



A load of garbage

For as long as we have discarded food scraps and other detritus, birds have made use of it to survive. Today, millions of birds worldwide make a meal of our waste. Nowhere is that more evident than in our cities.

It's lunchtime on a warm summer's weekday in the heart of Bristol. In the city centre along bustling St Augustine's Parade, office and other workers are taking their lunch breaks, sitting around the attractive water fountains, making the most of the sunshine and eating sandwiches or takeaways from nearby cafes. I've joined them to watch what transpires here each and every day because these human workers are not the only ones eating their lunchtime snacks.

Oblivious to the cacophony of noise from incessant buses and cars on the streets all around, and dodging between the office workers' legs, are groups of plump birds, some slate-blue and white, some pink and white. They are busily eating lunch too. They are humble city pigeons and hundreds of them come here on weekdays to make the most of this city centre alfresco restaurant.

But theirs is not a very restful lunch break. Incessantly, they pick crumbs off the neat paving, toss scraps of paper over to see if there are edible morsels underneath, and collect excitedly in lively groups wherever someone has decided to share a little of their lunch with these virtually hand-tame birds. And, frequently to the annoyance of local authorities in cities around the world, many people enjoy scattering at least a few crumbs and watching the ensuing pigeon scramble for the best bits to devour.

Very soon, though, the lunch break is over and people return to their offices or to construction jobs locally. Now the pigeons scurry about, mopping up the last lunchtime scraps, making sure that there isn't a crumb left on St Augustine's Parade. I walk its length and breadth and I can see none; the pigeons have picked it clean.

Then they gradually move away too. On to another spot, perhaps, where the remnants of a Big Mac have been dropped on a pavement or maybe where a shopping centre rubbish bin has been overturned by something much larger than a pigeon, its motley contents scattered in the breeze.

City pigeons, descendants of pale grey-coloured wild Rock Doves (now renamed, rather plainly, as the Common Pigeon) that breed mainly on the ledges of coastal cliffs and frequently interbred with domestic and racing pigeons, are almost certainly the bird that is most instantly recognised by everyone the world over. Even office workers in the world's largest cities – where their encounters with birds are few and far between – recognise this bird, maybe the only one they do!

That's not surprising. City pigeons share much of their lives with us, in cities from Tokyo to New York, London to Sydney, eating up our spilled scraps of food and breeding on the brick and concrete ledges of our buildings, their substitute for the sea cliffs and crevices their ancestors still use.



They loaf around on roofs, in gutters, on ledges and windowsills, in and around railway stations, car parks, town squares and shopping centres. Anywhere, in fact, that they can scavenge some scraps of food. And although they are notoriously tolerant of people when they are sifting around for crumbs on the ground – and will readily feed from your hand – they like a bit of peace and quiet for breeding.

So their favoured spots for laying eggs in the scrappy nests they construct from grasses, bits of rag and paper, and maybe a few leaves, tend to be in abandoned buildings. A deserted seaside hotel with easy access to most of the rooms through broken windows perhaps, part of a factory that has fallen into disuse or on high ledges inside railway stations. Sometimes, too, they will nest in holes in trees.

Living for up to six years, city pigeons are arguably the most successful birds in the world, found in towns and cities across almost every continent. Look closely at some of the film footage of the dreadful New Orleans floods in August 2005 and the only bird that appears on screen is the ubiquitous town pigeon! Able to evacuate far faster – had it wanted to – than the city's human inhabitants, there must have been enough food scattered about to entice them to stay on!

They are unbelievably versatile. A few years ago I was with a group of fellow travellers in the Sahara Desert very close to its dead centre in the extreme southwest corner of Libya, where sand-blasted, dark red mountains devoid of any vegetation contrasted with the wind-smoothed contours of orange-yellow sand.

We had reached a temporary Tuareg settlement where the families kept some goats to graze on the spiny shrubs in nearby wadis and a few chickens fed partly on some corn these semi-nomadic farmers had carried out here with them.

But the scatter of grain in a little enclosure against a cliff that they had constructed to pen in a few young goat kids had attracted half a dozen 'city' pigeons and here they were, hundreds of kilometres from any permanent habitation! And while the flying distance would be no amazing test for a pigeon, how was it that they knew that there was a scatter of grain to be raided in otherwise so incredibly inhospitable surroundings?

