

# Wonga Pigeon

*Leucosarcia melanoleuca*

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Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

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Wonga Pigeon foraging (photo: Steve Merrett)

## Description

A large, plump pigeon found in rainforests and wet sclerophyll forests in south-eastern Australia, where it forages on the ground for fallen seeds and fruit, also for invertebrates from amongst the leaf litter. Birds also take food from low bushes that can be reached from the ground. When it is on the ground feeding, it walks purposefully and quickly.

Males and females are alike: predominantly grey and white birds with a broad white "V" on their breast and bold black arrowheads on their flanks. The legs, base of bill and orbital ring are pink. Juveniles lack those pink colorations, and have only a few arrowheads on their flanks, plus they have a brownish wash to their upper plumage. No sub-species are recognised.

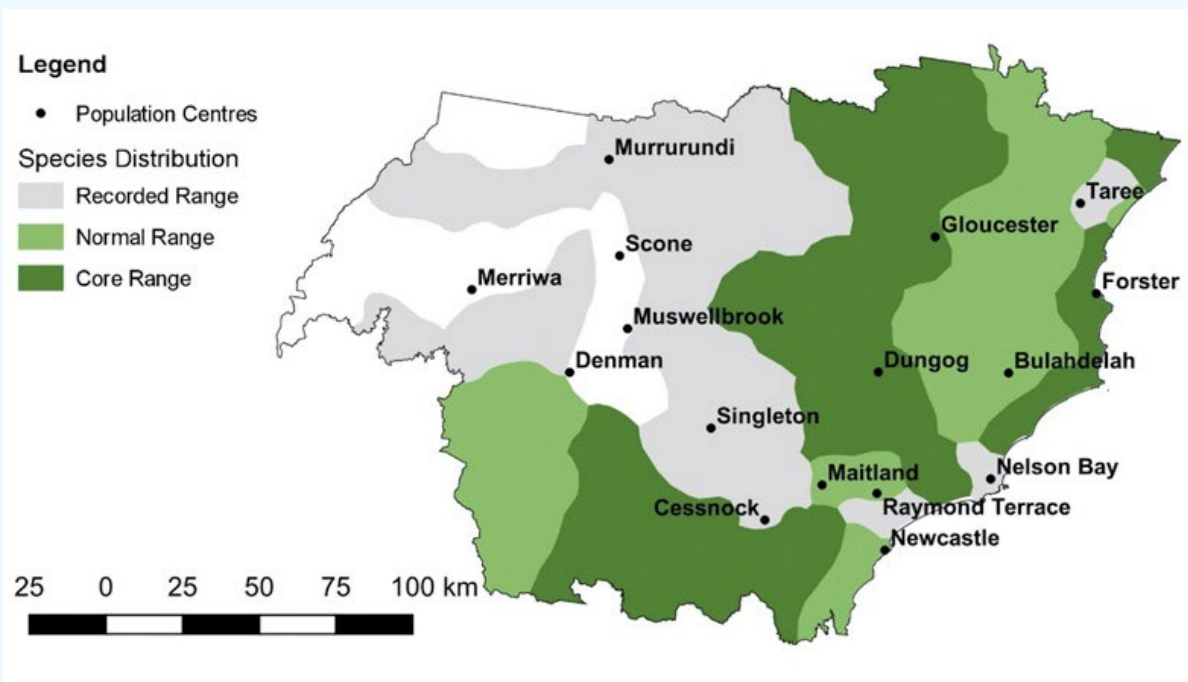
The Wonga Pigeon is a wary bird, more often seen than heard. When flushed from alongside a walking track, an obvious flight feature is the white outer tips on the tail as the birds flies away. A characteristic after the bird flushes is that

it often lands on a nearby branch, raises its tail and looks back at the cause of the disturbance.

The call of the Wonga Pigeon is distinctive; an oft-repeated monotonous single note (“wong”) which carries for long distances (up to a kilometre when the weather conditions are favourable).

## Regional status

The Wonga Pigeon is a breeding resident of the Hunter Region, although breeding records are infrequent (perhaps because the nests are difficult to find). The core range is centred on the well-forested parts of the region. There are fewer records from the more-urbanised areas and Hunter Valley farmland areas, and they are uncommon in the drier woodlands to the west of the region.



