

# The European Turtle Dove

Text composed by Charles van de Kerkhof

Photos by Charles van de Kerkhof in the collection of the Natural History Museum at Tring, United Kingdom



Scientific : *Streptopelia turtur*  
French : Tourterelle des bois  
Dutch : Zomertortel  
German : Turteltaube  
Spanish : Tórtola europea

Order : Columbiformes  
Family : Columbidae  
Subfamily : Columbinae  
Genus : *Streptopelia* (Turtle Doves)

## Taxonomy

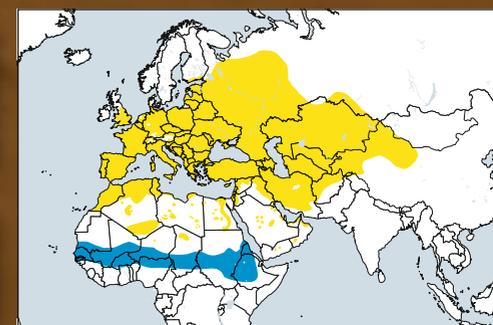
The European Turtle Dove was named for the first time in 1758 by Linnaeus as *Columba turtur*. The genus of the European Turtle Dove has had several name changes throughout the years, but eventually was named *Streptopelia*. This name was given by Carolo Luciano Bonaparte in 1855 and is based on the neck drawing of the many species of turtle doves. The Greek word *streptos* means collar and *peleia* is Greek for dove. *Streptopelia* can therefore be directly translated into 'collared doves'.

The European Turtle Dove is closely related to the Dusky Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia lugens*), to the Adamawa Turtle Dove (*S. hypopyrrha*) and to the Oriental Turtle Dove (*S. orientalis*).

## Subspecies and distribution

Currently four subspecies of the European Turtle Dove are recognised, the previously described subspecies *isabellina* is included in *rufescens*. The four subspecies are:

- *S. t. turtur* (Linnaeus, 1758) is found in Europe, Asia and Africa, the breeding grounds stretch from Great Britain in the west to Kazakhstan in the east, Russia in the north to the North-African Mediterranean coast in the south, including Madeira and the Canary Islands.
- *S. t. arenicola* (Hartert, 1894) is found in Africa and Asia, from Morocco to Tripoli and from Iraq and Iran to north-western China in the east.
- *S. t. hoggara* (Geyr von Schweppenburg, 1916) is found in Africa, in the Hoggar mountains in Algeria and the Aïr mountains in Niger.
- *S. t. rufescens* (C. L. Brehm, 1855) is found in Africa, only in Egypt in the Dakhla and Kharga oasis, and in Faiyûm and in parts of the Nile valley. The subspecies *isabellina* has been included in this subspecies.



■ breeding grounds ■ wintering grounds



From left to right: *S. t. hoggara* - *S. t. rufescens* - *S. t. arenicola* - *S. t. turtur* (males)



*S. t. turtur* with a Eurasian Collared Dove in the background (photo: Charles van de Kerkhof)

## Description

All subspecies of the European Turtle Dove are between 26 and 28 centimetres long and weigh between 99 and 170 grams. There is a considerable resemblance between both sexes in wing length, tail length, tarsus length and the length of the bill tip to the feathers on the bill. Because of this it is hard to establish the sex of the European Turtle Dove based on these characteristics. During the breeding season it is relatively easy to distinguish the male from the female due to the male's blue-grey head and a pinker breast. Outside of the breeding season the colours of the male are less pronounced and it is therefore harder to see the difference between the sexes.

There are not many images available of the subspecies *S. t. arenicola*, *S. t. hoggara* and *S. t. rufescens*. To portray these subspecies, we received permission from Hein van Grouw, Senior Curator of the bird collection of the Natural History Museum at Tring, to photograph all four subspecies in their collection. Apart from photographing the four subspecies this provided us with the opportunity to put both female and male European Turtle Dove study skins next to each other to see the differences between the sexes. As well as providing the opportunity to put European Turtle Doves of different ages next to each other to portray the moulting stages from a juvenile plumage to that of an adult bird. The morphologic research yielded the following information:

### *S. t. turtur*

The subspecies *turtur* is for us the most known subspecies. In Europe it is easily distinguished from the other present turtle doves due to the black and white lines in its neck, and from the clearly visible red skin around the eye. Besides its appearance, the characteristic courtship call of the European Turtle Dove cannot be confused with any other dove species in Europe.

***S. t. arenicola***

The subspecies *arenicola* is slightly lighter in colour, this is especially noticeable on the wings.