For such a resourceful and successful bird – and one that's easy to study because they are so tame – it's ironic that ornithologists have paid it scant attention. Most serious birdwatchers disregard the common city pigeon. Regarding them as a bit of a 'Heinz 57' of the bird world, any serious ornithologist pays them almost no attention.

So it is that in the authoritative *EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds: Their Distribution and Abundance* (T & A D Poyser, 1997), the authors comment that few – if any – birds are as poorly known in terms of their distribution and numbers as the city pigeon and its Rock Dove (or Common Pigeon) ancestor.

So John Tully is a breath of fresh air. A retired deputy headmaster living near Bristol, and a very active amateur ornithologist, Mr Tully is putting the city pigeon on the ornithological map for the first time. Over the last couple of decades he has become the leading world expert on them.

'Birdwatchers want wild birds to look at,' comments Tully. 'I suppose they think that city pigeons are sort of tainted but I think their success makes them even more worth studying. They are arguably the bird that has best adapted itself to live our urban life.'

'It's pretty easy to count them in winter because almost all of them are in towns and cities then,' comments Tully. 'In summer, when they're breeding, they make forays out into the countryside for



food so it's harder then to get accurate counts. But unlike counting most birds, you don't even have to get up early in the morning. Pigeons rise late and roost early. That suits me! They even line up on building ledges like well-behaved schoolchildren', he adds wistfully.

'In the 1991/92 winter when I retired', he says, 'I counted 108 pigeon flocks in Bristol totalling 7,440 birds. I repeated the count ten years later and the total came to between 7,500 and 8,000 birds so it hadn't changed much, if at all. A few flocks had disappeared but many of the others had increased in number, some markedly. But they have declined a bit since then.'

Bristol, with around 420,000 human residents, covers an urban area of 110 square kilometres. So there is one city pigeon for around 50 or 60 human residents.

But what John Tully had spotted in his repeat survey was a big change in where the pigeons were living. No longer were they predominantly in the city centre where they were concentrated in 1991/92. Many of them had moved further out, not to the outer suburbs with their bigger gardens and leafy green spaces, but as far as the inner suburbs – still very built up – closer to the centre. Often where there are shopping centres, pavement cafes and other places where people drop food.

'Where houses are pretty tightly packed as they are in some parts of Bristol', comments Tully, 'there don't seem to be as many pigeons. It may be that, by coincidence perhaps, there are less food scraps or there are more cats to kill them off.'

'But I also think the pigeons like shopping places and piazzas, places where they can also get an open view. It might be something to do with spotting predators like cats, or Peregrines that hunt them or even Sparrowhawks, the females of which are big enough to kill them and carry them off. They don't seem to like being confined too much, where they can't see what's happening around them', he adds.

And the reason for town pigeons moving out to pastures – or more correctly buildings – new? John Tully reckons that it's because much more aggressive Herring Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls have moved into the centre to grab all the scraps and to breed on warm city roofs and ledges where they are little disturbed.

'We have over 2,000 pairs of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls breeding in Bristol now', he says. And they're still increasing. City pigeons have declined by about 28 per cent between 2000 and 2008 but Herring Gulls have increased by 66 per cent over the same time and Lesser Black-backs by 11 per cent. And the gulls nest on factory and office roofs, places often hard for people to get to.

Whether the increase in city gulls will continue is hard to say. They first began nesting on British city roofs in the 1920s. Many spend long periods feeding at refuse landfill sites, then return to their urban homes at night to roost and to breed in summer. They tend to live longer and produce more offspring than their cousins who confine themselves to the coast, their natural habitat.

But land-filling of domestic refuse is declining as more local authorities and consumer groups promote recycling and composting. So their food sources will decline, probably drastically. Their abundance might yet be short-lived and city pigeons might even re-take their city centres!



Gulls can be notoriously aggressive, especially when they have eggs or youngsters nearby. In coastal towns they sometimes even injure people by swooping down to take a sandwich from



someone's hand as they are about to take a bite! They sometimes spray revolting vomit or faeces as they do, a tactic almost certain to cause the hapless individual to drop their snack.

