



# Give me all your turtle-dovin'

The beautiful, soft-voiced turtle dove may be synonymous with Christmas, but as a symbol of courtship and love this endearing bird resonates all year round and must be saved, urges Mark Cocker





THE cultural stories attached to the turtle dove are so complicated, so varied, that you could well imagine them framing one of those riddles you find inside a Christmas cracker. 'Which bird, named after a marine reptile, has a song considered the very essence of summer, but has somehow become a symbol for our Yuletide celebrations?'

We'll come to those stories shortly, but one turtle dove fact on which most agree is its status as the most beautiful of our five native pigeons. The bird's breast is a soft vinous pink and the belly linen white, but the most arresting features are the finely barred black-and-white neck patch, the bright rufous-orange mantle and wings liberally spotted with black. Vivid colours are only part of the aesthetic appeal, because turtle doves are also exquisitely shaped—elfin-sized with a sweetly rounded head and long attenuated wings and tail that come to a perfect point at the rear.

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Equally unequivocal is the bird's status as our most calamitously declined species. As recently as the 1970s there were an estimated 125,000 pairs in Britain. Then came a rapid reduction in range and numbers, until the species diminished to only a patchy presence in southern and eastern England, where the final few thousands are still slowly dwindling. The key factors in this collapse are thought to be habitat loss and agricultural intensification—particularly the disappearance of seed-bearing ‘weeds’ in arable areas—but also the wearisome tradition of hunting turtle doves throughout the Mediterranean.

Those practices may be centuries old, yet they now bear down on the bird at a time of crisis. Mercifully in 2021, there was an EU-wide moratorium on the legal shooting of turtle doves, which almost immediately demonstrated the birds' powers of recuperation—they increased by 400,000 pairs—together with the baleful consequences of the shooting in the first place. Despite the proven value of staying the hunter's hand, the EU Commission backtracked this year and sanctioned the resumption of legal hunting, albeit with a quota.

Nightingale and spotted flycatcher may closely match the turtle dove's overall →

**Dove at first sight: the marriage of vibrant colours and perfect proportions ensure the turtle dove leaves a lasting impression**







99% losses in Britain, but not its wider story as a red-listed species threatened with extinction from north-west China to Iberia. This may make it a suitable mascot for our age of environmental anxiety, although that couldn't be further from the original notions we once assembled around this creature for thousands of years.

Turtle doves are unique in being the only family member to perform a long-distance migration out of Africa. Their sudden and, at one time, inexplicable reappearance was a dramatic indicator to people of seasonal change. 'Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times, and the turtle and the crane and the swallow,' announces the narrator in the Book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. However, the dove's spring arrival also signified something equally elemental in our affairs: that here was a renewed moment for courtship and for love.

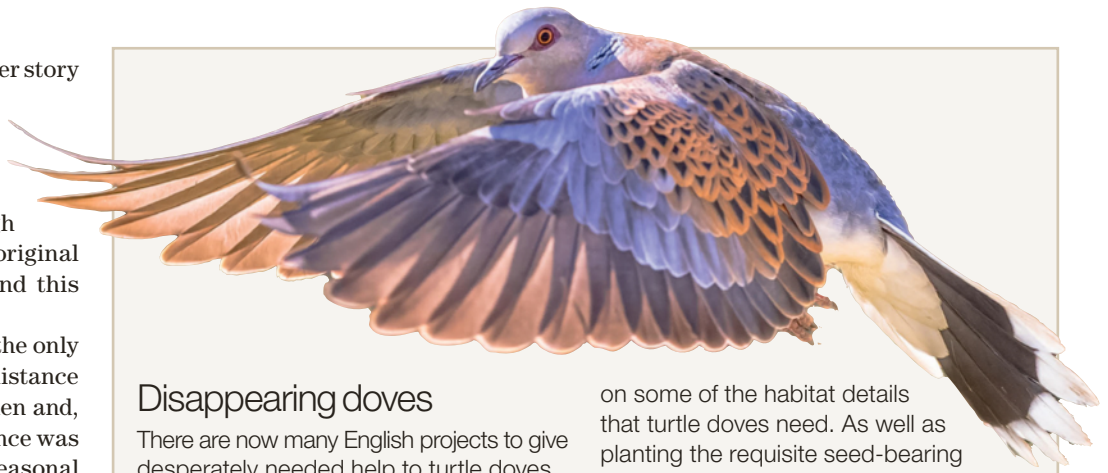
## ‘In *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer wrote of “the wedded turtle with her heart true” ’

Turtle doves were almost tailor-made for these associations because they seem especially bonded as pairs, males and females sharing equally the tasks of incubation and feeding of their young. I can well remember the birds in my childhood—you almost always saw them in pairs or you would hear a male singing to his mate—and it is with the song that we touch on something at the heart of the bird's special status.

