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A Record of the European Turtle-Dove in the Florida Keys

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On 9 April 1990, Wells (Hereafter PW) observed a strange dove at the Lignum Vitae State Botanical Site's private access point on Lower Matecumbe Key. On 10 April, he described it to Hoffman (hereafter WH) as most resembling the Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) as illustrated in the National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America (National Geographic Society 1983) but differing in several respects. It was present all day on 10 April. WH and Richard Sawicki of National Audubon Society observed and photographed it shortly after noon and WH photographed it again at 1800 hrs (Fig. 1). The bird was observed at leisure at distances of as little as 10 m as it fed on a mowed lawn and bare ground with Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*) and Common Ground-Doves (*Columbina passerina*). Using Goodwin (1983) and Cramp et al. (1985), WH identified the dove as a European Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) in bright and unworn adult plumage (the British literature calls *S. turtur* the Turtle Dove, but that English name is inadequate because there are at least five species called turtle doves worldwide). On 11 April, the bird was seen by Smith (hereafter PWS), Sue Smith and Mickey Wheeler and examined carefully with a Questar telescope as it sat in a Gumbo Limbo (*Bursera simaruba*) tree. Despite regular subsequent searches by PW and WH, the bird was not seen again.

European Turtle Doves have several close relatives in Africa and Asia [Dusky Turtle-Dove (*S. lugens*); Pink-bellied Turtle-Dove (*S. hypopyrrha*); Eastern or Rufous Turtle-Dove (*S. orientalis*); and Laughing Dove (*S. senegalensis*)], but *turtur* can be distinguished by details of back and wing color, grey crown color, pinkish breast color, and/or tail pattern, and especially by the black neck-patches prominently hatched with silvery white. *Streptopelia* also includes the Spotted Dove or Lace-necked Dove (*S. chinensis*) and a group of species with solid black half-collars on the backs of their necks. The latter group includes the Ringed Turtle-Dove (*S. risoria*) and the Eurasian Collared-Dove (*S. decaocto*), both established exotics in Florida. The European Turtle-Dove breeds throughout temperate western and central Europe, and locally in north Africa. Most of the population migrates to sub-Saharan Africa to winter (Cramp et al. 1985).

The occurrence of this bird in south Florida is not easy to explain. We consider three possibilities: the bird escaped from captivity or was deliberately released; the bird crossed the Atlantic on its own from its natural range; or the bird crossed the Atlantic assisted by one or more rides on board ship.

Because pigeons and doves are popular cage birds, any exotic columbids appearing in Florida (other than some Caribbean species) should be under strong suspicion as escapes from captivity. European Turtle-Doves are quite rare in captivity in the United States, however (American Dove Association 1986 directory), and none have entered legally through the Port of Miami in at least five years (USDA data, C. Miles, pers. comm.). The possibility of escape from captivity in the West Indies is also possible; after all, this is the route Eurasian Collared-Doves took to reach Florida (Smith 1987). The European Turtle-Dove's highly migratory habits apparently make it less suitable as a cage bird than the Ringed Turtle-Dove or the Spotted Dove. PWS was able to examine the plumage and feet of the dove on Lower Matecumbe Key through a Questar telescope. Except for a couple

of wing-coverts, the bird showed none of the feather wear common on captive birds. The tips of the tail and primary feathers were clean and undamaged. All claws were examined and showed no signs of abrasion or unusual wear. From this inspection we conclude that if the bird were captive, it likely was held only briefly and almost certainly had been free long enough to molt its entire plumage.

Several lines of evidence point to the possibility of a European Turtle-Dove making its way naturally to Florida. The species is highly migratory, and the distance from West African wintering areas (e.g. Senegal) to south Florida (ca. 6400 km, or 4000 miles) is not a lot farther than the distance from those same wintering areas to the species' northern limits in Europe (5500 km or 3400 miles). The appearance of this bird in mid-April coincides with the peak of migratory movement out of Africa (Cramp et al. 1985). The birds migrate across the Mediterranean Sea and Bay of Biscay, and often appear in the Azores and Canary Islands, so they are able to cross water. They migrate across the Sahara Desert as well and apparently are capable of fairly long nonstop flights. A European Turtle-Dove flying from Africa to south Florida would not have to cover the whole distance nonstop, but could have rested in the Lesser or Greater Antilles or even on the eastern South American mainland. March 1990 was particularly windy in south Florida, with the weather dominated by southeasterly trade winds, so favorable wind conditions for an Atlantic crossing did occur. Vagrancy of spring migrants westward across the Atlantic from west Africa to the Caribbean and southeastern United States has not been noticed in the past [although such a pattern of vagrancy from Africa northwest to New England and the maritime



Figure 1. European Turtle-Dove on Lower Matecumbe Key, Monroe County, Florida, 10 April 1990.

provinces of Canada has been suggested, e.g., Grove et al. (1981) for Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*); and McLaren (1989) for Little Egrets (*Egretta garzetta*). European species that winter in Africa, particularly herons and shorebirds, do seem to stray southward across the Atlantic to the West Indies in fall; a fall record of Common Cuckoo exists for Barbados (Bond 1959). A European Turtle-Dove possibly could have arrived in the western hemisphere in the autumn, wintered in the West Indies or South America, and then migrated north into Florida at the same time its compatriots were leaving Africa for Europe.

The third possibility is that the bird reached the western hemisphere across the Atlantic, but was assisted by a ride on a ship. The best information on land bird occurrences at sea comes from the *Sea Swallow*, the journal of the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society. This journal each year summarizes observations submitted by its members of land birds coming aboard ship, or observed at sea, throughout the world. We perused these summaries in volumes 29 through 37 (1977 through 1987). In all years, European Turtle-Doves were reported seen at sea in the eastern Atlantic, in the Mediterranean, in the Red Sea and/or in the western Indian Ocean, during both spring and fall migration. They were among the species most consistently reported landing aboard ships. One notable occurrence (*Sea Swallow* 30: 79, 1981) was of a European Turtle-Dove that came aboard a ship northwest of Scotland 11 May 1980, rode it south (!) for eight days and 4800 km (3000 miles), and left the ship off the Azores. Given the abundance of ship traffic across the Atlantic, from Africa and Europe to North America, South America, the Panama Canal, and the West Indies, it is perhaps surprising that records of European Turtle-Doves hitchhiking to the New World have not surfaced before.

We would suggest that ship-assisted vagrancy is the most credible explanation for this European Turtle-Dove's appearance, although unassisted vagrancy and escape from captivity are both plausible. Escaped doves, particularly of the genus *Streptopelia*, are adept at establishing breeding populations (Smith 1987), so if this bird did come from a large release or escape, establishment of a feral population is a real possibility. However, to our knowledge, there have been no other reports of this species at large in Florida or elsewhere in the United States.

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