Reducing city gull numbers, or attempting to remove them entirely, is fraught. They largely ignore bird scarers that frighten off other birds. Rooftop spikes, tensioned wires and similar means of deterring city pigeons prove pretty ineffective too. If their nests are removed and their eggs are taken, broken, or oiled to stop them hatching (all perfectly legal because they are listed as pests), the gulls will simply rebuild or re-lay, or choose another nest site in the same area and start all over again!

They might be intimidated by birds of prey but, in addition to being social birds with strength in numbers, gulls are large, powerful and aggressive so they are more than capable of fighting back against any potential predator, particularly if they consider their chicks to be at risk.

City pigeons, a much more delicate and more easily deterred bird, never great squabblers, wouldn't stand a chance of success competing with a noisy, beak-stabbing, bellicose Herring Gull at a newly discarded burger and fries. So, in the long run, city gulls will turn out to be a very much more difficult problem than city pigeons have ever been.

'You get around one town pigeon for every 50 people in most cities', comments Tully. 'I suspect it's higher in tourist areas. I did counts in Bath, a popular tourist destination, several years ago and there the ratio was one pigeon for every 44 people though in Weston-super-Mare it was only one for every 58, perhaps because, as a seaside resort, Weston isn't exactly popular in winter when I did the counts. Or the pigeons don't like the sea air', he adds.

'So much depends on how free of food scraps and other rubbish a town is', says Tully. 'Nailsea in North Somerset [population 18,000] has a pretty reasonable pigeon population and it isn't too spick and span', he comments. 'Thornbury in South Gloucestershire [population 12,000], on the other hand, has cleaner streets and better waste collection. There are almost no pigeons there.'

According to Dr Stephen Baillie, Director of Science at the UK's British Trust for Ornithology, British city pigeons might have shown an upward trend in numbers of perhaps 10 per cent since 1994 though, because there are few data, no one's sure! In the 1960s the best guess was that there were more than 100,000 pairs of them in Britain and Ireland. There has been no proper census to find out.

John Tully, though, is certain that this is a huge underestimate. He's estimated the numbers of human city and large town dwellers in Britain to be about 30 million out of the UK's total population and used his average of about 50 people for each pigeon. That gives a total of around 600,000 city pigeons in the UK! It might even be more.

To anyone who slips headlong on their slimy droppings or has their drying washing stained with the stuff, city pigeons are a pest. But they have their positive attributes too. Tully estimates that the Bristol lot consume between one and two tonnes of waste food every week, anything from discarded apple cores to Kentucky Fried Chicken.

'They don't re-deposit most of it where they feed either', comments Tully. 'Most of their droppings are at their roost sites, mainly dilapidated buildings with a plethora of holes in their roofs and smashed windows. It's only the demolition workers that need worry! Most city people don't come into contact with it', he adds.

But their diet doesn't consist entirely of human society's waste. City pigeons, like their wild counterparts, will also take seeds of garden plants and weeds growing in urban areas. And they



make forays into the countryside in order to feed on grain or other plant seeds too. They pick up grit from roads and pavements, sometimes even small pieces of mortar as a source of calcium and to help physically in their crops to break down the food they eat. After all, British fish and chips can take some digesting.

In spite of emotive language used occasionally by the tabloid press, there is no evidence that city pigeons pose any significant human health hazard, and it's only possible to pick up infections like pigeon lung disease if you work with them in confined places such as pigeon lofts.

They do produce a lot of unsightly droppings discolouring ledges on buildings, and their accumulated guano, being acidic, corrodes the stonework and metalwork, the reason for many such ledges and windowsills now having upright plastic or wire spikes attached to them to prevent the birds landing. Not a modern invention, metal spikes were used for the same purpose in 1444 in Sandwich in Kent according to local church wardens' accounts.

Spikes plus netting to keep pigeons from landing where both pigeons and people are likely to congregate – railway stations for instance – are reducing the places that the pigeons can call home. If these measures become widespread, their numbers are almost certainly going to decline.

