

Wildlife Rehabilitation From Rescue to Release

SEASON 4, EPISODE 6 PIGEONS AND DOVES WITH BRITTANY TURNER PART 1

Gail Buhl: Welcome to Wildlife Rehabilitation From Rescue to release a podcast dedicated to licensed wildlife rehabilitation and the veterinarians who support them. I'm your host, Gail Buhl.

Gail Buhl: Hey everyone! I am so excited. I get to interview and talk to Brittany Turner again. If you remember early on in the podcast, season one, I think it was season one. Uh, we talked in general about songbird care. Today we're doing a deep dive. We're doing a deep dive on doves and pigeons. So, Brittany, welcome to the podcast.

Brittany Turner: Hi, Gail. Um, yeah, I'm super, super excited today to talk about pigeons and doves. Um, they are a favorite of mine that we're not supposed to choose. favorites in rehab, but they are definitely my favorite. And we'll talk about that some more. You'll hear about it for a very long time today.

Gail Buhl: Uh, yay. I know I'm going to learn lots. I do a lot with birds, but not necessarily, especially with young, uh, doves and pigeons. And we'll get into that. But a little tiny bit of background. You've been with the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Minnesota for 11 years, I think, right?

Brittany Turner: I started back in 2013 as an intern in our songbird nursery, and since then, I've worked my way up to now overseeing all the animal husbandry at the wildlife rehab center. So I am the Rehabilitation Director currently.

Gail Buhl: Well, that's amazing to me. That would be a great job. I love husbandry. I am weird, I love setting up cages.

Brittany Turner: Oh, yeah. You got. It's so much fun to get in a new species and have to look up their natural history. And for us, we are very, very high volume. For those who don't know much about the wildlife rehab center. We topped 21,000 patients this year, so just a handful of animals through the door, and we see all of the animals that are in Minnesota wildlife. Raptors go on to the Raptor center. But otherwise we see a huge variety of species.

Gail Buhl: It teaches you so much. And I know that there's crossover learning, right? Um, with species that are similar but not the same, you know, and oh my gosh, just how cool. Minnesota, of course, for people who don't know. Uh, and of course I'm in Minnesota and love

Minnesota and, uh, especially for birds, uh, this is a state that has hundreds of bird species that breed, uh, in the spring and summer and our and other birds that pass through in the fall on migration. So we have a huge number of species. So you guys probably see over 200 species of all animals a year, do you think?

Brittany Turner: Yeah, typically it's between 180 and 200. varies by year. Um, but yeah, we see a ton of Minnesota wildlife.

Gail Buhl: Wow. So not only just been at the Raptor Center, the wildlife rehabilitation center. Um, but you actually, in the past have worked at the Raptor Center, too. I mean, I know, I know. Um, but you are also a bird watcher, so you on your spare time, which you don't have much of during the spring and the summer. Uh, but you do a lot of bird watching and kind of being out in, in the world, out in nature and and things like that.

Brittany Turner: Absolutely. Yeah. I also do hobby photography of birds, which are, I think, one of the hardest things to do photography of, because by the time you get them locked in, in focus, they're gone. Especially tiny little warblers. But yeah, I think it was last year. I maxed out at like 18 species of warblers in one day. We had a fall out and I just walked in a park and found so many species. It's so much fun.

Gail Buhl: That is so much fun. And yeah, in the spring, warblers are a tiny bit easier to identify. Yeah, than they are in the fall. But, uh, yeah, absolutely amazing. And I know that everybody who listens to the podcast knows that I am a huge proponent of natural history, that I think it informs every single step of the rehabilitation process. Um, and, and so, you know, I applaud and I'm a bird watcher, too. So, you know, we share that in common too.

Brittany Turner: So, yeah, I am a big proponent. And if you ever hear any talks I've done at any conferences, I at this point feel like I should get a paid sponsorship. But, um, very big proponent of Cornell Lab of Ornithology, birds of the world. Um, so side note if you're a rehabilitator working with birds at all, I highly recommend it if you have a subscription with the National Wildlife Rehabilitator Association. Um, as a member, you can get into it for free.

Gail Buhl: Thank you for that plug. And make sure in the show notes that we have links to both NWRA and then the Cornell Birds of the world, and I've used that resource so much.

Brittany Turner: It's bookmarked on every digital device I have, because if we get in something that I don't know the natural history of, you can immediately get housing, diet and migration information as well.

Gail Buhl: Right, right. And weight and size and I mean all that kind of stuff. And if you've got a juvenile that doesn't look like the adult, you know, trying the identification, of course, is the number one thing. And so we're going to be talking about doves and pigeons today. So I know that they are your faves. How did they become your favorites and why are they your favorites?

Brittany Turner: They're just so cute. But that's not the real reason.

Gail Buhl: That's not the real reason.

