

# Avicultural experience with EUROPEAN TURTLE DOVES

(*Streptopelia turtur*)

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Part 5 in a series about the European Turtle Dove

## Introduction

*Streptopelia turtur*, the English name: "European Turtle Dove" is debatable as far as I am concerned as *Streptopelia t. turtur* is present most of the year on the African continent, the subspecies *S. t. arenicola* can also be found in Asia, and the other two subspecies *S.t. hoggara*, *S.t. rufescens* never leave the African continent. Is this species African or European? In that respect, the Dutch name "summer turtle dove" is a clear name for this turtle dove that can only be found in our regions in the summer.

I still remember the first time I saw European Turtle Doves, in my grandfather's aviary, 15 years ago. He was very proud to have two pairs of these turtle doves, a turtle dove, as he said, which he knew from childhood, but which he hardly ever saw in the wild again. Shortly afterwards, I bought my first pair of European Turtle Doves, and this species has remained in our collection ever since.

## Housing

Obviously, our goal should be to keep birds in a way that keeps them in good condition all year round. Fresh drinking water and sufficient type-specific nutrition are the basis. I feed our European Turtle Doves year-round with turtle dove grain, pheasant pellets, calcium and grit. Green food is regularly offered to the other aviary residents in the form of weeds from the garden and the turtle doves also occasionally eat from it. Softbill food is also available in the aviaries with other bird species.







dust bath in the summer days. Sunbathing, lying on the ground with one wing pointed all the way into the sky, is standard behaviour as soon as the sun shines directly on the aviary. When it rains, these turtle doves take a "shower" in which the wing is raised in the same way as when sunbathing. However, this always takes place sitting on a branch and never on the ground.

Enough space and sufficient attributes in the aviary such as plants and perches are a must. The big advantage of these turtle doves is that they make use of every layer in the aviary. In my experience it is important that at least one side of the aviary is closed, and that they can find shelter under a 'roof', whether this is the canopy of a tree, or an actual roof, or a piece of aviary covered with a shade net, the turtle doves feel a lot safer that way when they know that they can hide 'under' something. All our aviaries with European Turtle Doves have a roof area, sufficient planting, and a part of the aviary that is covered with shade net.

I have heard many enthusiasts say that these turtle doves will damage their heads if the roof is made of mesh, or if the aviaries are too long, but that only occurs when there is a sparrowhawk or hawk sitting on top or next to the aviary. It is precisely then that the turtle doves make use of the possibility to hide under a roof.

In 2016 I kept a number of these turtle doves in an aviary full of berry bushes. Our assumption was that the turtle doves left the berries alone, but both the red and blue berries were eagerly consumed by them.

What struck me during the 2018 breeding season was that they also opt for protein rich food. The song thrushes which they are housed with were given common green bottle fly larvae, buffalo worms and waxworms in a bowl to feed their young. The turtle doves, both adults and juveniles eagerly joined the song thrushes feasting on this protein rich food.

Clean drinking water is a given, but I make sure that there are water dishes, placed at a height, in the aviary where the turtle doves can wash themselves. Especially in the hot summer days this is used regularly. Sometimes they wash themselves completely in these water bowls, but most of the time they sink into them just too wet their bellies. In addition to these water baths, I have seen the turtle doves occasionally take a







To continue on birds of prey: care must be taken that the European Turtle Doves do not suffer from predation. They should be housed in such a way that vermin cannot enter the aviary and that they can sit in a safe place out of sight from predators outside the aviary. All this naturally results in less stress and healthier birds. Despite the above precautions and care, I have lost some birds. In my opinion, aviaries with a net remain a nuisance with regard to pests such as rats that disturb nests, chase adult pigeons or bite holes in the net so large that birds can escape. That is why all our aviaries now consist entirely of mesh.

The migration period of birds of prey is the main cause of the loss of turtle doves in our collection. I therefore ensure that the roofs of the aviaries are covered as much as possible with shade net during the winter period so that the birds can not be 'harassed' from above by migratory sparrow hawks and resident hawks in search of food. As stated earlier: by partially covering the aviaries with shade net, the birds sit a lot more quietly in the aviary and they fly less erratically when there are birds of prey on or next to the aviary.

An interesting side note is that we have several nesting boxes for little owls in the garden that the jackdaws like to use. As soon as the jackdaws return to our garden for the breeding season, they ensure that no sparrowhawk, hawk or buzzard dares to enter our garden. Like true spitfires, in formation the jackdaws attack any bird of prey that comes close to the garden. The turtle doves are not afraid of the little owls, often the owls sit on top of the aviary and the turtle doves remain calm.

European Turtle Doves in the wild (in situ) migrate to Africa in the autumn. The birds in our collection (ex situ) do not have this option. My experience is that these turtle doves are a hardy species as long as they have drinking water and sufficient and the right food. Protection against the elements is the least that should be offered in the

winter period. Most of our turtle doves have an inside area in the winter, where they spend the night all year round and where a dark-radiating heat lamp burns in the winter period for extra heating for the peacock-pheasants. The turtle doves also make good use of this. Some of our turtle doves only have a covered aviary with two sides closed so that they are reasonably protected. In the winter period I have never lost any birds due to the cold or wet weather.

