

THE VIOSCA PIGEON

By CHESTER C. LAMB

THE VIOSCA BAND-TAILED PIGEON (*Columba fasciata vioscae*) is a race peculiar to the southern tip of Lower California, Mexico. Band-tailed Pigeons were first discovered there by John Xantus in 1859 or 1860, but it was not until William Brewster began making a systematic study of the birds of that region that it was found that the pigeons there are different from those of the Pacific coast area of the United States. Brewster described the bird (*Auk*, V, 1888, p. 86) with type taken by M. Abbott Frazar, May 30, 1887, at La Laguna, in the Victoria Mountains. The bird was named in honor of Mr. Viosca, then United States Consul at La Paz.

In general appearance the Viosca Pigeon is very much like its near relative, *C. fasciata fasciata*, which is so widely distributed on the Pacific coast, though not known to occur south of latitude 30°. The chief distinguishing mark between the two races is that the Viosca lacks the dark tail band, or at best this band is only faintly indicated; furthermore, the general color tone is slightly paler in the Cape form.

The Viosca Pigeon is, with one exception, known to occur only in the Victoria Mountains, sometimes known as the Sierra de la Laguna, or in the adjacent foothills. The exception is Brewster's (*Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool.*, XLI, 1902, p. 77) statement that Mr. Frazar saw large numbers at San José del Cabo in September, "passing southward". During my own two years residence in the Cape district, however, this bird was not seen outside the mountainous district above indicated. I very much doubt the pigeons leaving Lower California at all, as implied by Brewster on Frazar's report.

I became acquainted with the Viosca Pigeon July 5, 1923, when I made my first trip to the Laguna Mountains, and in the next month found them abundant. The following year, parts of four months were spent in their range and I had ample opportunity to study and observe this isolated race of pigeon. It was common throughout the mountains, ranging from an altitude of 1500 feet to the tops, some 6500 feet. At the lower levels the birds are found in the canyons where wild grapes and another native fruit grow; but the type of country they like best, and their real home, is the live-oak region of the higher valleys and canyons. These birds are swift and powerful fliers and it would not take them long to travel for their food, either to the pinyon pines above or to the wild grapes and figs below, whenever they might wish to vary their acorn diet.

Acorns, wild grapes, pinyon nuts, and a sort of wild fig were, in my experience, their only foods in the summer. Their flesh was a real treat, regardless of what they ate. Unfortunately, I did not see the pigeons in the winter time, though I visited several localities from which other observers have recorded them. From other published records it seems these birds do have a tendency in winter to visit the lower hills of the Victoria Mountains and, to a slight degree, other nearby ranges.

At one of my camps in the Victoria Mountains, my work table was placed directly under a large live-oak tree which bore an abundant crop of acorns. This was a great attraction to the pigeons as well as to numerous Narrow-fronted Acorn-storing Woodpeckers. It was a marvel to me how such a large bird as a pigeon could alight in this tree, even on its slenderest branches, without the least audible flapping of its wings; often I would be unaware of a pigeon's presence until it was made known to me by the woodpeckers. The pigeons and woodpeckers, it appears, are inherent enemies. Let a pigeon alight in this tree, and if a woodpecker is near-by, the latter immediately, with

loud cries, sets upon and drives the pigeon away, which departs with a great flapping of wings. In no case have I seen a pigeon try to defend itself, and one was never seen to take the part of the aggressor. When attacked, a pigeon flies to a near-by tree and often, as soon as the woodpecker's back is turned, so to speak, the pigeon is back again in the oak tree, only to have the same thing happen again. It is lucky for the pigeons that woodpeckers are not always on guard, else they would get but few acorns.

The pigeons often hang head downward on a slender branch, reaching for acorns, and then there is some flapping of wings. They partake in equal numbers of the small and the large acorns, and also take them when they are quite green. My observation is that they get the acorns mostly in the trees; on but few occasions have I seen them feeding on the ground. Perhaps because of the pigeons and woodpeckers, but few nuts ever have a chance to reach the ground.

The first bird voices one hears in the early morning in the live-oak region are those of the Narrow-fronted Woodpeckers, closely followed by the Viosca Pigeons, whose mellow *whoo-whoo* (first note short, second long and slightly lower) sounds almost human, as if someone were trying to attract attention. From the specimens taken, I learned it was only the males that make this sound. At this time the birds perch upon some dead or bare limb, usually at some elevation. They are frequently seen fluttering spirally with short wing-beats or sailing slowly over some clearing, and then an entirely different note is uttered at short intervals, hard to describe, but which could be called a sort of hoarse, guttural croak, sounded for a sustained period.

I have never seen this bird in flocks except when a dozen or two were feeding in an oak tree. For a large bird, they have an uncanny way of hiding in the trees behind the smallest of limbs or bunches of leaves. Often I would notice but one pigeon in a tree, but upon my closer approach pigeon after pigeon, that I had not seen before, would fly out. They are not excessively wild.

Their nesting season is a lengthy one, but I have no way of knowing whether more than one brood is raised. Thayer (Condor, XI, 1909, p. 143) records them as nesting December 26. Nelson (Mem. Nat. Acad. Sci., XVI, 1921, p. 46) says they were nesting January 24, and Brewster (*loc. cit.*) reports that Belding found them nesting in February. Other observers have noted them as nesting in April and May, and I found both fresh eggs and large young during June, July, August and September. Contrary to the report cited by Brewster (*loc. cit.*) that "one to two" eggs are laid, in over twenty-five nests examined by me I never found more than one egg or one young in a nest. Both parents participate in incubating the eggs. The birds are close sitters, but when disturbed from the nest the sitting parent will fly to a nearby tree and remain quietly until the intruder leaves the nest.

The majority of the numerous nests I examined were in live-oak trees, usually situated on the forks of the larger horizontal limbs, and placed from 10 to 20 feet above the ground. Some nests were also found placed among the smaller branches and near their extremities, but this was exceptional. A very few nests were found in a small species of white-oak tree that grows on the hillsides. This oak is peculiar in that in the dry season the leaves turn brown and appear dead, but a few days after the first rain, the leaves gradually grow green again.

There are a few pine trees, mostly pinyons, scattered among the oaks in some parts, but only in one instance did I find a pigeon's nest in a pine. This was a well built nest six feet above the ground, against the trunk where a horizontal limb grew out. One nest was found on a frond of a leaning fan palm tree. The nest is as a rule carelessly made, of a few coarse twigs, with no nest lining.

Berkeley, California, July 22, 1926.