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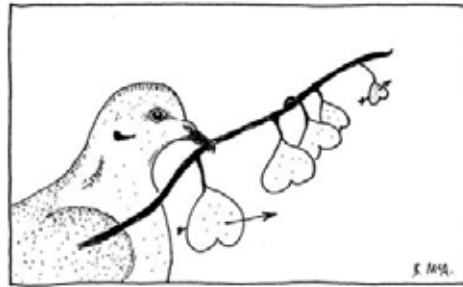
“Turtle dove done drooped his wings. . .”

That line is from an old song from the Georgia Sea Islands. The verses never made much sense to me when I heard them on our Burl Ives record, though the drooping wings felt melancholy. This song was the first I heard with a turtle dove in it, and it has stayed with me since childhood. Songs I have learned since then just about always make use of a line rhyming “dove” and “love,” so we file away a subconscious association of doves and romance. Then it is a short step to doves-and-peace, as in bearing an olive branch.

The turtle doves in this neighborhood are called mourning doves, though I am not sure why. My guess is we humans tend to anthropomorphize the behavior and utterances of our fellow creatures. We look for ways to identify with them, to feel what they are feeling or to think they are feeling what we feel. Here is another song:

You hear that lonesome turtle dove,
That flies from pine to pine.
He’s mourning for his own true love,
As I will mourn for mine.
Storms are o’er the ocean, love,
The heavens may cease to be,
The earth may stop its motion, love,
If I ever prove false to thee.

There is lots going on here in someone’s poetic imagination, and it does turn out that when the turtle dove droops his wings, he is courting. He sometimes strikes his feet hard on a perch, one foot after the other, ruffles up the feathers of his neck and rump, spreads his tail and droops his wings, according to Edward Howe Forbush writing in 1926.



As for his cooing, this heralds the coming of spring described in the “Song of Solomon” in the *Bible* (2:11-12), when “the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.” Our doves engage in both billing and cooing when feeling amorous. Males give the long-coo when wanting to attract females. “Whoo-hoo-hoo. . . oo-oo-oo.” They also put on an aerial display, clapping their wings together for a quick flight upward to about a hundred feet, then spiraling down with wings held low.

There is also a short-coo, “Whoohoo-hoo,” and sometimes doves make a whistling sound. Folks thought this was done somehow by the wings while in flight, but then Forbush heard the whistling from a bird that was perched and still.

“Billing” is also part of courtship. The female puts her bill inside that of the male. Then they bob up and down several times, holding on by their bills. They do this just before mating.

When building a nest, the male brings twigs one at a time and presents them to the female. He may even stand on her back and pass them to her over her shoulder. They work together to make the nest and then take turns incubating their eggs. In one case, the male stayed on the nest from morning to evening, and the female from evening to morning. There was a shift change sometime between 8:30 and 10:30 a.m., and then another one in the afternoon

between 4:30 and 5:30 p.m. There are typically one to three eggs, which hatch after two weeks, and a pair of doves will raise two broods in a summer.

Once the chicks hatch, the parents feed them on “pigeon milk,” which is a thick liquid containing sloughed-off cells from the lining of the adult’s crop. This milk is a rich and cheesy curd, 35% fat. Cow’s milk is 5% fat, at most. Young pigeons are ready to leave the nest when they are twelve to thirteen days old.

Mourning doves are big birds, nearly two feet long with a wingspan of about eighteen inches. They have long pointed tails, “lake red” legs and feet, and claws which the old books describe as being “horn blue.” They only weigh three ounces.

Our string band used to play for many outdoor weddings. I remember one sort of new-age hearts and flowers flavored one in which a bridesmaid released balloons over a field and made a short speech about these balloons symbolizing “peace and love and truth and dove.” We have enjoyed quoting this ever since. My favorite story, though, is of a young man who made his first trip out west one summer during his college years. A professor hired him and other students to work on an archaeological dig in Colorado. His first night there he slept out under the stars, full of the romance of the west. Ever after he would tell how excited he was to wake to the sound of coyotes howling. He’d never heard this back home in Boston, so it was a great thrill.

Dad would finish his story with a laugh, saying he soon learned that what he’d heard that time was a mourning dove. — Bonner McAllester