***S. t. hoggara***

The subspecies *hoggara* is richly coloured with broad, deep orange-brown-yellow coloured feather edges of the upper wing coverts, the feathers on the head and back have brown-yellow edges.

***S. t. rufescens***

With the subspecies *rufescens* the male is richly orange-brown coloured on the head and on the back, the breast is of a deep pink colour. The underside of the wings is grey coloured.

The female is lighter in colour with a light pinkish colour on the breast.

European Turtle Dove females resemble the males, but are usually less colourful. During the breeding season the eye ring of the females is not as dark as that of the males and is slightly smaller.

Adult European Turtle Doves have a complete moult after the breeding season. The moult period starts in July and August with the body feathers. In August and September, the adult birds moult their wing and tail feathers. The moult of the wing and tail feathers occurs both on the breeding grounds and on the wintering grounds. The entire body moult is complete between February and April of the next year.

Juvenile birds are mostly browner and less colourful compared to adult birds. They have a 'scale' pattern with light beige feather edging on the wing coverts and on their breast. The iris is grey-brown or light-brown coloured. At a later stage the juvenile birds have brown-red feather edging on the wing coverts. The iris colour changes from yellow-brown to yellow-orange. During these stages the juvenile birds do not have their characteristic black and white stripes in the neck. Just like adult birds the juvenile European Turtle Doves start their body moult in August. In August or September, the juveniles moult half of their tail and wing feathers on the breeding grounds, the other half they will moult when they arrive on the wintering grounds. Having said that, juvenile birds have been caught on the wintering grounds and still had their entire juvenile plumage. These are presumably juveniles from the last nest of the year, and they moult their entire plumage on the wintering grounds.



Top row: *S. t. turtur* (male)



Bottom row: *S. t. turtur*  
(from top to bottom: male - juvenile - juvenile)



*S. t. arenicola*  
(from left to right: male - male - male and female)



### Habitat

European Turtle Doves traditionally occur in a wide variety of landscapes. Nowadays they are found, both in Europe and Africa, mostly in cultivated farmland landscapes. It is a bird species that loves open cultivated areas, with open foraging areas, breeding possibilities and waterholes. They avoid heavily forested areas and prefer sunny and dry open terrain with protection against the elements. On mainland Europe they can be found up to a height of 350 meters above sea level. In Africa the European Turtle Dove occurs up to 1300 meters above sea level.

In Europe the European Turtle Dove does have to compete with the Eurasian Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*).

### Food

The majority of their diet consists of seeds. European Turtle Doves are opportunists and eat seeds which can be found at that specific location and time of year. These are both seeds of wild plants and of cultivated crops. Berries and insects are consumed too. Even though the European Turtle Dove resides a lot in trees, they only forage on the ground. They prefer foraging grounds with open areas to provide them with a view around.

In the breeding season most European Turtle Doves forage individually or in pairs. Outside of the breeding season they forage in large flocks.

### Breeding

European Turtle Doves are monogamous. The subspecies *turtur* arrives in April and May in their breeding grounds in Europe. In the Netherlands European Turtle Doves breed from the middle of May till the end of July. The males mostly arrive earlier and lure the females with their courtship call. When a female is close by the male will follow the female while hopping and purring until the mating occurs. At this stage a pair of European Turtle Doves is often seen sitting together, preening each other's neck and heads like real 'turtle doves'. Both birds build a nest that consists of twigs. The brood consists of two eggs which hatch after 13 to 14 days. Both the male and the female brood and help raise the youngsters. The juveniles will leave the nest after approximately 20 days. European Turtle Doves are sexually mature after one year.

### Migration

*S. t. turtur* and *S. t. arenicola* are migratory birds who after their breeding season migrate to Africa. Some birds of the subspecies *arenicola* spend the winter sometimes in northwest India. The other two subspecies are less focussed on migration and stay on their breeding grounds or migrate slightly to the south. Most birds of the subspecies *turtur* and *arenicola* spend their time in Africa in the Sahel zone from Senegal in the west to Ethiopia in the east. It has been recorded that some individuals of the *turtur* subspecies migrate 4000 kilometres in approximately three weeks.



*S. t. rufescens* (males)



*S. t. hoggara* (males)

## Acknowledgement

I want to express my gratitude to Hein van Grouw, for the opportunity to study the skins of European Turtle Doves in the collection of the Natural History Museum at Tring. I also want to thank Fried Ketelslegers for hours and hours of interesting discussions about our mutual hobby and about the many species of wild dove that have our interest.

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