### Breeding season

I only offer the European Turtle Doves in our collection one nesting option. For the reason that it hangs safely, in a place where the birds are not bothered by changing weather forecasts and where they are the least disturbed. Good use has been made of this to date. No other options are being sought. The turtle doves do not make nests in the food bowl as it is a lot lower and quite open. I make sure that the nest option is suspended at such a height that nest control is easy to perform with the least disturbance.

I don't offer the nest box until March or April and I fill it with a layer of beech chips. Cut birch twigs are offered as nesting material. The doves build their own nest of birch twigs on top of the beech chips. The male brings the twigs to the female on the nest. The female organizes the twigs in the nest. Some nests consist of a few twigs on top of each other and other nests are real structures.

It differs per pair of turtle doves whether they start immediately with a follow-up clutch. Some birds lay a new clutch two days after fledging, in other pairs there are a few days to a week between fledging and a follow-up clutch. In a follow-up clutch, the male brings the female new material for the nest. In our collection, the male brings twigs to the nest both before laying a follow-up clutch and during the follow-up clutch.





From the four breeding seasons 2016 to 2019, I kept track of when the turtle doves started nest building and laying their eggs. The first egg of the breeding season that I collected is from March 9th and the first egg of the last clutch of the breeding season was laid on August 1st. The average weight of 23 freshly laid eggs from our European Turtle Doves was 8 grams. The sizes of 40 eggs from our turtle doves was on average 30 millimetres long and 23 millimetres wide. In the last four years of measuring and weighing the eggs, I have had one exception where the egg was 35.7mm long and 25.7mm wide. According to the literature, the eggs are laid between 36 and 48 hours apart.

It is indicated in the literature that European Turtle Doves leave the nest after 20 days. Personal observations of our turtle doves show that our young fledge on average on days 15 and 16. In 2019, I started looking more specifically at the weights of them. I was able to weigh a youngster just after hatching, this one weighed 7 grams. The young can be ringed from 5 days old. Around the fifth day of life, 15 of our young weighed an average of 43 grams. The young birds fledge around day 15 or 16. At that time, 14 of our young weighed an average of 93 grams.

In avicultural literature it is stated that young European Turtle Doves can be ringed with a 6.0mm ring







around the fifth day of life. From my own observations this is possible between the fifth and eighth day of life. This is mainly because the first young can be ringed from day 5 and the second young is on average two days younger and is occasionally less developed than the first young.

It is stated in the literature that once the young turtle doves fledge, it takes 2 to 3 days for them to fly. When our young turtle doves leave the nest on day 15 or 16, they immediately fly through the entire aviary. After the young have left the nest, they are fed with crop milk for at least another week. In addition, the young birds soon eat the same food as the adult birds.

The neck markings of the young birds start to come through after eight weeks and there is a huge individual difference when the markings are clearly present. The eye colour of young turtle doves is brown up to the age of three weeks. After three weeks, the young develop a light brown or grey-brown eye. As with the neck drawing, it differs per individual when the eye colour changes to yellow-orange. In 2019 I saw and heard a young male, from the first nest from April, courting his fellow European Turtle Dove residents in the beginning of August, at the age of fifteen weeks.

Young birds can be housed with the parents and siblings until spring. As soon as the new breeding season arrives and the males start to define their territory, the father chases after juvenile males. It would seem that the black and white neck markings lead to aggressive pursuit.

If several males are housed in one aviary, this often results in plucking each other's necks bald. In this way, the less dominant birds lose their black and white neck markings and the dominant birds become calmer in chasing after them.

If two males are kept together, it can happen that the dominant male chases the subordinate male so much that he dies of exhaustion. From my own experience with more than two males together in a spacious aviary, this is not the case. Then they still pluck each other's neck feathers, but there is no question of further aggression. If these bald-necked males are set aside, the neck feathers will have grown back within a month.

It has been reported that in protected environments birds live considerably longer than their wild counterparts. A number of ages are known for European Turtle Doves in aviculture. Mr. Schofield from England indicated in 1986 that he had a 13-year-old European Turtle Dove female. Another English enthusiast, Mr. Macklin, described in 1936 that one of his European Turtle Doves was 29 years old and still in good health. Our oldest European Turtle Doves are currently 9 years young, fortunately we can enjoy their company for a long time!

Personally, I think European Turtle Doves are a wonderful addition to the aviary. As long as they are housed as a pair, they are very peaceful towards each other and other



aviary residents. They are beautiful turtle doves to watch and their behaviour makes them very interesting to observe. As far as I am concerned, the icing on the cake is the beautiful courtship of the male in the breeding period!

### Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my parents for introducing me to this wonderful hobby, the possibility to keep this species and especially for all the hours that went into the care when on several occasions, I decided to go abroad and made my parents care for the birds.

### Bibliography

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