



Artwork by Dominic Cant

White-crowned Pigeon

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Patagioenas leucocephala

DESCRIPTION

The adult is dark grey, with green iridescent lines along sides of neck and white bars on the nape, a brilliant white forehead and crown to the head, a white iris, and a pale-tipped red bill. Females are similar to the male but the crown of the females are a duller grey to greyish-white colour. Juveniles are a less dark shade of grey, lack the nape pattern and white iris, and show only a few pale feathers on the crown.

DIET

The diet consists almost entirely of fruits from the evergreen or semi-deciduous hardwood forests in which it feeds; especially the fruits of Poisonwood (*Metopium toxiferum*). Studies have shown that more than 50 different plant fruits are eaten by the White-crowned Pigeon including Pigeon Plum (*Coccoloba diversifolia*), Gum Elemi (*Bursera simaruba*), Mastic (*Sideroxylon foetidissimum*), small figs and bolly fruits. Rarely, they will eat wasps and flies, small land snails, seeds and flowers.

REPRODUCTION

The White-crowned Pigeon is generally a colonial nester, building a nest of twigs in mangroves and dry scrub. In the Bahamas it often nests on offshore islands and conducts daily migrations between nesting and feeding grounds. Breeding season ranges from March to August and in the Bahamas often as late as September.

The White-crowned pigeon forms a strong pair bond with its mate and lays two shiny white eggs. Both the males and the females take turns on the nest, the males incubate during the day and females at night. Incubation lasts for about 13 -14 days. When chicks first emerge they are pink and covered in a fine down, turning a dark brown black by 4 days old.

Both the mother and the father brood and feed their young, again males tending to the young in the day and females at night. Both the males and the females produce and feed their chicks "crop milk", a milk-like substance secreted in an area of the lower neck called the crop. This milk contains similar proteins, fats and sugars as mammal milk but is secreted from special glands in the crop.

HABITAT

White Crown Pigeons primarily inhabit coastal woodlands and mangroves when breeding, but also well inland into coppice and pine forests as they follow available food resources in the non-breeding areas.

DISTRIBUTION

This is a common year round resident in the Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica and Antigua. Locally common on Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, San Andres and Providencia. It is uncommon in the Cayman Islands, Anguilla and St. Barthelemy, and is rare on St. Martin and Guadeloupe. It is a rare wanderer in the Lesser Antilles south to the Grenadines. The White-crowned Pigeon also occurs in the Florida Keys and islands near Mexico and Belize.

STATUS

The White-crowned Pigeon is classified on the IUCN as a Near Threatened Species. Formerly abundant throughout its range, this species has declined dramatically and is now threatened due to impacts of habitat loss, severe over-hunting, harvesting of nestlings for food and introduced predators.

In the Bahamas the White-crowned Pigeon is hunted. The open season for the White-crowned Pigeon is September 29th and closes on March 1st. A bag limit of 50 birds may be shot in a single day as stated in the Wild Birds Protection Act.

THREATS

The main threat to this species is illegal hunting. Another main threat to this species is loss of habitat. Agriculture and deforestation have reduced the species' feeding grounds, typically inland hardwood forests.

INTERESTING FACTS

The bird is very skittish, and is known to simply abandon its nest when it is encroached upon.

The song is Mourning Dove-like *woo pop woooo* calls.

White-crowned pigeon chicks have 2 small spines projecting from the base of the nasal cavity which are thought to aid in food transfer from the parents.