

Wild Wednesday, 30 December 2020, Doves, by Walt Anderson

The dove has been a peace and love symbol in various parts of the world, so I will focus on doves as 2020 comes to its merciful end. The Mourning Dove is believed to be the most abundant bird in the state of Arizona, and its range includes most of the continental US. It is a game bird in many states, and annual harvests can range from 20-70 million birds! But that's not why they are "mourning." The name comes from the haunting cooing calls that people sometimes mistake for those of an owl.

To sustain such a large harvest, the bird is a prolific breeder. It typically lays two eggs per clutch, but it renests readily, so its natural rate of increase compensates for the very high annual mortality. A two-year-old dove is an elder, for sure.

Let's look at some photos to learn more about this species and a couple others that occur in Arizona. Please read photo captions to the end, for there are lessons to learn here. The wildlife of Granite Dells is a heritage worth protecting, so as we start the new year, let's do our parts to help out.



Arizona has doves year-round, though some in the winter have arrived from the northern states and southern provinces of Canada. They are tolerant of cold and simply need sufficient supply of seeds to make it through the winter.



Doves and pigeons are in the same family, separated more by size than by any anatomical feature. In fact, the feral domestic bird has been called Rock Dove and Rock Pigeon, confusing the issue even more. There are more than 300 species in the family, and they are found on all continents except Antarctica. Doves have stout bodies, short legs, and small heads. Mourning Doves are strong flyers, which enables them to live in desert areas where they can commute to water twice daily. Unlike most birds, which must tip their heads back to swallow water, doves can suck water in directly, saving them time and reducing risk of predation. They can also store seeds in their expansive crop, which allows them to process the food at leisure and relative safety. They grind seeds with a muscular gizzard. The whistling wings upon take-off have a communication function, as alarm is spread quickly. Body feathers are loose, so a predator sometimes ends up with a mouthful of fluff while the bird gets away.



Doves are monogamous, though with such high mortality rates, they will re-pair after losing a mate. The male is slightly larger, with blue on the crown and nape and varying amounts of iridescence there. When not breeding, doves congregate in flocks, sometimes in the hundreds. You might expect the collective term for a number of doves to be a “drove,” but it’s actually “dule,” a variation on the French word for “mourning.” Here is a cool Yule dule.



Males deliver sticks to the female, who builds a flimsy nest and typically lays two eggs. Both sexes incubate, the male during part of the day shift. He is a good model parent, as he clearly is not shiftless.



Nestlings are fed “pigeon’s milk” by both parents. This is a secretion of the crop and contains a rich mixture of fats and proteins. These fledglings can fly, though they are dependent upon the care of the male for some time; the female usually is starting a new clutch. This was the first instance of double-clutching (you readers who never used a stick shift may not get this, but google it; it’s pretty shifty).