Another technique to try to limit them has been to build a modern-day dovecote (see Chapter 3) to entice them away from places where they might cause a problem and then remove their eggs as they get laid. It's been tried, for instance, at the University of Wales Hospital in Cardiff.

'We built a dovecote and two wooden sheds for the pigeons about eight or ten years ago because we had so many pigeons on flat roofs at the hospital,' says Simon Williams, Head of Operational Services for Cardiff and The Vale Health Board. 'We're trying to keep on top of maintenance so that they can't get into roof spaces and other places and we also use spikes and netting to stop them landing.'

'I go there once a week to remove pigeon eggs in the sheds and dovecote and replace them with china eggs,' comments Vicki Watkins of Fauna Wildlife Rescue who is contracted by the hospital. 'It's taken away about two-thirds of the pigeons from the main hospital buildings and their numbers have reduced overall. I've been doing it now for seven years. They use another contractor to remove gull eggs and I believe their numbers have dropped too.'

PiCAS UK, a Pigeon Control Advisory Service, advocate a mix of measures to reduce pigeon problems depending on the site. The mix often involves sealing any roof spaces, installing spikes and netting, building pigeon lofts or dovecotes where the birds are encouraged to breed and their eggs are replaced with dummies to keep the population limited, and, if possible, installing smooth, steep-sloped roof sections so the birds can't land on them.

PiCAS is also quick to point out that killing pigeons simply won't work and uses the example of Basel in Switzerland where around 100,000 city pigeons were shot over a number of years. It made no difference to the numbers in the city; more youngsters survived to fill the gap!

The issue about the mess made by city pigeons came to something of a climax at an otherwise rather ordinary railway bridge over Balham High Road in south London. It was never famous for much, apart from carrying trains in and out of London's Victoria Station but, since August 2000, it's become infamous for its pigeons!

The bridge has ledges on which large numbers of city pigeons roost. A High Court judge, Mr Justice Gibbs, decided that Railtrack (now Network Rail), which owns the bridge, should pay the 'reasonable' costs of dealing with the public nuisance claimed by Wandsworth Council who have to clean up their droppings on the pavements below.



‘As early as the 14th century, Londoners irate with the pigeons at St Paul’s Cathedral were throwing stones at them, thereby breaking windows, much to the Bishop’s consternation’, the judge said. ‘But there is no evidence that the population of Balham has resorted to this form of self help.’

The council claimed that its annual cleaning costs had reached £12,000 whereas the one-off capital cost to pigeon-proof the bridge with mesh would be £9,000. An appeal against the decision was dismissed the following year. Network Rail has around 20,000 bridges in its UK rail system. Luckily for them, not all are home to pigeons.

If we want fewer pigeons in our cities, London’s former mayor, Ken Livingstone, had the right idea. Where city pigeons are abundant and congregate – at well-known tourist spots like Trafalgar Square for instance – signs ask people not to feed them.

The mayor introduced a byelaw in 2002 making it illegal to feed them or to distribute feeding stuffs for them. The same anti-pigeon policy is being continued by the current mayor, Boris Johnson. The reason? Not because of any claims that they are a health hazard but in order to cut the costs of cleaning and repairing the monuments in the square.

In 2001, Bernard Rayner, whose family has sold bird seed in Trafalgar Square for 50 years, agreed to close his stall in exchange for a substantial payoff from the London mayor. After a brief High Court hearing about the withdrawal of his licence, during which Mr Justice Hooper admonished counsel for the mayor for making him ‘spend an awful lot of time reading about pigeons’, Mr Rayner, 47, said he was sad to leave the square.

‘I’ve been concerned with the pigeons all my life, but everything comes to an end’, said Mr Rayner.

If you walk around Trafalgar Square these days, you won’t get hordes of city pigeons around your feet or flying up in front of you. According to the mayor’s office, about 4,000 pigeons here in 2002/03 have been reduced to around 120 now. Many might have simply gone elsewhere in the city but some campaigners are appalled at the policy. Supporters of ‘Save the Trafalgar Square Pigeons’ claim to feed the birds every day outside the banned zone while still campaigning against the ban.

Julia Fletcher of Pigeon Alliance recently called the loss of pigeons ‘the greatest wildlife cruelty catastrophe that London has ever known’ and claimed that autopsies had shown that birds had died of starvation.

