

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

The Real Topknot Pigeon!

CRESTED Pigeons (30cm) are not Topknot Pigeons (45cm)! Crested Pigeons, with lovely erect crests, live in the suburbs throughout Australia, singly or in small groups, feeding on native seeds. Topknot Pigeons are large with swept-back red-brown non-erectile crests giving the head a uniquely untidy shape. Topknots are never in the suburbs, never come to the ground (even to drink) and feed in large groups exclusively on fruit in the high rainforest canopy and are found only on the East Coast of Australia. The backgrounds and lighting effects in the two photos reveal the two birds' striking habitat differences.



CRESTED PIGEON

An Aboriginal Dreamtime Legend clarifies how the solitary behaviour of a boy named Goola-willel led to his tribes' totem, the Topknot Pigeon, which constrained the tribe to travel in groups, never alone, to search for food. Immense Topknot flocks were seen by Captain Cook's crew at Cooktown in 1770 and much later feeding flocks of 20,000 birds were reported. When early settlers arrived, they cleared the rainforests and hunted the Topknots for food which decimated their numbers. In recent times, Camphor laurel fruit provide a substitute diet, but flocks seldom number more than 200 birds.

Topknot pigeons search for the most succulent fruits because their thin-walled gizzards cannot digest the seeds. Nomadic and highly mobile they follow seasonal fruit-ripening patterns and travel long distances to find food, often in large, straggling flocks. This fast-moving, high-flying flock is usually how they are observed in the west of Brisbane. They feed on 80 plant species which provide fruit during every month of the year. Topknots cannot digest so they disperse the seeds of around 70% of plant species in Australian rainforests. This long-distance movement of seeds away from parent plants is a key contributor to the dynamics of plant communities, reducing density-dependent seedling mortality, and contributing to the maintenance of plant genetic diversity.



TOP KNOT PIGEON

~ Jim

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Digital Bird Guide: <http://www.moggillcreek.org/>

Images: Courtesy of
Ed Frazer at Brookfield