

The Key West Quail Dove: An American Beauty

This beautiful dove barely makes it as an American native species.

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By Tony Brancato

Few Americans — bird enthusiasts among them — are aware that some of the most beautiful and exotic species of doves are native to our very own United States of America. The Key West quail dove (*Geotrygon chrysia*) is one of these beauties. It belongs to a nonscientific classification of "quail doves." Quail doves are not, nor are they related to, quail. The word quail simply describes the dove's shape. Quail doves are shaped like a quail, having rounded wings and tail and being plumper than other doves.

This beautiful dove barely makes it as an American native species. It migrates from the islands of Cuba, Bahamas, Haiti, Dominican Republic and the Florida Keys (its namesake). In the last decade, it has not been seen on the U.S. mainland.

DescriptionThis dove appears to be a little larger than a common ringnecked or Barbary dove, but it is not. The male of this species has upperparts that are burnt sienna with deep rich iridescent bronzish-green and amethyst coloration. The nape, crown and the upper back of the neck are reddish-purple. The mantle, back, rump and wing coverts are also this reddish-purple or purplish-red color. The inner secondaries and primary tips are burnt umber. The throat is pale, nearly white in color. A unique and conspicuous broad, white stripe extends from the lower mandible under and beyond the eye. The burnt umber area separates the lower edge of this white facial stripe from the pale, nearly white throat. The sides of the neck and breast are a lavender pink or pinkish-gray with shadings to near white on the belly. The underparts of the tail are grayish-buff with tips that are nearly white. The bill is raw umber and reddish-brown at the base. The eyes are orange, yellow or red. The orbital skin is a pale red. In mature birds, the feet and legs are light red. Young birds have pink feet and legs.

The female of this species is slightly duller than her male counterpart, with more of an olive-brown cast. However, both sexes look much alike to the untrained eye. Immature birds have little, if any, iridescence. They are also more brown than the adults.

Feeding And Habitat In The WildThe Key West quail dove is migratory. In the wild, it feeds on the ground, usually beneath the cover of bushes or trees. It eats a variety of seeds, fallen berries, fruit and insects. The Key West quail dove is an endangered species. It inhabits countries (other than the islands off of the U.S. mainland) that are extremely poor. Small, wild populations currently exist in isolated areas of Puerto Rico. This species has nearly disappeared from most of its range, because of destruction of forested areas and heavy poaching. It is extinct in Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. The Key West quail dove is now only seen in private collections or zoos. It has not been reported in the Florida Keys in a number of years. Fortunately, specimens exist in many private collections and in large zoos throughout the country. No effort has been made to reintroduce this species back into its home range. (Conditions are such that it would be futile at this point in time.) This species last hope is with the dedicated avian enthusiasts that are able to raise it.

In CaptivityThe Key West quail dove is a wonderful addition to any aviary. They are docile, gentle and trusting. Few wild doves are so easy to maintain. Once they adjust to the keeper, they are rarely skittish or flighty.

Unfortunately, the Key West, as with many wild doves, are sporadic breeders. Captive Key West quail doves in the U.S. are inbred, which makes them poor breeders. Fertility is a main concern. This is a species that is not for the novice dove enthusiast. They are extremely difficult to find and expensive. Because the Key West quail dove is a native species, it is illegal to keep them without a federal permit. I have seen Key West quail doves for sale at bird marts. The seller had no idea that it was illegal to sell or purchase native species without proper permits. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Heavy fines can result from purchasing or selling any native species.

FeedingNutrition is extremely important for all captive doves. It would be impossible to replicate the Key West quail dove's diet in the wild, but we can come close. This dove's main food source is seeds. I provide a variety of seeds: Finch mix, wild bird, niger, safflower, sunflower and millet seed. I also feed soft foods, such as steamed rice, grated carrots, broccoli and apples. They also enjoy raw, shelled peanuts, raw, shelled sunflower seeds and mealworms. However, the best food in the world is not going to be conducive to good health if the feeding dishes are dirty or there is a lack of fresh, clean water. Good sanitation is imperative.

HealthThis species is hardy and seldom becomes ill. However, a health concern for all doves and pigeons is canker (a

cheese like substance). Preventive measures are best to control canker. Keep the water fresh and clean. If you notice a dove with canker, isolate it. Put it under a 25-watt light bulb and get it to an avian veterinarian. Many feed stores have canker medications for pigeons. These will work with doves. Follow directions and monitor the other birds. Treat the entire aviary only if your veterinarian recommends you do so. (Medication can be placed in the drinking water.) Many pigeon fanciers routinely treat for canker whether it is evident in their flocks or not. Personally, I do not recommend blanket treatments, because disease can become immune to medication.

CourtshipThe Key West quail dove, unlike most of its relatives, is a quiet dove. It coos so softly that it is barely heard. The cooing sounds like that of a domestic pigeon, but much softer. When courting the hen, the male struts after her raising his closed wings. Bonded pairs are loyal to each other and are excellent parents. The young are nearly black in color when they leave the nest. They fledge at less than 10 days old. It is imperative that chicks are placed back into the nest at night. Otherwise, they will get chilled and die. Caution must be exercised when handling any young, wild doves. Grasping a young dove will cause it to become so frightened that it will die of shock. I use a napkin or handkerchief and cover the youngster. Then I put it back into the nest. If you do not know which nest the youngster came from, put it on a branch or perch. The parents will locate it and keep it warm. Many young doves are lost because they get chilled, attacked by other adult birds or the parents cannot locate them to feed them.

HousingA clean, airy, draft-free aviary is equally important. All doves enjoy sunshine and thrive in a bright, sunny environment. If the aviary is located in a shady area, consider using artificial lighting. Lighting that mimics the natural, broad-spectrum of sunlight is a good substitute. Put the lights on a timer and have them on for at least eight hours per day. Ten or 12 hours is even better in dark aviaries. Never leave lights on for 24 hours, because this causes an imbalance in the birds' natural breeding cycle. Overcrowding, stress, poor nutrition, lack of sanitation, and poor ventilation can cause health problems. Prevention is the key to a happy, healthy aviary environment.

The Key West quail dove is sensitive to cold weather. They can be acclimated to tolerate cold weather in proper housing. In southeastern and southwestern states, an aviary that is in a sunny location, free of drafts and dry will do well. Good ventilation is important in all seasons. During stormy weather, a dry aviary is essential. External heat is not needed if the doves have been acclimated to the colder temperatures gradually. In Eastern, Midwestern and Northern Plains states, this species would not be able to tolerate temperatures below freezing without a heated environment. They are, after all, a tropical and subtropical species.

Our new location in the Inland Empire of Southern California can be frosty some winter nights. We are at an elevation of nearly 3,000 feet. Our aviaries are draft-free, dry, well ventilated and unheated. Temperatures below 30 degrees Fahrenheit seldom occur more than a few days in a row. Our doves are acclimated and show no ill effects.

If you have a question for Tony Brancato, send him an e-mail care of BIRD BREEDER at birdbreeder@fancypubs.com. We regret that columnists are not able to respond to letters individually.

Tony Brancato has bred doves and pigeons for 35 years. He currently breeds 25 species of seed-eating foreign doves. Brancato lives on the Inland Empire of California.