Most city authorities wanting to reduce city pigeon numbers quote a long list of ‘pigeon problems’ and refer to numerous complaints they receive from members of the public. The problems include a range of diseases that pigeons carry, allergies resulting from mites and other insects nurtured in pigeon nests, pigeon faeces damaging buildings, nesting materials blocking drains and gutters, and fire escapes and pavements becoming slippery because of their droppings – however correct or incorrect such assertions are.

And while RoSPA, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, lists ‘slips, trips and falls’ as a major cause of outdoor accidents they have no data on whether pigeon droppings are ever a contributory factor.

But most city authorities recognise that many people value having pigeons around and that they have become a generally welcome part of urban life. So most are trying to keep city pigeon numbers down but certainly not eradicating them, an impossibility in any case.

Venice, though, has a completely different attitude. The maritime city has a reputed 100,000 of them, more than its 60,000 human inhabitants. In the fabulous 12th century Piazza San Marco,



arguably the finest built square in the world, they congregate in swarms, picking crumbs from the cafes around and being fed by waiters and tourists alike. Since 2008 it's been illegal to feed them there but not everyone takes note.

'If you want to reduce city pigeons it's easy,' argues John Tully. 'Stop feeding them, don't leave food scraps around, don't drop refuse, have an efficient refuse collection system and the pigeons will undoubtedly decline. Some cities like Bern have reduced them considerably but you have to be squeaky clean to do it. The Swiss are of course,' he adds.

The anti-pigeon lobby generally gets more attention than their supporters, and connotations such as 'stool pigeon' and 'pigeon-toed' don't help. One of the less common supporters is Andrew Blechman, a US journalist who wrote *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's most Revered and Reviled Bird* (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2007), a witty, quirky and sometimes entertaining account of pigeon loving and hatred. But does he fall into his own trap by referring to them as 'scruffy-looking birds with a brain the size of a lima bean'? Most city pigeons I've ever seen look decidedly well turned out and nicely groomed.

Pigeons doing pretty well in our towns and cities are one reason why many pairs of Peregrines have taken up residence on some of our tallest buildings around the world. They have a penchant for taking hapless pigeons in flight, carting them back to their high-rise nests and encouraging the young falcons to devour them.

Might pigeons do well as the result of the smoking bans that more and more countries are introducing? And will climate change benefit them? John Tully thinks so. As more and more people eat outdoors, more food scraps are dropped under their tables. Pigeons – maybe urban gulls too – are bound to benefit.

Most people seem to like having pigeons around. Perhaps it's because they are so tame, because their softly murmured cooing is endearing, or because they have, quite simply, been part of our city scene for so long. Today they are to be found on almost every continent and in most cities the world over ... the most successful urbanised bird we have. They apparently first appeared in London in the mid 14th century, the time that a very much larger – and much more impressively coloured – bird held sway on London's streets.



To the throngs of 16th century pilgrims, most from the countryside, jostling their noisy way across London Bridge to Southwark Cathedral, the familiar stench of excrement would probably have surprised them less than the flocks of huge, rust-red birds encouraged by the city folk to feed off any stinking debris.

They were Red Kites. A bird of prey perfectly content to live off food scraps and small, dead animals rather than kill its own prey, the Red Kite is an impressive beast, surely all the more so at close quarters in a London street!

Well over half a metre in length, with a metre and a half wingspan and a deeply forked tail, in breeding plumage the red kite is a bright rusty red with a near white head. Graceful birds, adept at extraordinary manoeuvres in the air, they made their nests of rags and refuse in the forks of city trees.

Medieval Red Kites apparently thrived in London as they presumably did in most European



cities at the time. John Clark, Senior Curator (Medieval) of Early London History and Collections at the Museum of London, refers to two early mentions of their existence in Britain's capital.

One was by Baron Leo von Rozmital, a Bohemian nobleman who, with an entourage, visited London in 1465 during the reign of Edward IV as part of a tour of 'the western corners of Europe'.

