

THE FATE OF THE WORLD DEPENDS ON THE COLLARED DOVE!

Such an astonishing statement deserves some background. And it stems from a fable somewhat less complimentary to our favorite species than we are used to hearing. I need to refer to that delightful series of books by Gerald Durrell who maintains the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust on the Isle of Jersey for the conservation of endangered species. The "Bafut Beagles" was the first book of his that I read, but for our present purpose one short account in "Birds, Beasts and Relatives" is germane. His family spent 5 years on the Greek island of Corfu before WW II. On Corfu occurs Streptopelia decaocto, the collared dove. This dove is conspecific with S. roseogrisea and S. risoria, our beloved ringneck dove. Durrell attributes the story to Dr. Theodore Stephanides, a medical doctor and ingratiating biologist who befriended him when Durrell was a child. They were listening to the cicadas and the "gentle, questioning coos of the collared doves".

"In Greek," Theodore said munching his sandwich methodically, "the name for collared dove is dekaoctur — 'eighteener', you know. The story goes that when Christ was . . . um . . . carrying the cross to Calvary, a Roman soldier, seeing that He was exhausted, took pity on Him. By the side of the road there was an old woman selling . . . um . . . you know . . . milk, and so the Roman soldier went to her and asked her how much a cupful would cost. She replied that it would cost eighteen coins. But the soldier had only seventeen. He . . . er . . . you know . . . pleaded with the woman to let him have a cupful of milk for Christ for seventeen coins, but the woman avariciously held out for eighteen. So, when Christ was crucified, the old woman was turned into a turtle dove and condemned to go about for the rest of her days repeating dekaocto, dekaocto -- 'eighteen, eighteen'. If ever she agrees to say deka-ep̄ta, seventeen, she will regain her human form. If, out of obstinacy, she says deka-enn̄aea, nineteen, the world will come to an end."

ADAN mar-Apr '86 : 7

. . . W. J. Miller