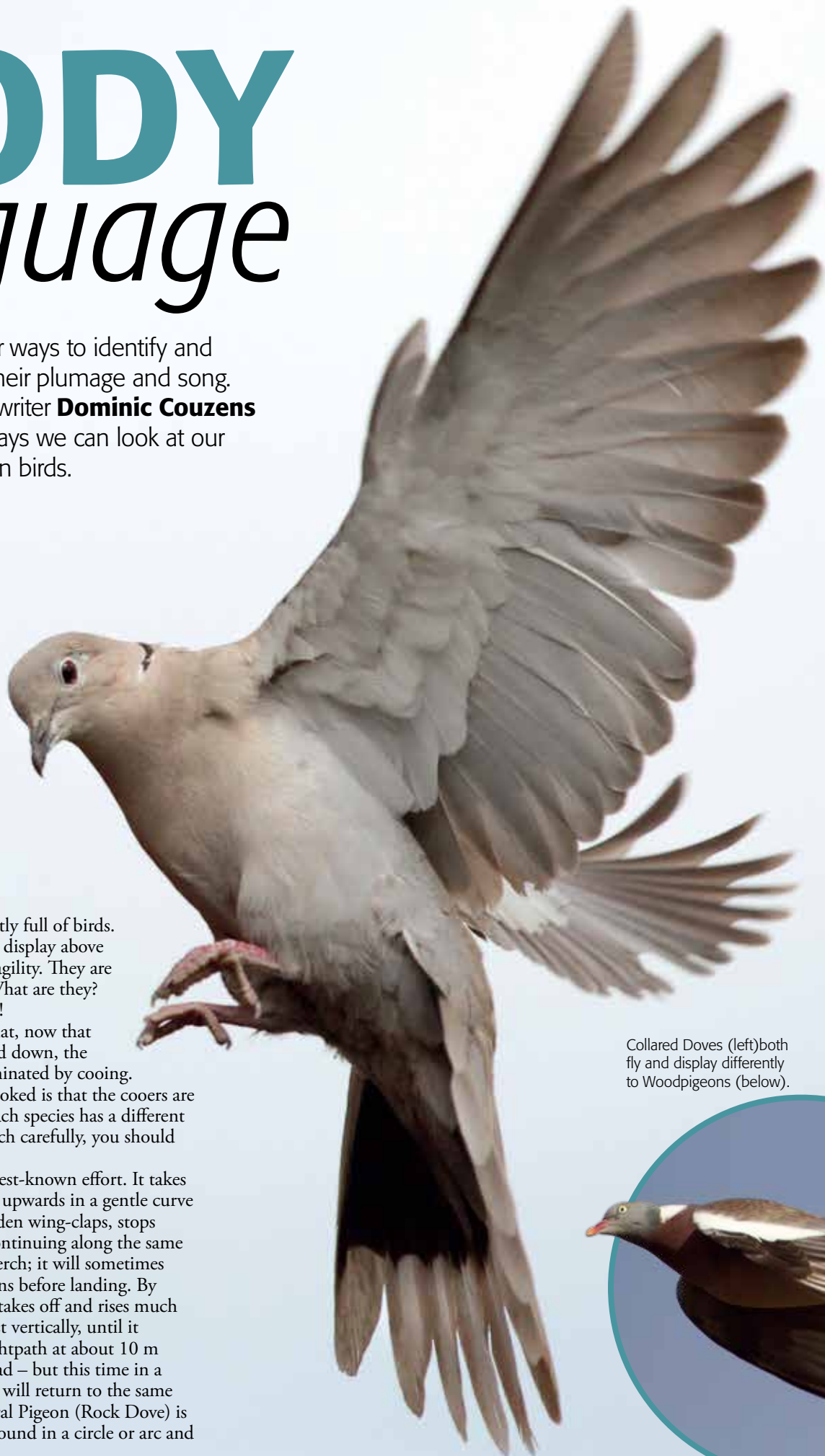


# BODY *language*

There are many other ways to identify and enjoy birds beyond their plumage and song. In this article, nature writer **Dominic Couzens** looks into different ways we can look at our most common garden birds.



The summer skies are currently full of birds. You cannot miss them. They display above the rooftops, showing great agility. They are the epitome of the season. What are they? Pigeons and doves, of course!

You might have noticed that, now that the shriller bird song has died down, the lazy garden airwaves are dominated by cooing. What you might have overlooked is that the coos are hogging the airspace, too. Each species has a different flight display, and if you watch carefully, you should notice the difference.

The Woodpigeon's is the best-known effort. It takes off from a high perch, flying upwards in a gentle curve until it gives a couple of sudden wing-claps, stops flapping and glides down, continuing along the same line away from its original perch; it will sometimes perform several up-and-downs before landing. By contrast, the Collared Dove takes off and rises much more steeply upwards, almost vertically, until it too reaches the top of its flightpath at about 10 m and glides down, wings spread – but this time in a downward spiral or arc, so it will return to the same perch or one nearby. The Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove) is much lazier, simply flying around in a circle or arc and

Collared Doves (left) both fly and display differently to Woodpigeons (below).





Goldfinch (top) perch very upright, vertically, while the Chaffinch (right) has a horizontal posture.

Starlings (right) will walk while foraging on the ground compared with the bounds and hops of Blackbirds (below).



giving some wing-claps, but its party piece is to lift its wings up in a V and spread its tail as it sails through the air.

