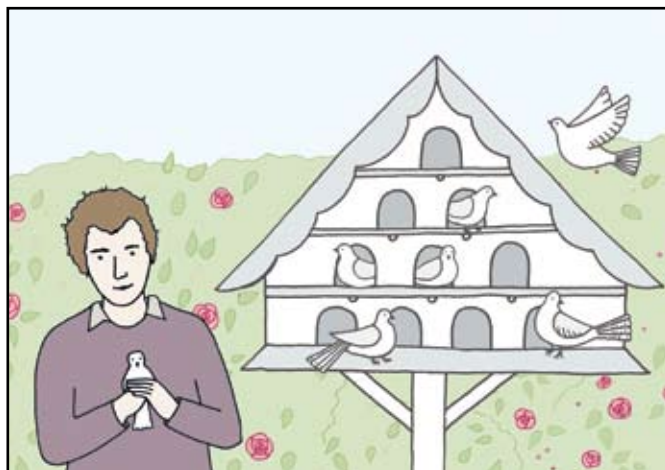



**CONFESSIONS OF A WI SPEAKER** BY MARTIN GURDON


## Birds of paradise?

### IT WAS 7.30AM ON A FRIDAY

when the phone rang. 'I've got them doves for you,' said a voice.

It was the owner of the local organic farm (called Cuckoo's Pit, but known in our house as 'Cuckoo Spit'). Months before, he'd promised to catch some of the wild doves that sometimes roost in his barns to fill our empty dovecote. Apparently he had.

I was facing an early morning bout of physiotherapy. Couldn't I collect them tomorrow? 'Not really,' came the reply. 'I've got them in a bag.'

Why am I telling you this? Well, as a WI speaker who usually has a chicken in tow, I'm often asked by members whether my wife and I own other animals. This, gentle reader, is by way of an answer.

Anyway, I made a bleary, pre-breakfast trip to be handed a big paper potato bag whose writhing contents turned out to be six white doves, a dove/pigeon lovechild and a lost racing pigeon. I felt all this was a portent of things to come. I was right.

Two years before, my wife had expressed interest in keeping doves in our Kentish garden, reasoning that they would be pretty and low maintenance. We bought a dovecote and three pairs of fantailed doves from a man with a beard and camouflage trousers. After the requisite period of dovecote imprisonment – which meant twice daily climbs up a stepladder to feed and water the birds – we released them. They predictably

decamped instantly, never to return.

Then bird flu terror kept the dovecote unoccupied but with Farmer Cuckoo Spit's offering, the time seemed right to try again. Our new flock was very tame but we couldn't sex the birds, so paired them off on a big dove/little dove basis, and when punch-ups ensued, swapped them round. Eventually we had three male and female pairs and order was restored.

By then we'd released the dove/pigeon and traced the racing pigeon's owner. Back in the dovecote, eggs were being laid and broodiness was in the air, interspersed with much strutting, nodding and twirling. Shortly before we released the doves there was a hatching. Baby doves are *excruciatingly* ugly. They emerge like tiny versions of Doctor Who nemesis Davros and mature into lumpy pink executive stress balls with spiky feathers and warped beaks. Nevertheless we felt that this one might discourage an exodus, so opened up the dovecote.

When the adults emerged there were nest invasions and another orgy of violence – it's a myth that doves are birds of peace. Somehow Junior survived, and everyone made up and flopped on the lawn. Half the doves appeared to have forgotten how to fly, and had to be rescued from our marauding chickens.

Junior was growing fast when disaster struck. Our dove prisons were boxes attached to the dovecote. I'd left one open but in place to make it harder

for the baby to fall out of the nest but the box had shifted, the parents couldn't get in and at 7.30pm had vanished. By 10.30pm they still hadn't returned and in desperation I rigged up an old greenhouse tube heater and cardboard box-with-straw arrangement, pulled on some rubber gloves and extracted baby, who spent the night in our shed.

At 4.30am it was on with the gloves again. I posted Junior back into the dovecote, and the parents duly returned, fed it, then moved into the next door nesting area and ignored it. Cue more nocturnal ladder climbings to reunite offspring with adult birds – who, with joyful cooing, rushed to the baby they'd forgotten. Doves are rotten parents.

'They're latchkey parents,' said a friend from Greenwich who knows about these things. 'Their baby comes from a broken home. Once it grows up it'll start stabbing your chickens.'

Fortunately, it matured into something rather pretty, and a lot less tough than the chickens. We've had at least four more hatchings since and, beyond feeding and watering, the birds take care of themselves. This doesn't make them low maintenance. Doves breed constantly and I'm 'looking forward' to years of climbing ladders and removing eggs.

Topically, given the WI interest in honeybee health, my wife's now talking about getting a hive. I don't think I can handle the stress. **WI**