

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

It is about 4:30 in the afternoon, and as I have come to expect, the morning doves are gathering beneath my feeders to entertain me once again. Even the amusing way they walk has a very useful purpose. Doves thrust their head forward then hold it stationary as their body catches up. This allows them a moment of steady vision that is much clearer than when their head is moving. They may appear silly, bobbing about, but they are better able to see danger before it strikes. In spring, when they once again begin the courting game, they are a source of additional entertainment, singing their mournful songs, circling to a fluttering landing before a potential mate, then strutting, bowing low and cocking their tails.

Like most seed eating birds, doves have crops, a balloon-like sack in the throat that serves as a storage bin, holding food that will be digested later. Most of the year a mourning dove's crop works in the same way as other birds—except during nesting season. During the last week or so of incubating the eggs the crop of the dove, and other members of the pigeon family, undergoes amazing changes. In both parents the walls of the crop increases to as much as 20 times the thickness of normal as it prepares to produce crop milk. For the next few weeks the crop of both male and female will secrete a milky substance that contains more fat and protein than is found in cow's milk. This pigeon's milk is 25-30% fat, 5% lecithin and 10-15% protein.

For the first three to five days after the chicks (called squabs) have hatched they are fed this milk exclusively. Then, seeds are slowly introduced, mixed with the crop milk, making a substance somewhat like cream-of-wheat. The parents go on producing crop milk, which will be added to the squabs diet of seeds, for about 18 days.

The diet of the adult mourning dove is 98% seed and grain, which is low in fat and protein, needed by developing chicks. Morning doves have evolved the ability to produce pigeon's milk, solving the difficult problem of how to provide the fat and protein their chicks need to mature into healthy adults.