

Watch for Predators on Doves

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Any dove breeder who has had doves very long, has had tragedies. Newcomers should be warned ahead of time about how to minimize dangers, and encouraged not to give up when finally confronted with blood and torn bodies.

Mixing species is chancey. Poultry such as chickens (and probably pheasants, guinea fowl and turkeys) would gobble up eggs and young squabs, if given half a chance. Domestic pigeons tear up nesting sites of smaller doves by domination and vigor. Pigeons can scalp young squabs and even adults of small dove species, if they don't move quickly enough, or are cornered. Other breeders have had more experience than I with combinations of other species.

Bird predators such as hawks and owls can be a problem. Goodwin has mentioned the tawny owl in England as a serious predator for free-living doves. But in the United States (N.A.) we seldom have such populations of the most commonly kept species (Ringnecks). The larger owls, however, can strike through chicken wire and injure doves and pigeons, but they probably don't bother city pens. A shrike can send a pen of doves into pandemonium, resulting in broken eggs and dumped young.

Snakes have taken young Ringnecks and eggs, but like owls and hawks are not considered a common nor important danger to doves.

Mammalian predators are the serious ones. Opossums will take pigeons and doves, but usually can be reasonably thwarted with close attention to tightening up possible entrances and weak wire. Racoons are more tenacious and deadly where they occur. The stimulus for this article was a recent tragedy, presumably from a 'coon, among my outside birds at home. I have cages of welded wire with $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 1" mesh to thwart cats. They hang from a $2\frac{1}{2}$ foot overhang of the house and are 18 inches off the ground. This area is fenced and dogs eliminated. During the winter I noted occasionally a bloody toe from one of the four Ringnecks and two pigeons all of which overwintered successfully in these pens. Three times a cage was nearly torn from this mount. With Spring nearly here, I put out more birds and two important squabs I raised indoors. For 10 days the squabs did fine. Then catastrophe! Feathers and blood all over the pen (3' x 3' x 4') and no sign of body remains! How did the predator get the whole body out? Wings, head and legs, yes possibly. But two whole bodies in one night? The very next night a pied, silky Ringneck female sitting on eggs was killed in a similar pen, head, legs,

wings, and skin disappeared, but the body stayed this time. Dr. Hollander, who is having his own predator problems in his new Mutant Meadows says, "Probably a racoon." Needless to say, I moved the outside birds indoors, until I can get a "coon hound."

Rats are also persistent and clever. They will climb and find any possible hole over 1" in diameter in a pen. Three outside growing pens, three and a half feet off the ground on stilts, holding about 40 Ringnecks each were invaded by rats night after night, while I kept patching holes day after day. Live traps failed. Forty-two doves disappeared before I found and patched all the holes. I say disappeared, but really there was an occasional leg band and foot, or wing or skeleton under a cage now and then. Over 30 years ago in Oklahoma, I had to bury chicken wire mesh to 18" in the ground all around my two large dove flight pens to keep out rats. One pen had 2" wire in one end, and I had no money to get 1" mesh. I borrowed a rifle and laid in wait in the small shed at one end of the flight pen. Just before dusk I shot a big rat coming in. But for a while I thought my ears were also a casualty.

Fourteen years ago in Davis, California, I had a pair of dwarf Ringnecks I had bred for four years (under 4 ounces and healthy). They were in a 3' x 3' x 5' chicken wire pen in a garage, protected from cats on top and back. An 8 year old boy "sicked" his Boxer on them. The dog demolished the cage and birds before my wife could get outside. Total loss! I never regained a balanced pair like that again.

The worst single constant predator on tame doves has to be the cat! One was observed to catch a free wild adult mourning dove in the middle of my garden. Many cats known to tolerate pigeons, succumb to doves, i.e., Ringnecks. Cats are clever, persistent, patient and have "night vision" which doves probably lack. My first experience with cats preying on doves was in the 1930's in Oklahoma with the two flight pens already mentioned. Two or three times a year a cat would hit my "flock." The main pen was 14' long by 7' x 7' with 1" mesh chicken wire on the south side of a chicken house. Typically the cat would appear at dawn and at dusk and sit on top of the house, evidently considering all that dove meat and how to get some. Within a few days they would have solved the problem: scare the doves when they could not see well (crepuscular times — dawn and dusk) and the doves fly to the end of the pen and hang on flapping till the cat rushes over, reaches

through and off with the head, wing, leg, or some combination thereof!

Persistent cats without collars, I shot with a borrowed .22 gun. One I killed with an iron bar, in the act. I usually managed to scare collared cats sufficiently to scare them off, and such cats were inside houses at dusk and night anyway. A very few I persuaded the owners to bell, but this was more helpful to wild birds than my doves. One collared neighborhood cat that belonged to the town banker was really killed by a car in our alley. I suspect they never believed my story.

Cats are frustrated by $\frac{1}{2}$ " mesh wire — no larger size will stop them. For some time I have used half by one-inch welded wire mesh. It holds its own shape and is proof against cats, against raccoons, and other predators. 