He was well received and dined lavishly with the King, reputedly being presented with 50 courses of food! The Baron refers to clouds of kites in the city and also mentions that it was a capital offence to harm them because they were essential scavengers that helped to clean up the place, though John Clark has never found evidence to support any such ordinance.

The Italian Andrea Trevisano, Venetian Ambassador to England from 1496 to 1498, commented that Londoners tolerated not only Red Kites but crows, rooks and jackdaws too. The kites, he said, were so tame that they would take out of the hands of little children the bread smeared with butter in the Flemish fashion, given to them by their mothers.

'I suspect that the notion of a penalty attached to destroying them was a tale told to foreign tourists. There was of course a penalty for taking the royal swans, but I've never found any reliable reference to legal protection for the carrion-eating birds!' says John Clark. All the same, it was probably widely accepted that they should be left alone because of their usefulness.

But more of a clincher is the fact that Red Kite bones have been found in excavations in what is now the City part of London, the original area of the capital. Alan Pipe, Zoologist at the Museum of London Archaeology, has compiled the records that exist and they show that kites were present there from the 2nd century AD, through the Middle Ages, with the most recent evidence dating from 1340 to 1500. The bones have been found in excavations at Poultry, around the Guildhall, the Baltic Exchange (in what is today the City's financial district) south to Monument Street near the north bank of the Thames and west into Drury Lane.

Ravens were seemingly commonplace in medieval London too. Alan Pipe has numerous records of bone finds dating from AD 70 right through to 1710. Presumably they, too, fed off waste and dumped meat and slowly died out as the city became cleaner. Today, it would be unusual to see ravens in any half clean city. Those famously confined to the grounds of the Tower of London (with their wings clipped to make sure they stay put) would not live there naturally.

Like most growing cities, London was a pretty grubby place through the Middle Ages. But a lot of houses had their own 'privies', albeit often draining into open ditches. There were numerous public latrines for those that didn't, though with all of this effluent, and more, pouring into the Thames, the river was highly polluted and often stank.

'In general, popular writers exaggerate the stinks and filth; academic writers concentrate on the counter-measures adopted by the City', says John Clark. 'The occasional tipping of a chamber pot into the gutter I can imagine went on, but certainly not "households throwing their excrement into the streets" as some writers suggest. Rubbish was collected from the streets on a daily basis. I've noticed that the worst complaints about heaps of uncleared rubbish belong to the period around 1350 and later plague years when there was a fear of disease. Not surprisingly, the public services had broken down.'

'Butchers used to dump their offal onto the shore of the Thames where it would wait for the next high tide to wash it away. Later on they were made to empty it directly into the river from a jetty at high tide so that it wouldn't pile up. Presumably this was the sort of waste that carrion birds would particularly go for', he adds.



Both Chaucer (1343–1400) and Shakespeare (1564–1616) mention kites, though not specifically in London. In his plays and other writings, Shakespeare refers to kites no fewer than 15 times.

Roger Lovegrove in *Silent Fields: The Long Decline of a Nation's Wildlife* (Oxford University Press, 2007) points out that Red Kites were always detested in the countryside because they took farmyard poultry and young rabbits, both important as food for people. So they were frequently killed.

City tolerance changed too as drains started to be installed and some of London's refuse got taken to dumps on the fringes of the growing urban area. By the late 1800s, a huge underground infrastructure of main sewers had been installed at great cost under the direction of Joseph Bazalgette (1819–1891), an engineer still venerated by sewage and water engineers today, though hardly remembered by most people who benefitted.

With better sanitation and refuse disposal, city centre kites declined. Long associated with the squalor and disease that London's municipal engineers wished to eliminate, the Red Kite became the bird no one wanted to see. They were poisoned, trapped and shot, with bounty payments encouraging the carnage.

The last cockney Red Kite was seen flying over Piccadilly in 1859, though most of them had been killed off very much earlier. By 1870 they were extinct in England. In Scotland they hung on until 1900. Only in the wildest, least populated parts of central and west Wales did a few pairs survive.

From that tiny population – reduced at its lowest ebb to six breeding pairs – combined with reintroductions from continental Europe to Scotland and England, the Red Kite is once again on the increase. It hasn't yet attempted to re-establish itself in our towns and cities, where gulls and city pigeons have established a monopoly on discarded food. But who knows; one day they just might turn up on London's streets once again and start breeding in its parks. They've already been seen diving into streets in Leeds city centre!

