A PIGEON'S CHOICE OF PLUMS

Oliver (1955, New Zealand Birds, p. 442) includes only the berries of sweetbriar, holly, cherry and rowan among those of introduced plants eaten by the New Zealand Pigeon *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*. In my garden at Belmont, on the Western Hutt hills, Wellington, are two plum trees about 12 ft. high that produce in most years an abundant crop of rather small, indifferent plums. This summer the crop was immense, but probably because of the drought the fruit were even smaller than usual. While they ripened during the first three weeks of January 1970, the trees were frequently visited by one and occasionally by two native pigeons. For about two weeks a pigeon was present more often than not, and examination of its droppings suggested that it was eating little else but plums.

The trees were so heavily laden with ripening fruit that at first sight it looked as if the birds had a superabundance of food. Closer observation showed otherwise. In the first place, many of the plums near the extremities of the slenderer branches could be reached, if at all, only after much manoeuvering for position. Secondly, the pigeon picked only those fully ripened plums that came off with a light tweak of the bill; any plum that resisted was left alone. And thirdly, only the smallest plums could be swallowed whole; larger ones were rejected. Thus, to be eaten, each plum had to pass at least three tests, for accessibility, ripeness, and size.

Most of the plums appeared to be decidedly too large and were completely ignored. Those actually picked were tested in the bird's bill and then either dropped or retained according to their size. If retained, the pigeon swallowed or attempted to swallow them whole; but it found some too large even at this late stage and after vigorously attempting to swallow them eventually dropped them. I measured ten plums that the pigeon had tried unsuccessfully to swallow. Using calipers, I measured two diameters at right angles to each other, and both at right angles to the long axis of the plum passing through the stalk. Each of these ten rejected plums had a minimum diameter of 25 - 26 mm., so it seemed that the pigeon could swallow only fruit that were smaller than this. A few plums that the pigeon rejected without seriously trying to swallow were all appreciably bigger than 26 mm. diameter. The pigeon never tried to eat the plums other than by swallowing them whole. The ground beneath the trees was often littered with plums, but the pigeon only occasionally came down to eat them. Presumably the fallen fruit included a specially high proportion of plums previously rejected.

Though not measured, obviously only a small proportion of the plums on the trees were accessible and of suitable size for the pigeon to eat; so the bird had to work quite hard to make a living despite the great abundance of fruit.

This observation underlines the danger of assuming that an animal has plenty of food just because there appears to be plenty left.

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