Brittany Turner: They're just such an interesting bird. Everybody sees pigeons, right? Even people who are in the city don't have access to going into large nature preserves and parks. They see pigeons, right? So it's something that everybody knows. I grew up watching them. Right. Um, and then, of course, doves are also just phenomenal birds. But for me, I got really invested in them back in 2018, um, working on improving their natural husbandry. I took a deep dive of how can we improve their care in rehab because we are having some, some issues like calcium deficiencies and why. And just digging down into it, I started to specialize in those two species. Pigeons are a lot harder than mourning doves. We'll talk about that. But it was really that deep dive and then I just fell in love with them. I also, my first ever pet bird was a dove that was found outside, had a wing fracture. Turned out it was domestic. So it couldn't be released. So I ended up, uh, rehoming him and he was my perfect, perfect bird. So I got really invested in doves. I now have five of them personally.

Gail Buhl: And they're still teaching you a lot, aren't they? Even though they're domestic, I mean, there's got to be some overlap.

Brittany Turner: Oh, absolutely. So that's kind of how I got started. Really loving the pigeons and doves. Was that deep dive into their natural history and striving to give as best captive care as possible.

Gail Buhl: Excellent. So when we're talking about pigeons, I think the the official informal name, not scientific name, but informal name is rock pigeon. Is that right?

Brittany Turner: Yeah. That is what they're called now. They used to be called rock doves. And you might still hear them called rock doves. Um, but in North America, they're not native. Um, so you can consider them. Feral is what people usually say, but it is rock pigeon *Columba livia*. I looked it up. So they were introduced into North America in the 1600s, and they've thrived. Obviously, if you've seen any city anywhere, even in farm country, you'll see them. Um, they're really adaptable. They're really hardy. But yeah. So rock pigeons are the only pigeon species we see here in Minnesota.

Gail Buhl: So today, basically we're going to be talking more specifically about rock pigeons. How many species of pigeon are there?

Brittany Turner: So species of pigeons in the world I'm not sure. Um, in North America, there are 12 species of. We'll go into their order and what they are. Right. Let's go back a little bit. So pigeons and doves are in the order of columbiformes, which one of my favorite facts that I learned when I was doing research on them is the other family that's in that order included the dodo bird.

Gail Buhl: What?

Brittany Turner: Yep.

Gail Buhl: Are you kidding? Was that the fun fact you were telling me before that you were. The fun fact that she said she was gonna to surprise me with something, but she wasn't going to share it before. And that's it! Holy buckets. That's amazing. I did not know that.

Brittany Turner: Yeah, they're related to dodo birds, which I think is so much fun.

Gail Buhl: Yes, I agree.

Brittany Turner: Anyway, so there's that's.

Gail Buhl: Back to our regularly scheduled program. Right?

Brittany Turner: So in the family of columbidae you have all the pigeons and doves. So again, there are 12 species in North America. Mhm. Um, for pigeons, I believe. Nope. I'm not going to say it because I don't want to say the wrong number, but okay. That's 12 species across the US. Okay. Um, again we in Minnesota we only see rock pigeons for the pigeon side of things for doves, our only native columbiform that's still existing because of course, passenger pigeons used to be here, too. That's a whole different podcast talk.

Gail Buhl: I have a special place in my heart for passenger pigeons, too. So that might be a very fun one to talk about.

Brittany Turner: They're so fun. Anyway, our only, existing native columbiform in Minnesota are the mourning dove. But we also have rock pigeons, and we do have Eurasian collared doves as well. You can't tell by the name. They're also an introduced species to the US. They don't really belong here. They were introduced in the southern part of the US and have adapted their way up north. So we have small populations in Minnesota, but we rarely see them in rehab. At least for us. I know other places do.

Gail Buhl: Mostly the Eurasian collared are found in cities as well?

Brittany Turner: At least in Minnesota they're more in like farm country kind of rural areas.

Gail Buhl: Okay. Scientific name for mourning dove?

Brittany Turner: I'm gonna. I'm not going to pronounce this right.

Gail Buhl: Don't worry about that.

Brittany Turner: Zenaida macroura. I don't have Eurasian color dove, scientific name listed, but again, we don't see very many. I think we at the wildlife rehab center see 1 to 2 a year.

Gail Buhl: Okay.

Brittany Turner: Um. So. Yeah. Rock pigeons and morning doves.

Gail Buhl: Rock pigeons and morning doves. That's that's a great deep dive for us today. So we're going to start out kind of at 30,000 feet level. In general, why do these birds come into rehab?