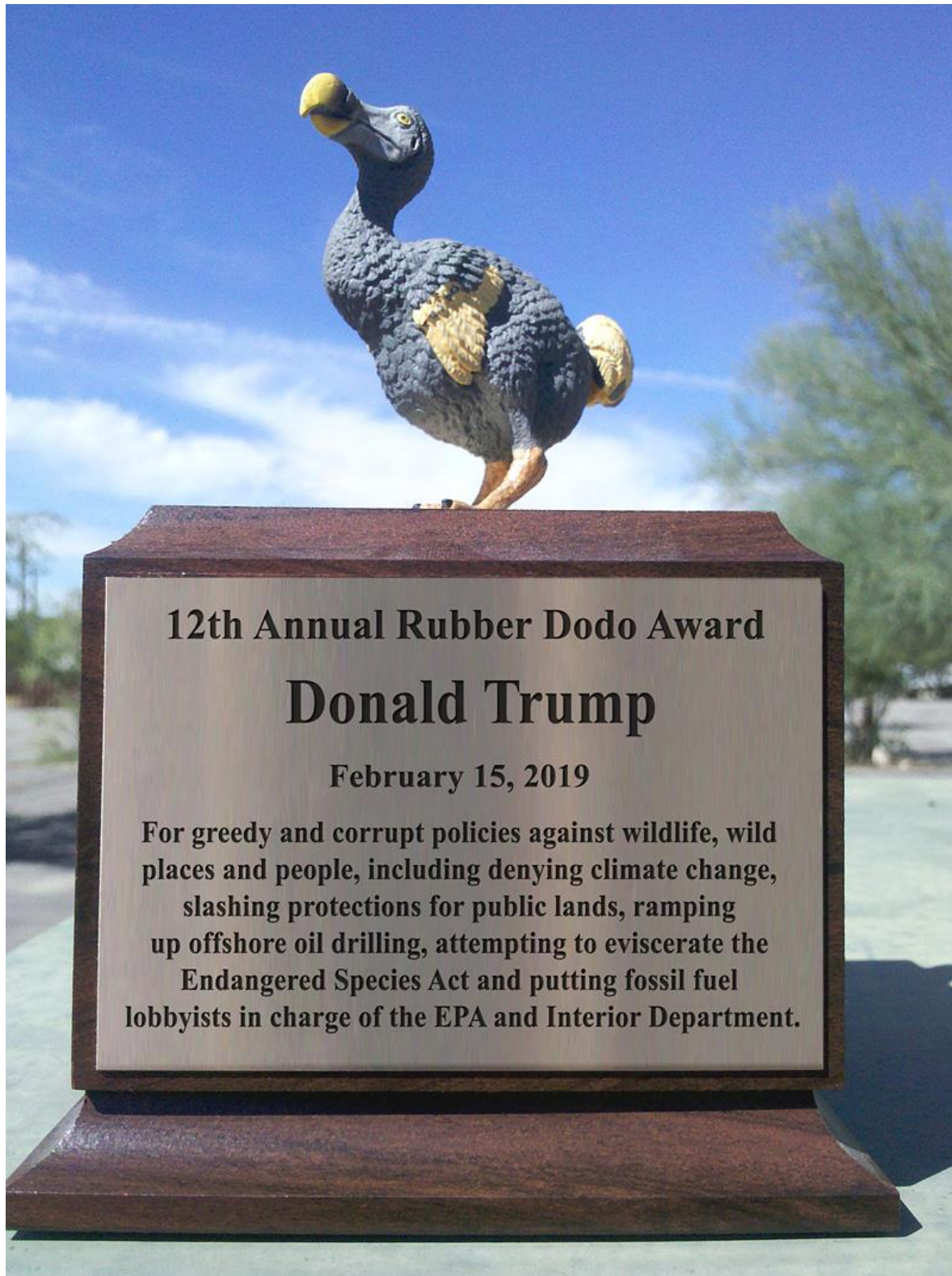
We also have the White-winged Dove in the southern part of Arizona, though I have seen them in the Granite Dells in Prescott occasionally. That's Dells granite in this photo. White-winged Doves can be abundant in mesquite or tamarisk thickets, where their "Who cooks for you?" calls can almost drown out other bird songs. Most migrate south out of the state for the winter. In Mexico, doves are called "paloma." Arizona also has limited populations of three smaller species: the Inca Dove and both Common and Ruddy Ground-Doves. A warming climate and human habitats may allow these to spread farther north in the future.



The Eurasian Collared-Dove is an incredible story of a species that thrives in the presence of humans. It spread from its original range in India and nearby throughout Europe with amazing rapidity, and after being introduced to the Bahamas in 1974, it reached and then spread quickly across the US. It reached Arizona around 2000 and now is found nearly everywhere that people live. This is in dramatic contrast to the demise of the Passenger Pigeon, once the most abundant bird in North America but now extinct because of human persecution. A close relative of our pigeons and doves was the Dodo of Mauritius, which suffered the first documented human-caused extinction of a bird species.



The success of the Eurasian Collared-Dove should not delude us into thinking that we humans are good for birds, as data suggest that US bird populations may have been cut in half in recent decades. Human greed and folly will likely send more species "to go the way of the Dodo." To call out the actions of "those who have done the most to destroy wild places, species, and biological diversity," the Center for Biological Diversity gives the annual "Rubber Dodo Award." If we continue to threaten our natural heritage, it could be we who go the way of the Dodo, and will there be any doves left to mourn us?



12th Annual Rubber Dodo Award

Donald Trump

February 15, 2019

For greedy and corrupt policies against wildlife, wild places and people, including denying climate change, slashing protections for public lands, ramping up offshore oil drilling, attempting to eviscerate the Endangered Species Act and putting fossil fuel lobbyists in charge of the EPA and Interior Department.