

## European Turtle Dove

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3-3-2004

By Tony Brancato

The most common native dove on the European continent is the European turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*). The name may be a misnomer because this beautiful dove migrates into Asia and northern Africa. However, this species is most common in western Europe, the Canary Islands and eastern Europe. In Africa, it is widely distributed across the northern portion of the continent and also into the Middle East.

The European turtle dove is incredibly beautiful — undoubtedly the prettiest of all the turtle dove species. They are handsome, alert, hardy birds. Few dove species are able to tolerate the cold as well as the European turtle dove. This makes them an ideal species for bird enthusiasts that cannot provide heat for their aviaries. Provided with an aviary that is dry, draft free and in full sunshine, they will do very well.

In many respects, this species is ideal. The downside is that they are terrified of humans. It takes a lot of time and patience on the part of the keeper to settle these doves. Hand-raised young birds are usually docile until they mature, when most revert back to their original wildness. It is a challenge to raise these beautiful creatures — perhaps a challenge best left to an experienced dove breeder.

This species is commonly found in many aviaries throughout the country. The European turtle dove belongs to a very large nonscientific category of turtle doves. They are closely related to the common domestic ringneck or Barbary dove (*Streptopelia risoria*), the Senegal or Palm dove (*S. senegalensis*) and the Asian dwarf turtle dove (*S. tranquebarica*). The name turtle dove refers to a band of color on the top of the neck giving the dove an appearance of being able to draw its head into the neck, like a turtle. Some turtle doves have beaded feathers and do not have the semi collar of color as the domestic ringneck dove.

**Description**This species is nearly the same size as a domestic ringnecked dove. However, it has proportionately longer, pointed wings. The forehead is grayish-blue. The throat has a pinkish-white coloration, while the sides of the face are pale grayish-pink. The lower throat and breast are a pale, delicate pastel pink, the flanks are gray. This dove has a beautiful black patch with silver-tipped feathers on both sides of the neck. The mantle is light brown, with tinged gray. Inner coverts of the wing and scapulars are burnt orange-buff spotted with black. This effect is due to each individual feather being black and edged with burnt orange fringes. The outer wing coverts and underwings are grayish-blue. Wing primaries and outer secondaries are Payne's gray. The lower back and rump area are a dull gray with a blue tinge. The upper tail coverts, the main part of the tail feathers, are also this dull gray coloration. The outer tail is also Payne's gray with a wide, white terminal bar. The underside of the tail is black and white. The eyes are deep yellow gold or even pale-orange in some individuals. The skin surrounding the eye (orbital skin) is dark purplish red. The bill is black with a slightly lighter tip. Legs and feet are also purplish-red in color.

The female of the species is nearly as bright as the male. Sexing is difficult because both sexes are nearly alike. The vent bone beneath the tail in mature females is a tiny bit separated. In males, the vent bones touch or nearly touch. Juvenile birds are duller and appear more brown. Their markings are less pronounced, with the neck markings totally absent in young birds. Juvenile males are slightly more reddish than juvenile females.

**In The Wild**This species inhabits a wide variety of environments, including wooded brush and scrub. In Europe, this species is found in open woodlands and around farming areas. In Great Britain, European turtle doves are often seen in agricultural areas. European turtle doves are not uncommon at bird feeding stations in English gardens. These doves are also found in small cities and in the suburbs of large cities.

In Central Asia this species has adapted quite well to arid regions. They are found among orchards of dates, almonds and apricots. As long as these doves can find water, they seem to thrive in a variety of environments.

**Feeding and Care**The European turtle dove feeds mainly on the ground. It eats many varieties of weed seeds or cultivated grain seeds, when available. It also, to some extent, eats buds and small leaves. It is not unusual for these doves to also eat small invertebrates, garden slugs and snails. In forests, they have been observed eating tree caterpillars and other tree pests.

This dove is a swift and powerful flyer. In many parts of its range it is classified as a game bird. Hunting of European turtle doves, either legally or illegally, has caused it to be extremely wary of humans. They are incredibly shy of people and difficult to approach in the wild. Unfortunately, in captivity they are extremely wild and unpredictable, banging into walls or wire to avoid being caught.

In captivity, I recommend one pair per aviary. This species is wild and requires an aviary at least 4 by 8 by 6 feet high. They do well kept with other doves and are not hostile to smaller dove species. However, males of the same species will fight. I have not had one male European turtle dove kill another male European turtle dove, but I did have one male pick the feathers off the head of another male. The sexes are difficult to determine. Sometimes you may think you have a pair, but in reality they are both males. If a bird is pecked a lot and missing head feathers, chances are it also is a male.

Keeping European turtles with several species that are docile by nature. Non-skittish doves have a calming effect on the European turtle doves. I have also found that if I keep them in aviaries that are 10 feet or higher, they are less apt to panic. They can fly to one of the higher perches and feel safe. I keep one pair of European turtle doves in each of our aviaries. They are with other dove species, both smaller and larger. I've never had any problems. They are fairly good breeders for a foreign dove. But I would not recommend keeping Senegal doves or domestic ringnecked doves with European turtle doves, because there is a slight chance that the two species might interbreed. Any offspring would be sterile.

All of my dove species are seedeaters, so their main diet is seeds. My basic mixture is enriched finch seed, wild bird seed (no cracked corn), safflower seed, shelled raw sunflower and health grit. My doves also relish some soft foods as well. Every other day, as a treat, they are fed steamed rice with raw grated carrots, spray millet, raw peanuts and crushed, hard-boiled eggs. Mealworms are provided occasionally. Mealworms are high in protein. If you feed a lot of mealworms to your doves, it can cause serious liver problems. Cracked corn should never be fed to doves and pigeons. The sharp edges can cause tears in the throat and crop and be a source of canker. Cracked corn can absorb moisture and be a source of fungal disease. I know of fanciers that feed cracked corn to their doves and pigeons, seemingly without problems. However, sooner or later problems may occur. Personally, I would not take that chance.

**Purchasing Stock** This species is not so uncommon that it is not available. European turtle doves are usually reasonably priced. In most parts of the country they sell for about \$100 per pair. Bird marts and bird breeders usually have extra birds available. It is important to purchase from a reputable breeder if possible. Purchasing doves from bird fairs or marts, pet shops and bird shows is risky. The doves have been exposed to disease and, usually, no one is certain where they came from or how old they are. There will be no guarantee that the doves are a pair or capable of breeding. Be aware that there is no guarantee the doves you purchase will breed, regardless of where you purchase them. Providing the right diet and environment will be conducive for doves to breed. Sexing is difficult and a real problem to the inexperienced dove keeper. I would not recommend this species to the novice dove keeper. They are much too wild to be put in a small aviary. They do best in a large, planted aviary.

In purchasing doves, look for birds that are alert and bright-eyed, with no wetness around the eyes, bill or vent. Droppings should be firm and not watery, green or yellow.

The European turtle dove is worth the extra attention that is required to keep them successfully. They are charming, wonderful medium-sized doves. I have found them to be excellent parents and prolific at times. The species is certainly not for everyone: Only those that can truly appreciate a wild and splendid creature for what it is — not tainted by the hands of man.

If you have a question for Tony Brancato, send him an e-mail care of BIRD BREEDER at [birdbreeder@fancypubs.com](mailto: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 in the Inland Empire of California.