Brittany Turner: There's quite a few reasons. Some expected, some not. Typically our admin forms show people just say we found it not flying, which I know is true for a lot of birds, but especially pigeons. It's always. We found them. It wasn't flying away, so we grabbed it. There's a lot of different reasons for it. Um, we do see window strikes and head trauma. Those are more for mourning doves, which we'll talk the natural history differences there in the same group. But rock pigeons and mourning doves, their behavior is very different. So mourning doves more likely to have window strikes. Um, pigeons can also hit windows and other things. They're flying around buildings. And juvenile birds are not the best at flying. We get a lot of predator attacks. Um, they are a really great prey species, which hurts my heart because I love them so much. But they are a really great prey species for a lot of animals. Um, you think of the peregrine falcon grabbing pigeons downtown, but then, of course, mourning doves. Yeah. Easy prey for the most part. And they have a lot of meat on them, so it's really great. But we get a lot of predator attacks. We also do see pigeons that have lead, which is not something that we think about.

Gail Buhl: Wait what?

Brittany Turner: Right! Yeah. So you think of lead and you think of eagles and swans is what most people think, right? They ingest it. We have had some pigeons that I don't remember the year we started testing them, but between 2011 and 2023, we tested 502 rock pigeons for lead, and we had 218 that had detectable levels and 100 right and in 137 had led above ten, which for our center requires treatment.

Gail Buhl: Wow.

Brittany Turner: So I don't know how they're getting it. For anyone who gets opossums, we also have a lot of, I know, different type of animal, but we also get a lot of Virginia possums that have lead, and we're not 100% sure how they're getting it. But yeah, one of our first signs for pigeons, for me at least for having maybe some lead, is they're a little bit too friendly as adults and we test them and sometimes they're positive.

Gail Buhl: Gosh isn't that interesting? Well, you know, I mean, there is a lot of background lead that is not normal. But because we have lead in everything. I mean, the computers that we're using right now to record this podcast has a lot have a lot of lead, you know, lead pipes lead

every I mean, it's just everywhere. So it would make sense to me just knowing a little bit about rock pigeons, you know, you find them in railroad yards, for example, or. And they're picking up the ground and they're picking up other things besides the spilled seed. You know, they need grit and things like that.

Brittany Turner: I don't have the data in front of me, but mourning doves, we don't really test for it because we don't really see symptoms of it. But that makes sense because while morning doves can be found in urban areas, they're more suburban rural birds. Right. And you think of a lot of the concentration of heavy amounts of lead are usually in the cities, and pigeons will eat whatever they can find. And as you mentioned, they eat grit. So they'll eat dirt and rocks and lead seeps into really everything.

Gail Buhl: Right. Wow. It is just one more way that. And of course, I'm preaching to the choir here with you, but also everybody listening that how important rehabilitation is to the wider world and even human health. Um, and whether it's finding diseases or finding hidden things like this that you wouldn't normally think would be an issue.

Brittany Turner: A few other reasons. These ones are less often, but they still happen. Poisoning. There are still a lot of places, a lot of people who don't want pigeons around. They use poison on seeds or corn. The pigeons eat it because free food, and then they have really, really bad symptoms of poisoning. It's really hard to watch if you get in pigeons that are poisoned. Um, we do see frostbite occasionally. Um, more in mourning doves. They are adapted to our climate up here, which, if you're not familiar with Minnesota, is cold. But while they're adapted, we do often see mourning doves. Adults with missing toes. Um, and they're just quite, not quite built. Well, for a really, really cold winters.

Gail Buhl: Right. Little toes.

Brittany Turner: Right. They have tiny little feet. We occasionally see them shot. Luckily, not very often, but we had quite a few years ago now a morning dove that was actually shot with a blow dart gun and survived that, only to then develop frostbite because after it had been shot, it had been on the ground in the winter for a while and ended up developing really severe frostbite.

Gail Buhl: Oh, the poor thing.

Brittany Turner: I know. It healed perfectly from a a blow dart going right through its body and wow, only for frostbite to get it in the end. Unfortunately.

Gail Buhl: Frostbite is nasty. For folks that are in different parts of the country that don't see anything like frostbite. Frostbite can be a determination of euthanasia or not euthanasia.

Brittany Turner: And for those who don't work with it or see it, it can take weeks to fully develop and declare itself. So then the animal seems like, okay, well, we're out of the woods and then little by little starts showing up as necrosis. But yeah, last one is kind of our other big

one is contaminant. Usually pigeons, they get stuck in tar. They land on freshly paved roads. They fall into oil.

Gail Buhl: God the poor things.

Brittany Turner: I know we often we have more oil pigeons than I'd like to admit. So those are the big ones.

Gail Buhl: And they come in as orphans too?

