiveness.
Temporary control – scaring devices	The key elements to effectively using scaring devices to move birds are timing, persistence, organisation and diversity. Timing is critical as birds are more likely to leave a briefly occupied site than an established roost.	May be only temporarily effective unless used in conjunction with other techniques.
Sound deterrents – alarm and distress calls, or frightening noise	Several products offer various combinations of species-specific alarm and distress calls, predator attack and hunting calls, and other frightening noises such as thunderclaps and shotgun blasts to frighten birds from an area.	Although useful for dispersing pigeons, the use of some is limited to situations away from residential or inner city areas due to high noise levels. May also be only temporarily effective.
Visual deterrents	Includes fake owls or other birds of prey, balloons, flashing lights and scarecrows. Effectiveness is increased if a number of these techniques are used in combination.	May be only temporarily effective.

Further information

Contact your nearest office of the Department of Agriculture or the South Perth office on tel. 9368 3333. Licensed pest control operators with bird expertise can also advise on the available options.