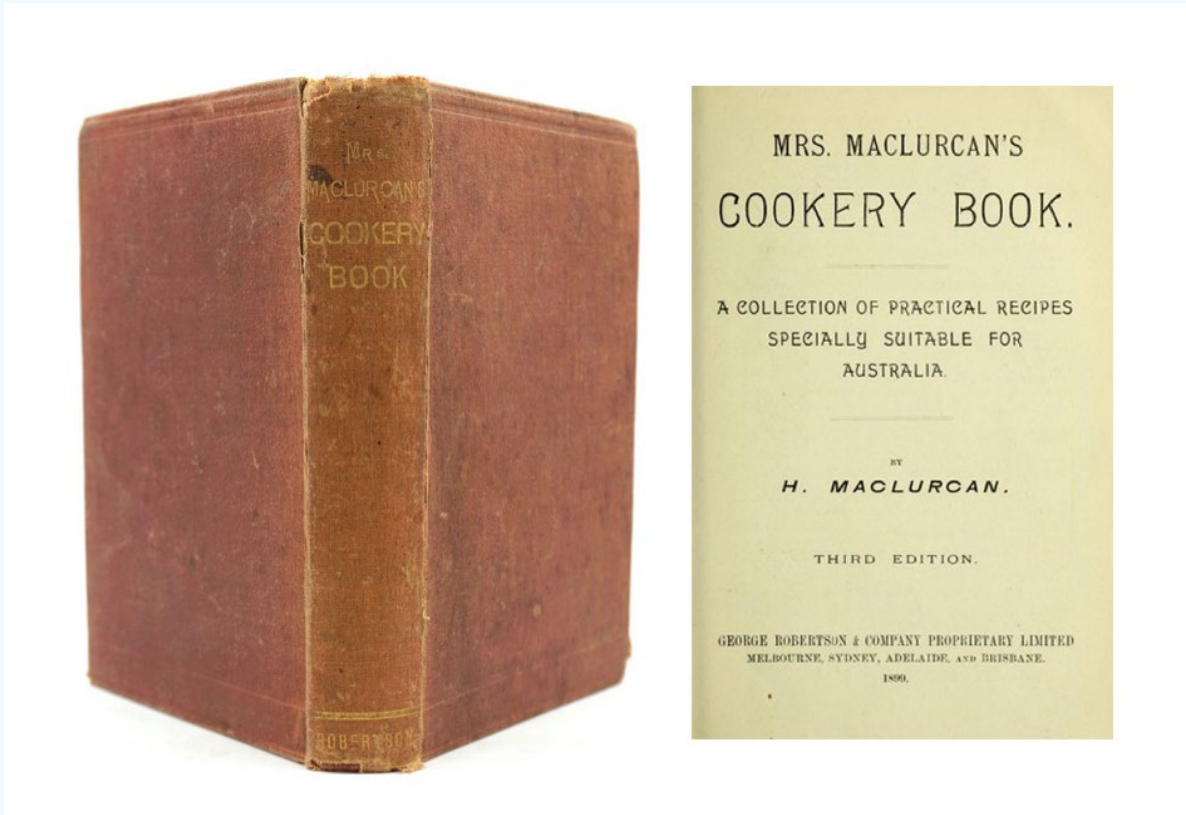
Distribution map for Wonga Pigeon (map prepared by Dan Williams).

## Culinary notes

Killing Australian native birds is illegal now, as of course is eating them, but that wasn't always the case. In the 19th century, and again during the Great Depression, Wonga Pigeons featured in many countryfolks' diets and there were recipes aplenty. For example, a Katoomba newspaper in 1932 published a recipe for Baked Wonga Pigeons, which required three birds plus a special stuffing (of butter, breadcrumbs etc), oven-baked. Around that same time, the Australian Woman's Weekly described a camp cook's creation whereby two Wonga Pigeons were placed inside a hollowed-out pumpkin with carrots and

onions and the assembly baked on hot coals, along with a damper. Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book (published 1898) had a recipe requiring six birds ("serve with watercress if obtainable").

Thankfully, those times have passed, and we can get our enjoyment from Wonga Pigeons by looking at them rather than eating them. Although perhaps it's no wonder that they are such wary birds!



Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book (1898)

## A drinking specialisation

Most birds drink by taking water into their mouth then tilting back their head for the water to trickle down their throat. However, pigeons and doves are able to suck up water and swallow it, just as we humans do.

## About the name

### Wonga Pigeon

Wonga is onomatopoeic for the bird's often incessant call, and is believed to originate from an indigenous language, presumably one from the Sydney area. Apparently, the original name bestowed was Wonga Wonga (and initially without Pigeon tacked on); in the 1926 Australian checklist the use of the single Wonga was formally adopted. The term Pigeon derives from the French word *pijon*, which originally referred to a young dove although later was



applied to any young bird.

*Leucosarcia melanoleuca*

The genus name stems from the Greek words *leukos* (white) and *sarx/sarkos* (flesh); suggesting a culinary perspective may have been applied when naming the bird, rather than a scientific perspective. The species name uses *leukos* again plus *melas* (black) and alludes to the pied nature of the bird's plumage (a name in early use was Pied Pigeon (Latham 1801)).



Wonga Pigeon presenting its richly patterned tail (photo: Stephanie Owen)

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