

Eurasian Collared-Doves in Arizona

The following article appeared in the September 2004 issue of the Vermilion Flycatcher, monthly publication of the Tucson Audubon Society, and is reprinted with permission. It focuses on establishing the rapidity with which Eurasian Collared-Doves have advanced across the state of Arizona and when they reached each county. Every indication is that since this article was written the doves are being seen in more places and in larger numbers. Arizona Birds Online plans to do a follow-up article that shows the increased number of localities where this new species is being observed and the size of the flocks that are being reported. In order to do this we need your help in reporting new locations on the special form for this purpose located on the Arizona Field Ornithologists website.

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Perhaps the most dramatic colonization of a bird species in recent Arizona history has been the rapid dispersal of the Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*). The first documented record of its appearance in the state was March 6, 2000 in Eager, located in Apache County near the New Mexican border. A pair was observed attempting to nest in a piñon pine in a private yard. They were likely in this and other areas before March 2000, but had either gone unnoticed or unreported. By the end of that year, the doves had been reported in six counties. Less than a year later they November 2002 the tally was 14 of the

state's 15 counties. Only La Paz County has no reports, which is more likely due to little birding there than to a boycott by the invading doves.



Eurasian Collared Dove, Photo by Pierre Deviche

This extraordinary dispersal is also revealed in the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Counts. Four were reported in two Arizona circles during the 2001-02 count; 61 in four circles in 2002-03; and 158 in five circles in 2003-04.

Not only have the doves expanded into more locations, flock sizes are growing, with increasing reports of more than 20.

Although documented reports of breeding in the state are scarce, the doves have become year-round residents in many areas and are surely breeding there. Most reports are from rural areas or small towns in agricultural districts. Sightings in urban settings require careful scrutiny, because Eurasian Collared-Doves can easily be confused with ringed turtle-doves, the African Collared-Dove (*S. roseogrisea*) and a fairly common escapee

in big cities and suburbs. These two similar species are also known to hybridize, increasing the challenge of identification. Fortunately, the most recent field guides have descriptions of the differences between them.

The Eurasian Collared-Dove's spread across Arizona follows its 20-year colonization of the United States. It was first reported in southern Florida in the early 1980s; the exact year of its arrival isn't certain. Most likely it came from the Bahamas or some other nearby Caribbean island. It was introduced to the Bahamas from Europe in the early 1970s by a local breeder. After some difficulties with his breeding operation, he released about 50 doves at the end of 1974. They spread rapidly throughout the West Indies and into southern Florida, and by 1999 the doves had migrated as far west and north as North Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, Washington, and Oregon.

First county reports

Apache, March 2000
Navajo, July 2000
Graham, July 2000
Cochise, September, 2000
Pima, September 2000
Maricopa, October 2000
Pinal, March 2001
Coconino, June 2001
Yavapai, August 2001
Yuma, March, 2002
Gila, April 2002
Greenlee, April 2002
Santa Cruz, July 2002
Mojave, November 2002

This species appears to follow a pattern described by ornithologists as “jump” dispersal, where there is initially long-distance dispersal of individuals, and later, the larger populations gradually fill in the gaps. The doves followed the same scenario, when, beginning in the 1930s, they dispersed across Europe from the Balkans and Turkey, which they had settled several centuries before. In the United Kingdom, for example, five pairs were known in 1950, but as the larger population filled in, this number quickly grew to 100,000 pairs in the next 27 years. For thousands of years before they began moving westward (and to some extent eastward into China and other parts of Asia), their home range was India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

Eurasian Collared-Doves appear to be very adaptable; they moved from relatively hot and dry areas in southwest Asia to the cooler, damper climate of

northern Europe. Key to their settling down in new areas is a year-round food supply, usually stored or waste grain, and ample roosting areas. In all regions, they steer away from heavily forested areas. It's not clear what particular characteristic or habit has made these doves such robust colonizers in the past several hundred years. The eminent ornithologist and evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr (1965) suggested that possibly a behavioral adaptation that gave them greater incentive to populate new areas may even have evolved a genetic basis.

Their spread across North America has been so rapid that few studies have been made and much remains unknown about their adjustment to this new territory. How do they survive harsh winters and the cooler weather of higher elevations (Eager is 7,100 feet)? What will be their effect on native birds, particularly other doves? Will they become transmitters of disease or agricultural pests? Descended from so few individuals released in the Bahamas, what longer-term effects could their narrow gene pool have? Does their dispersal here differ from that in Europe?

It seems likely that they are here to stay, and there's not much we can do about it, even if we wanted to. We should heed Kenn Kaufman's (1999) suggestion several years ago, even before they arrived in Arizona, "The doves are here, and they're spreading. In a way we can't really do anything. But we can—if I may be forgiven such heresy—try to enjoy them." And part of enjoying them is learning about them—their habits, breeding and distribution patterns, and relationships to other birds.

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