With most celebrated birdsongs—that of nightingale or song thrush, for instance—the sounds arrest our attention. We stop to listen and they captivate us. Yet, with turtle doves, there is little of that conscious process, because it is a soft, almost background purring noise. Singing turtle doves don't announce their presence, they insinuate themselves into our unconscious minds, laying down a mood within us like a layer of gentle colour. I want to say beige, but that suggests something bland, when it is both soothing and temperate, yet enormously vital. I liken it to the colour of ripening wheat made audible. Those who know the sound name it as the very essence of summer.

The thrill of it plainly moved our ancestors and they incorporated this gentle music into

**Turtle devotion: our tenderness towards *Streptopelia turtur* is reflected in Victorian artist Sophie Anderson's *The Turtle Dove***



### Disappearing doves

There are now many English projects to give desperately needed help to turtle doves. The best of these focus on creating the right habitats for the birds, which require us to rethink one of the most badly named and misunderstood land forms—'scrub'. Turtle doves love 'edge' places where tall shrubs mingle with more open ground. The whole supplies both the nesting places the birds prefer and the weedy plants, such as fumitory and bird's-foot trefoil, that form their seed diet.

One of the most important of these initiatives is in the North York Moors National Park and called the North Yorkshire Turtle Dove Project ([www.northdove.co.uk](http://www.northdove.co.uk)). It occurs across a 100,000-hectare (247,105-acre) swathe of country between Scarborough and Thirsk and centres on the last population of the species at the very northern edge of its range. Against the odds, the area has somehow managed to hold onto 50–100 turtle doves. Run by volunteers and dependent on small-scale grants, the project focuses

on some of the habitat details that turtle doves need. As well as planting the requisite seed-bearing plants, the group's members have dug about 10 ponds. Turtle doves feed their young a liquified seed mix known as 'crop-milk' and for this they need ready access to water. This habitat creation has benefited the turtle doves, but also a spectrum of other beleaguered animals, including woodcock, crossbills, frogs, toads and dragonflies.

Ecologist Richard Baines, spokesman and lead volunteer for the group, says that: 'We know from historical records that this was always a great place for this species. Our efforts have kept an outlying colony stable in the past decades, but there are very few other successfully breeding turtle doves within 100 miles of us. If we're going to keep this fabulous creature in these islands, then we need more work like ours, but we need it everywhere, and especially in southern Europe. The turtle dove is a symbol of good partnership and it's telling us all that we need to play our part.'

the turtle dove's status as a symbol of romantic love and marital fidelity. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer wrote of 'the wedded turtle with her heart true'. As in so much of life, Shakespeare perhaps put it best when he wrote in *Troilus and Cressida*:

As true as steel; as plantage to the moon

As sun to day, as turtle to her mate

Even in the US, where no turtle dove has ever graced the summer fields, the associations live on. A very striking example is in Buddy Holly's hit *That'll Be The Day*, where he turned the bird into a verb ('give me all your lovin' and your turtle-dovin'). It is, of course, the species' own song that gave rise to its rather strange name. There are no links whatsoever with a hard-shelled reptile; 'turtle' is an anglicised version of the French word for the species—*tourterelle*, which is itself a transliterated echo of the sound.

Now, we can finally turn to the third part of our Christmas cracker riddle. How on earth did this quintessence of summer find itself entangled in our solstice celebrations? The answer is the beloved carol, which may well

have originated in northern England in the 18th century, but also seems to have strong French connections and which we all know as *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Among the bizarre miscellany of items presented by 'my true love' to his beloved, there is one that stands out as deeply appropriate. On Boxing Day, he gives her a pair of turtle doves.

From this single reference, those birds have spread their symbolic wings until they too have become a synonym for the season. On the morning of the 25th, I suggest you scan your chimneypiece of cards or the wrapping-paper designs beneath the tree to see if you can spot a turtle dove nestled among all the other customary iconography. Yet, if Christmas is a moment for family affection, then perhaps we should agree: what better motif could you wish for than this beautiful, soft-voiced, endearing dove?

However, if Christmas is also the time for our wishes to come true, then mine would be to restore the real dove to its rightful place in our countryside and for this to unfold Europe-wide. 🐦