Brittany Turner: Yeah they do. And funny enough, there. I recommend anyone listening who hasn't ever googled funny pigeon nests. Please do. So we get a lot of orphans. Um, some of them are just. They fledged poorly and are not adapting to life in the wild, especially pigeons. They nest in the weirdest spots in the city, so when they fledge and land in a road, they can't always get back off the ground right away. Um, but they also are just notorious for building really poor nests. I don't want to insult them. They're great birds. They try their best, but especially if you look up again, domestic like people who keep pigeons as pets and build nests. It'll be like three sticks and they'll lay an egg. But I went through and did a collection for when I wrote a talk about this, and I found a picture of a mourning dove who nested in a coiled electrical cord right in the middle of it on the ground. Because why not? So natural history. Let's go back for rock pigeons.

Gail Buhl: Okay, let's do that and we can talk about these funny things as we go.

Brittany Turner: So there is there is reason for it. Um. Mourning doves, their natural history is they nest in trees. And most oftentimes they do. Sometimes they just they like to nest in gutters. So again this is mourning doves. I like nesting gutters because it's a perfect little spot. It's protected. It's nice like pre-made. So morning doves, they don't build the best nests. Some do, but we often get them falling out of nests. Um. That is a thing. Rock pigeons. If you can't tell by their name. Naturally, in their native habitat, they nest on rock cliffs. So they nest in. They make, um. You'll know the term for this. The scrapes. Is that what it's called?

Gail Buhl: Yes, a scrape. Yeah. Peregrine falcons, but a lot of a lot of birds will fall. Yeah. And basically how I describe it is they land someplace. They kind of move their feet around a little bit, scrape and say, home sweet home.

Brittany Turner: Yeah. Pigeons will use areas like that where it's those nice little cliff areas, and then they'll build their stick nest and then lay their eggs. But sometimes they don't need to build a big nest because it's already kind of a natural little crevice—safe. So in our cities, which are essentially manmade rock cliffs, they like to nest in windowsills and, uh, right along like cliff or, uh, building edges. Right? Roofs. So they get themselves into a lot of trouble in that way and then fall out of nests. There's a joke across the entire internet that baby pigeons don't exist because nobody ever sees them. I don't know if you've heard that.

Gail Buhl: I've not heard that.

Brittany Turner: If you go, I'm sure there's Reddit threads about it. But, um, nobody ever sees baby pigeons, and it's because they nest in such good little crevices because. Right. They're used to rock cliffs. Right. And they often nest high up, so you just rarely see them. There's a podcast called Ologies, which.

Gail Buhl: O Ologies is one of the best. That's a great shout out.

Brittany Turner: There was an episode about pigeons specifically. Uh, Rosemary Mosco was the guest speaker on that one. She wrote a book called A Pocket Guide to Pigeon Watching. She talks about in that podcast how to Find Pigeon Baby Pigeons in the cities if you want to, is really just learning what they sound like and listening for them. Um, but you'll see them in parking garages too. This time of year We were just downtown Saint Paul, Minnesota and saw pigeons flying out of a garage. And I almost guarantee there's a nest somewhere in there. They nest year round.

Gail Buhl: Fun. Oh yeah, that I knew.

Brittany Turner: Most of our nesting birds have a nesting season in pigeons. Say, hey, it's warm in here. Here's my nest. I'm gonna make more babies. And they do.

Gail Buhl: And they do. Oh my gosh. Okay, okay. So rock pigeons. Uh, we're still kind of in the natural history. They are. They nest all year round. If they've got the resources they make kind of a sort of a stick nest on a scrape, which would be on a and the natural world would be on a cliff face or in a little cliff crevice or something like that. But in our cities it's certainly on buildings, under bridge decks, uh, in garages. So what else do we need to know about rock pigeons and their natural history?

Brittany Turner: So this applies to both of them. I believe all columbidae members this applies, but they actually drink water very differently. And this will go into how we feed them in a bit. But they drink water very, very differently than other birds. Um, I don't want to say they're the only ones that do it because I never try. I try never to say all or never. Never. Because somebody will be like, wait, no. But, um, so most birds, when they're drinking water, they'll scoop it up with their bottom beak, tip their head back, and the water goes down. The esophagus bypasses the glottis. Um, we'll talk about epiglottis and glottis when we talk about feeding a little bit more. That's how most birds drink water. Right. You see them? They scoop up the water. They tip their heads back. They drink water. Perfect. Morning doves and pigeons and other columbidae members. They stick their beak into the water and actually drink it up. It looks like they're drinking through a straw. So they write. So they dip their beak in, drink up the water. They don't tip their head back. They just drink it up like they're sucking it up, which is very unique for their species. Very important as rehabilitators for when you're providing them a water source. A shallow dish doesn't always work. They need it a little bit deeper so that they can put their bill into it.

Gail Buhl: Ah, yeah, I love it, I love it. Okay, so when are they considered an adult where they will be breeding? So do you know, is it like a year or is it less than a year?

Brittany Turner: I think it's less than a year. Mourning doves might be different for looking at the bird. For rock pigeon, specifically, juvenile to adult juveniles will have more of a brownish eye color brownish gray. And the sear which is right on the Neris.