### FLIGHT PATTERNS

The moral of this is that you can identify pigeon and dove species simply by the choreography of their flight display, without bothering to look at their plumage. Indeed, you can also distinguish a Collared Dove in normal flight by its distinctive “flicking” wingbeat action. There are many garden birds that also give behavioural clues, subtle or otherwise, that help you identify them.

Take the Greenfinch. Another garden bird with summer broods, it is also performing a flight display. It takes off from a treetop and, with delightfully elegant, swallow-like wingbeats, will often describe

a wide circle or a figure-of-eight at constant height, perhaps 50-100 m long, over the garden, singing as it goes. Much less conspicuously, the Goldfinch does something similar, but the Chaffinch never sings in flight. Its party-piece is to catch insects in aerial sallies, like a flycatcher, something a Greenfinch hardly ever does. Have you also ever noticed that, when perched, both Greenfinch and Goldfinch perch very upright, vertically, while the Chaffinch has a horizontal posture? And that when feeding on the ground the Chaffinch has a strange, shuffling gait, moving its head like a chicken, while the other finches hop?

Birds often deliver clues about their identity that have nothing to do with plumage. Take those real aerial birds, the Swift, Swallow and House Martin. They all fly in slightly different ways. Swifts have a tendency to forage high, well above treetop and rooftop height, while Swallows typically flit fast and low, even on sunny days using their distinctive “rowing” wingbeats to skim just above ground. House Martins forage high, but they intersperse short glides, in brief arcs, with bursts of wingbeats. Swifts glide more often. Wet and cloudy weather brings martins and Swifts down to forage low, especially over water.

Back on the ground, some birds give away

**There are many garden birds that also give behavioural clues, subtle or otherwise, that help you identify them.**







Swifts (top) have a tendency to forage high, well above treetop and rooftop height, while Swallows and martins (left) typically flit fast and low.

their identity by how they flee from danger. Take Blackbirds and Starlings. When flushed, a flock of Starlings flies upwards, whereas a Blackbird, usually feeding alone, makes straight for the nearest cover, making its loud, panicky clucking. If you disturb a Song Thrush from a lawn, it also makes for cover, but quietly. On the other hand, if you disturb a Mistle Thrush from a field or large lawn, it flies away to the top of the nearest tree.

### THE WAY THEY WALK

Male Blackbirds and Starlings can look quite similar in a book or app, but once on the lawn they act in completely different ways. When foraging, Starlings swagger with a jaunty walk across the lawn in groups, probing their bills deep into the grass. Blackbirds, on the other hand, will run across the grass and then stop, checking their surroundings, before running another short distance to check again, eventually coming across a worm or other food item discovered. Song Thrushes also do this, but also have a party trick; they use a hard surface to smash open snail shells to get access to the mollusc inside.

Some birds are distinguishable purely in their mannerisms. Perhaps the best example is the

Dunnock. Although very similar in plumage to a House Sparrow, if you watch it for any length of time it soon reveals itself as a very different animal. Sparrows are sociable, loquacious and conspicuous; Dunnocks are usually seen singly, make quiet (although piercing) calls and are both shy and retiring. The Dunnock also has some odd tics; it constantly nervously flicks its wings and quivers its tail, and its gait has a curious shuffling style. Dunnocks are rarely seen away from cover, and mostly on the ground.

You need a good look at a Dunnock to appreciate it for what it is, but some garden visitors are more obvious: Wagtails, of whichever species, cannot stop wagging their tails. Treecreepers creep, mouse-like, up trees, in upward shuffles. Nuthatches often perch with

**Swifts have a tendency to forage high, well above treetop and rooftop height, while Swallows typically flit fast and low**







Jackdaws (left) fly in pairs, even in large flocks whereas Rooks (below) are less coordinated.



Treecreepers (left) creep upwards, while Nuthatches (above) tend to perch with their head down.

their head down and tail up. On feeders, Siskins have a curious habit of feeding upside down.

### MANNERISMS

The more you watch birds, the more you begin to appreciate their mannerisms. Robins, for example, consistently bob up and down on their perch, something you can recognise without seeing the orange breast. Wrens, if you can see them at all, bolt low and with whirring wingbeats across the garden, from one tangle of vegetation to the next.

Some species are difficult to distinguish on behaviour alone, and these include the Blue Tit and Great Tit. Both are common, boorish and confident, and in the summer spend much of their time up in the trees. In a woodland, a Blue Tit tends to spend much of its time high in the canopy, while Great Tits more often come lower down, but this is not a hard and fast distinction. Coal Tits, however, are the only regular garden tits that hover, which they do especially when feeding at the thin ends of conifer branches.

A few birds are distinguished by sociability, not just sociable Starlings and solitary Blackbirds, as mentioned above. Rooks – and also Jackdaws –

are famously gregarious, while Carrion (or Hooded)

Crows tend to be more solitary. Careful, though, it is very possible to see flocks of Carrion Crows. However, the distinction that really works is that Crows make solitary nests and Rooks nest in colonies. Jackdaws show some interesting characteristics, though. Even in their flocks, in the air and on the ground, Jackdaws are obviously in pairs. Their pair-bonds are amongst the strongest of all birds.

Talking of pair bonds, among the most ostentatious are those amongst pigeons and doves, which often huddle together, preening each other like love-struck teenagers. Clearly, all that hard work spent in the male's flight display, as mentioned at the start, pays dividends.

Wasptails, of all species, are obvious with their constant tail wagging.