

Inca Dove

Among the birds in our area that are taken for granted is the petite Inca Dove. About half the size of a Mourning Dove, the Inca Dove is one of our backyard birds that lives peacefully in small flocks where food and cover are present. Inca Doves often live around people both in the city and on farms and ranches. About the only time they attract attention to themselves is when they are calling. Their calls sound like “*no HOPE! no HOPE!*.” Their peaceful demeanor and message of “no hope” do not seem to fit.

I mentioned the Inca Dove’s seemingly peaceful life style. When I lived in Australia a common dove, called the Peaceful Dove, seemed to occupy the Inca Dove’s niche there. About the same size and with a similar plumage, the Peaceful Dove reminded me of at least one of the birds I missed back home in America. Most of the birds in Australia are distinctively different from our birds, so seeing one with close resemblance to an Inca Dove was special. Parts of Australia may look like Texas, but with many parrots and kangaroos around, I knew this was not Texas.

In South Texas the Inca Dove and another small dove, Common Ground Dove, are often called “Mexican” doves by non-birders. These two doves do not naturally hang out together, but look similar enough to be confusing to casual birders. Inca Doves have long tails with white spots; whereas, the Common Ground Doves have short black tails. Both have scaly patterns on their breast plumage and have rufous wings. Both prefer to live on the ground when foraging.

I am concerned for the future of the small ground doves as our populations of invading White-winged and alien Eurasian Collared doves take over habitats frequented by the ground doves. Mourning Doves may also be in trouble competing with these two aggressive doves. We are just beginning to see the explosion and expansion of the collared doves following the white-wing’s northern range expansion out of Mexico and South Texas. Time will tell how the competition plays out, but I believe the smaller doves will suffer.

Inca Doves inherited the non-engineering genes of their expanded dove and pigeon family. Most doves and pigeons construct, using the term loosely, almost flat platforms of sticks which they use as nests. Their eggs and young are not hidden very well, usually sitting on a strong limb or

other form of a sturdy platform. If nests were built out on more flexible limbs on the periphery of a tree canopy, it would seem the wind would blow them away. However, pigeons and doves do not seem to suffer population losses from their shabby nest construction. If it works, why change it. One behavioral habit of Inca Doves has always fascinated me – their roosting method, especially in the cold winter months. While living in Houston we had numerous Inca Doves in our neighborhood. One night I happened to observe a small group of Incas roosting in one of my backyard trees. Three doves were huddled closely together on a limb shielding them from the cold north wind. On top of the lower level of doves were two more doves in a stacked position. I remember seeing them stacked three deep one evening. The amazing thing was that they could hang on to each other and not tumble out of the tree. What a way to keep warm.

I also enjoyed seeing their courtship rituals. The male tilts forward with his tail held vertically and flared, showing the large white spots on the outer edges of the tail. The male struts and coos in front of the female to attract her attention. If other males join in the ritual, the fight is on between the males. Like a boxing match, these conflicts have pauses while the combatants preen themselves before the start of the next round. Never was sure how the winners were selected, but the ritual was fun to watch.

If you have Inca Doves in your neighborhood or on your farm, you might consider paying closer attention to the doves' activities. Their show might be better than what you can find on television. I think the doves are better actors.