Gail Buhl: So it's the nose is the Neris. The nose holes are the Neris. Yeah. And it's close. Fairly close to the head. Yeah. So far away from the tip of the the bill or the beak.

Brittany Turner: In juveniles, it'll be more the color of their beak. It might be a lighter gray, but for when they're there you would admit one and say, oh, this is an adult. Now their eyes are more of a reddish-orange color and their sear is typically a bright white color.

Gail Buhl: Ah, yeah, that's very helpful identification. So most rock pigeons, as far as plumage is concerned, when we're talking about adult often are gray and with darker gray on the wings, but they come in a whole wide variety of colors. I that's one of the things I love about rock pigeons. It's so pretty. Their feathers are so pretty and so underappreciated.

Brittany Turner: Oh go on, any rant about how awesome pigeons are and I will sit next to it for hours. So rock pigeons? Yes, they come in a huge variety of colors. There is a standard rock pigeon color, um, that you'll see more in the cities, like a standard. I can't remember how to describe it right now, um, but.

Gail Buhl: Kind of a slate gray Gray.

Brittany Turner: It's a two bands on the wing, but there are so many color varieties, so it's a bluish gray. And then they have two black bands on the wing. So that's typically the standard pigeon color. Now these birds have been domesticated for a really, really, really long time. A lot of times they started as homing birds. So those are a different type of pigeon. Those are homing pigeons but still bred from rock pigeons. So when you see a lot of different colors of pigeons, you see a lot of domestic breeds. There are an incredible variety of domestic breeds of pigeons, but they're all derived from the rock pigeon. So that being said, there are a lot, especially in Minnesota. I know other places as well. The Twin Cities has a lot of racing pigeon groups, people who keep pigeons for possibly meat for show pigeons, and when they get out, some can adapt, but most of the time they have a really, really hard time because they did not grow up in the wild. They don't have those instincts really anymore to survive in the wild, but some do and find a mate and breed, and then you end up with all the variety of pigeons in the wild.

Gail Buhl: Yeah so those genetics then get transferred to a lot of the wild, wild.

Brittany Turner: So it can make it difficult when you're determining when you get in a pigeon, if it's banded, it is an old pigeon. We do not rehabilitate those because they are owned pigeons and we only rehabilitate wildlife at our center. But you can search for their owner on the

National Pigeon Association website, but they are owned if they're banded, if you get one in though, and it lets say you get one in and it just looks brown, doesn't necessarily mean that it's a full domestic bird. It could be a wild, feral pigeon bred a while ago with a brown pigeon that escaped or was released. And this is a few generations down the line. So when you're driving in, especially the cities, and you see a variety of colors of pigeons, it means that other they were interbred with domestic varieties. So it makes it difficult in rehab because you get in a fully brown pigeon, doesn't mean you can't rehabilitate it if you rehabilitate rock pigeons, because it could very well be a feral pigeon. Um, so for us, determining if it's non banded, whether it's domestic or not is behavior. We look at their behavior. Are they comfortable around people. Um do they have the skills to survive in the wild?

Gail Buhl: And of course you have to have the differentials, you know, do you have lead? Do you have head trauma? Do you have to take all that stuff into account and eliminate that?

Brittany Turner: Totally. We had a case that was really interesting with a rock pigeon that was friendly and had some mixed white and brown or white and black coloring. Two and originally we thought, okay, it's a domestic, it's really friendly. But it tested for lead. It was positive for lead. And each treatment after a treatment and the lead would go down, it would start to be wild again. It didn't want to be around us, wouldn't sit near us. It was wild again. The lead would creep back up as lead does, and it would start to get friendly again. And we kept going through these up and downs of is this bird domestic or is it the lead causing neurological symptoms which in that bird was successfully released eventually once its lead was under control? So it's interesting.

Gail Buhl: So you mentioned earlier, I'm still on natural history of rock pigeons here that they eat pretty much anything, but they eat a lot of seeds. Yes. Um, and then of course, they pick up grit in the form of small rocks or gravel or those kinds of things to help them, uh, kind of grind up the shells of those seeds, and they'll eat any kind of seed. Do they eat anything else?

Brittany Turner: Not really. I think they can be opportunists. You'll see them eating people. Food that is dropped on the street in this in the cities. But if you're keeping pigeons or rehabbing pigeons, a full seed diet is perfect for them.

Gail Buhl: And in the wild two there I generally see them in flocks. So yeah. So they seem to be fairly social, but I don't think they necessarily nest that way. You know, like herons and uh, that nest in big colonies, they, they kind of pigeons seem a little bit more separate when they're nesting.

