

(John Scavetto)



Columbidae the PIGEONS and DOVES

Ornithologist Oliver Austin once provided this succinct description of pigeons and doves: “compact, full-breasted birds with short necks and small heads... bill is relatively small and slender, constricted in the middle, and with a fleshy cere at the base.” Just one other family character needs mention: these birds are known for bobbing their heads as they walk. There are 338 species of doves and pigeons spread worldwide in temperate and tropical zones. Most are grain, seed, and fruit eaters. Young doves and pigeons are called squabs. Both squabs and adult birds are hunted and consumed by people around the globe. The term pigeon is usually given to the larger birds in the family, while dove is applied to the smaller birds. The flightless, almost 4-foot-tall Dodo was classified in this same taxonomic order. It was hunted to extinction in the mid-1600s.

About 15 kinds of doves and pigeons have been found in the United States, and, surprisingly, almost half of these have been documented here in the Central Carolinas. Seven species, three species of pigeons and four species of doves, have been recorded. One of these birds is now extinct. Two are non-native species that have become established as breeders here. Three of these birds are rare vagrants in this part of the Carolinas, and the remaining bird is one of the most abundant birds in the region.

Currently, many species of pigeons and doves are expanding their breeding ranges across our continent. A special study of these range expansions is being conducted by scientists at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Data from citizen scientists is crucial for this type of study and birders can help. Visit www.birdsource.org for current information.