Red Kites have a surprising habit of decorating their stick nests – almost always built in a large cleft in a tree – with coloured objects. Often it's clothes, underwear taken from washing lines, handkerchiefs, gloves, even hats. Sometimes it will be children's soft toys, crisp packets or other colourful items.

Shakespeare even wrote the habit into *The Winter's Tale* where the character Autolykus, himself a petty thief, says: 'My traffic is sheets; when the kite builds, look to lesser linen.' Henry Williamson (1895–1977), the natural and social history writer, even wrote a short story, *The Flight of the Pale Pink Pyjamas*, about a Red Kite's assault on a clothes line!



Kites the world over are humankind's free sanitary engineers, eating up huge quantities of food scraps in cities and wherever there are uncovered refuse tips. Most of them are Black Kites, arguably the most common bird of prey worldwide.

Not actually black but a rather dull dark brown in colour, and nowhere near as attractive as their red cousins, Black Kites inhabit most continents and many cities. From Bamako, Mali to Cairo, Egypt; from Mumbai, India to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Black Kites are to be seen drifting in the warm air, waiting to plunge to the ground to seize some discarded food scrap or anything edible from a market stall. Flocks of them congregate at refuse tips.



Visiting sprawling Mumbai's huge municipal refuse tip in its eastern suburb of Deonar is not something I would recommend. It certainly isn't in any of the tourist guides. But, accompanied by a security guard nervously tapping his lathi, the long truncheon-stick carried by Indian police, it proved possible, though difficult, to get permission to walk over the huge dump. It is not an experience for the sensitive.

The squalor and stench is stomach-churning. Rabid dogs abound. And some desperately poor people eke out a living of sorts by sifting through every lorry load that arrives. Mostly these people live in the squalid shanty towns surrounding the dump, the whole site a disgrace in a country with one of the most vibrant economies in Southeast Asia. Begun in 1927, it's the oldest and the biggest open refuse dump in Asia, taking 70 per cent of the city's refuse.

While most such dumps are 'retired' within 30 years, Deonar has exceeded its saturation point and the garbage piles as high as nine-storied buildings and covers well over a hundred hectares. Around 1,200 trucks from all over the city come here daily, disgorging around 8,000 tonnes of garbage to add to the piles. Proposals to close it and install a modern facility, something talked about for a decade, were again rejected in May 2009 'for further studies' while around 2.5 million people remain affected by the pollution from it.

All this detritus, though, attracts plenty of birds. Squabbling parties of Black Kites take to the air as I approach them, then circle ominously before landing to sift through another new pile of refuse nearby. Phalanxes of snow-white Cattle Egrets, standing incongruously neat as choirboys on a knave of putrid discards, compete with the more aggressive kites for scraps of food. And flocks of delicately coloured Yellow and Citrine Wagtails pick off insects from the clouds that this urban horror breeds.

Vultures the world over will eat food scraps too, but many of them specialise in searching out the corpses of dead animals as they drift effortlessly on warm air high above. A pack of a hundred or so aggressive, hungry vultures can reduce a farmer's dead cow to bones in an hour. In keeping all manner of diseases at bay as a result, they are probably more important in many poor developing countries in Africa and Southeast Asia than antibiotics are in combatting human disease.

Not as showy as kites, and often not as obvious as pigeons, sparrows are great city cleaners too. Sit in an outdoor cafe in Madrid or in Marrakech's famous gravel-covered Djamaa El Fna square and chirpy House Sparrows picking up crumbs under the tables are as guaranteed as a good cup of coffee.

In Marrakech's case, though, they are likely to be accompanied by House Buntings, far more colourful, orange-brown sparrow relatives. Virtually worldwide in their distribution – though introduced to the Americas, Australia and New Zealand – House Sparrows will often take crumbs from your hand, so tame are they at pavement cafes.