Brittany Turner: Yeah. So when they're nesting, they do spread out a little bit. I think they can be found like in parking garages, maybe near each other, but not together. Right. They don't. They have their own little territories. This is their nesting area. But they are very, very social birds. Which leads into when we talk about rehab is housing them with con specifics. So con specifics, birds of the same species. Pigeons do really well with con specifics. You have to be a little careful with the adults because they can be territorial and fight. But juveniles especially,

we try and combine them and they eat better. They overall seem much calmer. Um, so yeah, very social birds.

Gail Buhl: You mentioned they can be territorial in the wild. Are they mostly just territorial around their nest area?

Brittany Turner: I'm not 100% sure on that one. Um, I know in rehab, in confined spaces, it can also make territoriality much more enhanced because they don't have enough space to separate.

Gail Buhl: Are they polygamous? Are they, um. Do they? I don't know, I don't think they. Quote unquote, mate for life. And that's a quote unquote, because a lot of raptors, for example, actually don't mate for life. They mate to the site. They're very site oriented. So where their nest is and they'll come back year after year to that, and they're more tied to that than they are to, um, another bird. But I don't know what it's like with with rock pigeons.

Brittany Turner: Yeah. So they can mate for life. If there's a disappearance of a mate, they'll take another one. Um, but for the most part, they do, um, stay paired up.

Gail Buhl: They stayed paired up. That is so cool. Is there? And I know there is, because I've observed this. But a courtship that happens.

Brittany Turner: Yes. It's so much fun. It's my favorite when I'm driving down the interstate and they're on light poles and I can see the male displaying for a female. It's so funny. So they do a lot of bowing and cooing. Mhm. Um, so they'll tilt their head down and make these coo sounds and kind of just do that and try and show the female how beautiful they are. Um, pigeons have a really beautiful iridescence to their neck. So moving around can also show that off a little bit more as the light hits it differently. They also do a really gross pair bonding thing. I think it's gross. We haven't talked about this natural history part. But listen, they are regurgitators.

Gail Buhl: We're gonna talk about that a lot.

Brittany Turner: So, um, one of their pair bonding is, um, regurgitating food into each other's mouths. It's really gross, but they love it. Um, you'll see it. Yeah. It's there's much more gross stuff that happens in their crop for their babies. But as adults, yes, they do regurgitate into each other's mouths as a sign of affection, just like anyone would want, right?

Gail Buhl: Anyone would want it. It might. Also, I know with Raptors, for example, if, let's say we're talking great horned owls, the the male as part of courtship will go catch mice, for example, and then the female will often, uh, food beg bag like a young owl, and then he is giving it to her. He's not necessarily feeding it to her, but, you know, handing it to her, and then she swallows it or whatever. And it is certainly thought that the female is trying to judge what kind of provider are you going to be? Because especially when the chicks are little, she's going to spend a lot more time at the nest than he will. And he has to provide food for the chicks and

for her. And a lot of raptors are like that. And then when the chicks get older, then they both have to hunt. But yeah. So I'm wondering if it has something to do like that because, you know, they do feed crop milk, which again we're going to talk about. But um, and the both parents feed so I don't I'm wondering it just is just curious to me. Just wondering if that's part of trying to decide. Yeah. You can you can help raise the kids.

Brittany Turner: Yeah. It very well could be I honestly don't know. Um, but leading into that, they do, um, share parental duties. Not a lot of birds. It varies highly around the bird groups, but, um, they do share parental duties. They both take turns sitting on the nest. They alternate. So it's not as much of your example of great horned owls where the female is primarily on the nest. These they will just switch off, um, throughout the day. And then once there are babies, they will both feed, which we'll get into.

Gail Buhl: That's really cool. Yeah, we'll get into that. Any. How about vocalizations? We know that. COO. Um, they don't have an enormous variety of vocalizations, do they?

Brittany Turner: They primarily coo. That is their base sound, but they do kind of make a grunting sound. They also make a lot of sound, though, whether it is a sound for any actual benefit towards one another or it's just structural, but they actually make a lot of sound when they fly as well. Um, not vocalization sound, but their wings beat really, really loudly. They can make a slight whistling sound.

Gail Buhl: Yeah, I've heard it. I've heard the whistling sound. Yeah, yeah.

Brittany Turner: They're very loud fliers.

Gail Buhl: Do you know how fast they can fly? Because they are fast. Mhm. And they also can quickly maneuver in the air. It does make them even though they might be a good meal for a predator. It is not easy to catch them.

Brittany Turner: They can fly as fast as 90mph um averaging about 50 to 60mph.

Gail Buhl: It's still so fast.

Brittany Turner: It's insane. I don't remember how fast the fastest homing pigeon was. So I know we're talking about rock pigeons. Homing pigeons are amazing and fly insane speeds, and I don't remember where I saved that information.

Gail Buhl: That's okay. I mean, that's what Cornell Birds of the world can help you with. And there you go. Plug in that again. But it also, it probably has a lot to do with that. They can fly so fast that they have such big pectoral muscles, right? Oh, yeah. They need fuel to fly, but they need the muscle mass to do it, too. So. And I wonder if that also developed, um, in the wild because they're prey animals.

Brittany Turner: Probably. They need that big muscle to fly, but they also a behavior of theirs is wing slapping.

Gail Buhl: Ah, yes. Yes, I've been slapped.

Brittany Turner: It can hurt if they're really if they're really trying. Um, they. So it is a sort of a defense mechanism of go away and they'll take their wing and just slap you with it. A lot of times it doesn't hurt, but sometimes they can hit that bone, can hit right in the perfect spot, and it hurts a little bit.

Gail Buhl: So as far as defenses yeah, if they're trying they're if they're faced with danger, flying has got to be number one for them.

Brittany Turner: Absolutely.

Gail Buhl: Get away. We're going to fly. So number two would be maybe wing slap if they can't you know. Um, and then of course, if anybody's ever been quote unquote bitten by a pigeon, it's. You don't have to worry about getting bitten.

Brittany Turner: They have really soft bills.

Gail Buhl: Yes.

Brittany Turner: You look at a cardinal and they can crunch up. They can crack open seeds. They've really hard bills. Pigeons and doves have really soft bills. They cannot crack open seeds.

Gail Buhl: Yeah, they swallow them whole. So that tends to grit.

Brittany Turner: The other, what I think is one of their coolest defense mechanisms that a lot of people don't know. So pigeons and doves both have really thick feathers. Like they just have a lot of them. Not that the feathers are themselves thicker, but they have a lot of feathers on their body. One thing, especially mourning doves, I believe pigeons it happens to. But if a predator were to grab the bird, they will fly off immediately. And again, this is especially for mourning doves, which we haven't talked too much about.

Gail Buhl: But yeah, we're gonna get to hear.

Brittany Turner: Um, yeah, but the predator ends up with a mouthful of feathers because they have so many feathers and they can just drop them. I mentioned I had my first bird was a dove, and one of the times he got really, really scared of something I would call it he poofed. It would just look like a pile of feathers. And you couldn't tell on his body that he'd lost anything. But they have just so many body feathers that they just go poof. And there's just feathers

everywhere. So it's a defense mechanism, as if something does get them and doesn't get a good enough hold. They can fly off and the predator ends up with just a mouthful.

Gail Buhl: And then they can they can emergency molt if they need to. You know, they've lost their whole tail or something like that. So often we talk about predatory birds versus, um, prey birds and prey birds. Their feathers are what is called loosely seeded in the follicles. So they easily release where, uh, predatory birds. So let's talk about raptors. Right. Are hard seeded into the into the follicle. So that means that it they don't come out easily. Which means it can hurt a lot. If you're trying to pull a feather for hopefully no reason and you're not pulling, you should not pull a predator. Predatory birds feathers out. But if you're pulling really hard, it does not come out easily, um, at all. And you could really hurt the bird and actually damage the follicle if you're forcibly removing that feather. Whereas prey birds like the doves, like the pigeons and other prey birds do cardinals, whatever, they're pretty loosely seated. So that means they come out pretty, um, pretty easily. And you're right. I'm glad you brought that up as a defense mechanism, because, yeah, they can they can fly away and grow the feathers later if they're alive. So yeah, it's a good it's a good defense mechanism.

Brittany Turner: Morning doves. Especially like I joke with our veterinarians at the center that if you look at them the wrong way, they're going to lose feathers. So we're talking more natural history, but I keep bringing up rehab side of things for mourning morning news especially, you have to be really careful with handling them and making sure you have a good hold because they will just lose feathers.

Gail Buhl: Okay, so we have and we're going to go back to rock pigeons, and then we're going to go right into mourning doves. Talk about some of the same things with natural history and how it's the same and how it's different. Um, but with rock pigeons, approximately how long do they live?

Brittany Turner: Their lifespan in the wild can be about six years. Um, but I know in captivity they can live a lot longer. Um, right. I don't remember-

Gail Buhl: Generally, that is what it is for a lot of species is that they live longer because of course, they have usually, you know, great food, great housing and a great medical package.

Brittany Turner: Yeah, so they average about two and a half years lifespan. Um, but they can live a lot longer. Um, if they. Yeah, if they're lucky.

Gail Buhl: If they're lucky. Okay. So let's pop over to, uh, talking a little bit natural history with mourning doves. I mean, how is it the same? How is it different?