Denis Summers-Smith, a life-long expert on sparrows and the ubiquitous House Sparrow especially, in his *On Sparrows and Man* (The Thersby Group, 2005), describes the close interrelationship between us and the cheeky but loveable little bird, which probably began at least 10,000 years ago when early hunters started to grow crops. House Sparrows began associating with wheat farmers in the Middle East ... and Tree Sparrows with rice farmers in China. They've lived close by ever since!

Other birds eat up our discarded food and associated detritus from human society too. Tree Sparrows, tidier-looking but similar to their house cousins, are the most common sparrow in cities



in China, Japan and parts of central and Southeast Asia. In hectic Bangkok, they are extremely common around many of its streets, picking up whatever morsels they find in spite of the vast numbers of lorries and cars so close by.

Sparrows are not known to be very noisy and their vocals fade into insignificance alongside what must be one of the noisiest city birds in the world. The house crow, a rather scruffy black and grey crow larger than a jackdaw, makes its presence felt in villages, towns and cities all across India, Nepal, Pakistan and wider afield where, in some places, it's become established after hitching rides on ships! As its name suggests, nowhere does it live outside urban areas.

The House Crow is an aggressive scavenger that will eat almost anything, from discarded food in refuse bins (which it will ransack) to road-killed rats. In a day, the House Crows of Mumbai probably mop up thousands of tonnes of waste that would otherwise make the city's backstreets even more squalid than they often are.

But its downside is that this crow leaves a trail of destruction – plastic bags and other debris – in its wake. And it also decimates local wildlife, aggressively snatching many birds' eggs and chicks as well as taking frogs, lizards and other small mammals, sometimes raiding people's homes to see what it can get and dive-bombing people carrying food.

This is a bird to watch! Its spread might be unstoppable. It has got as far as the Middle East, into Australia (where it has since been eradicated) and even into parts of the Netherlands. It hasn't yet made it to the southern US or South America where the climate would suit it just as well. But it might.

Much less aggressive, the Australian White Ibis – a large wading bird found naturally in wetlands, grasslands and estuaries where they feed on frogs, crayfish, fish and large insects – has, rather peculiarly, turned its attention to city life on that continent.

These days you are likely to encounter groups of these black-headed white birds with their long curved beaks raiding garbage bins or stealing food at picnic sites in Australian cities. While they are quite harmless, some people find their large size, and particularly their beak, intimidating. They also make quite a slimy mess wherever numbers of them roost. But they might not have become city slickers had it not been for the diversion of so much water from inland rivers for the irrigation of farm crops, reducing the amount of damp habitat in which they can feed. It was a case of adapt or perish for the Australian White Ibis.

In Indian cities, Common Mynas – brown, starling relatives – are abundant, frequenting railway lines and both urban and suburban areas where they feed aggressively on any food scraps, taking food from rubbish bins and collecting at picnic sites. Where they've been introduced, in eastern Australia and New Zealand's North Island for instance, the Common Myna is regarded as a serious pest.

Maybe the bird owes its success in the urban and suburban settings of Sydney and Canberra to its origins; having evolved in the open woodlands of India, this bird is cut out to live in habitats with tall vertical structures and little to no vegetation on the ground. And that sums up many a city street!

Crows in particular are ardent road scavengers – Magpies and Carrion Crows in Europe, House Crows in much of Southeast Asia. Several different species of vulture across the world do the same. After all, why do all that searching for a meal if there's a takeaway just along the road.

In the countryside, it's usually not possible to get very close to birds. In cities, it's easier. Urban birds, those that make a meal out of our discarded food scraps especially, can be extremely tame



and confiding. So it is that most of us admire those cheeky sparrows brave enough to hop onto our picnic table. And the city pigeons that scramble around our feet if we accidentally drop a few crumbs from a lunchtime sandwich.

It's only in our towns and cities that people can experience wild birds up close and intimate. Otherwise, the closest we can get is by looking at their images ... on television and in art. And that is the subject of the next chapter.



A load of garbage



Above: Share and share alike. City pigeons join in with workers taking a lunchtime break in the centre of Bristol, UK.

Left: Who dares wins. An aggressive seaside Herring Gull dives to steal some food in Ostende, Belgium.

Right: Litter pickers. A noisy group of House Crows in Oman work their way through the contents of a skip to find anything edible.

A load of garbage