Brittany Turner: So there's a lot that's the same. But in general their behavior is very, very different. So if anyone listening to this has ever tried to work with morning doves, I am sure you have a horror story of them being really difficult to rehab. Pigeons are very low stress. Really adaptable. Right. They're stressed out. They don't want to be touched by people, but they're pretty relaxed. They're pretty easy to keep. Morning doves are notorious for self trauma. They

are a flushing species. So flushing birds when there is a threat, they're afraid. They fly really fast and straight upwards. They try and just get out of there as fast as possible. And they can fly really, really fast. Like they can just go, which for in the wild is great. If there's a predator, they can just leave really quickly in rehab. What ends up happening is they fly really fast and hit the top of the enclosure immediately. So they're notorious for self trauma in captivity. It's really hard to keep their feathers nice and, um, not broken because they are easily spooked. You can reach into a pigeon cage, and most of the time they're just going to hunker down at the back and hope that you go away, or wing slap you, or puff up their chest with air to look bigger. Um, I say chest. It's the air sacs around their crop. But morning doves, they might freeze for a second, hoping you don't see them, but then they're going to flush and fly and bounce off the walls. That's the biggest difference for me, especially in rehab between pigeons and doves, is doves are so high stress that there are a lot of problems in rehab. And this is primarily older juveniles, adults. The babies can be a lot calmer, Homer. Especially if you can't raise them until they get too crazy. Because they do get crazy.

Gail Buhl: Well, this informs rehab, right? It informs, like you said earlier, you see more head trauma from hitting windows with doves than you do with pigeons, partly because of this behavior. And then it informs, okay, how are we going to house this animal? How are we going to- and maybe if, you know, we cannot house this animal in a, in a space that is going to be as least stressful as possible and in the way they need to be, you might need to transfer that animal right away, or you may need to make the decision that you cannot care for that animal. So these are very important things about their natural history. And we're not here to change their natural history. We're here to learn from it. And it's been honed. Those natural history characteristics have been honed over a millennia, uh, to be effective for that particular species.

Brittany Turner: Another one of the reasons like, I love a challenge. And they are, I think one of my biggest challenges for trying to figure out housing of songbird related. I know they're not songbird, but songbird equivalent kind of in terms of rehab, right? They're really challenging. A question I see from rehab every single year is how do we house warbling doves? Because mine just beat up its wrists because it's flying around constantly in the cage. Um, but I've had a morning dove that got a really bad head wound in a box that was maybe an inch taller than it. That's all it took. I had it in a box waiting for an exam, and it just kept flushing. And I thought, well, there's only about an inch of space. You can't really do much. And it ended up with a pretty bad head wound because they just sit there and flush, and that's our instinct. Get out of there.

Gail Buhl: Yeah, I either drop all my feathers or I have to fly away. Right. Or both.

Brittany Turner: Those are your options.

Gail Buhl: Those are the options. So okay, so but most of the rest of their natural history, they nest in trees and they build a nest. Maybe not a very sturdy one, but they build a stick nest and you are finding them more in the suburban areas and farming areas.

Brittany Turner: Yeah, they're very suburban. They are very rural as well. Um, so you'll find them in both. The ones that we get in are more from suburbia because they're easily found. Of course, they do adapt really well to nesting around people, but they primarily nest in trees. Again, they will nest in gutters or on houses. They're pretty adaptable, but their natural history is more nesting in trees.

Gail Buhl: Okay. What do they have? A courtship similar to rock pigeons.

Brittany Turner: They do. They do a lot of bowing and cooing. They're not quite as social. You'll see them at feeders in small groups in the winter. Non breeding. You might see them in bigger groups or migration because they do actually migrate. Rock pigeons I didn't mention this. They do not migrate. Um, they might move around based on food source, but there they pretty much stay where they are. Morning doves do migrate in Minnesota in the southern part of the country. I don't believe they do as much, but most of our morning doves do migrate. If the ones that choose not to, because they have food source and they just don't migrate, they will often be found in groups during non breeding season.

Gail Buhl: Okay. And do they have a breeding season then? Because rock pigeons we talked about they breed all year round.

Brittany Turner: Yes. So morning doves. They start early and they end late. Here it's more of a typical baby bird season. So for here we will usually start seeing them in April late April. Uh and the last ones are typically in August. September. Mhm. I believe they can nest year round in warmer climates. Okay. I don't know that they always do, but they can.

Gail Buhl: Okay. But here in Minnesota, they generally don't?

Brittany Turner: Yeah. We won't get babies between definitely October through like mid-April. Okay. And it's primarily because they migrate.

Gail Buhl: Wildlife Rehabilitation from Rescue to Release is a production of Partners for Wildlife. Working hand in hand with wildlife rehabilitator and veterinarians to improve the welfare of orphaned, ill, and injured wildlife. Our executive producer is me Gail Buhl. I'm the partnership coordinator for partners for wildlife at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine Raptor Center. To learn more about the Raptor Center and Partners for wildlife, visit the Raptor Center UMN dot edu, our producer is Rhys Rosato.

Gail Buhl: Special thanks to our guest, partners for wildlife, and the Raptor Center at the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota. Hope you'll join us again, especially for part two.