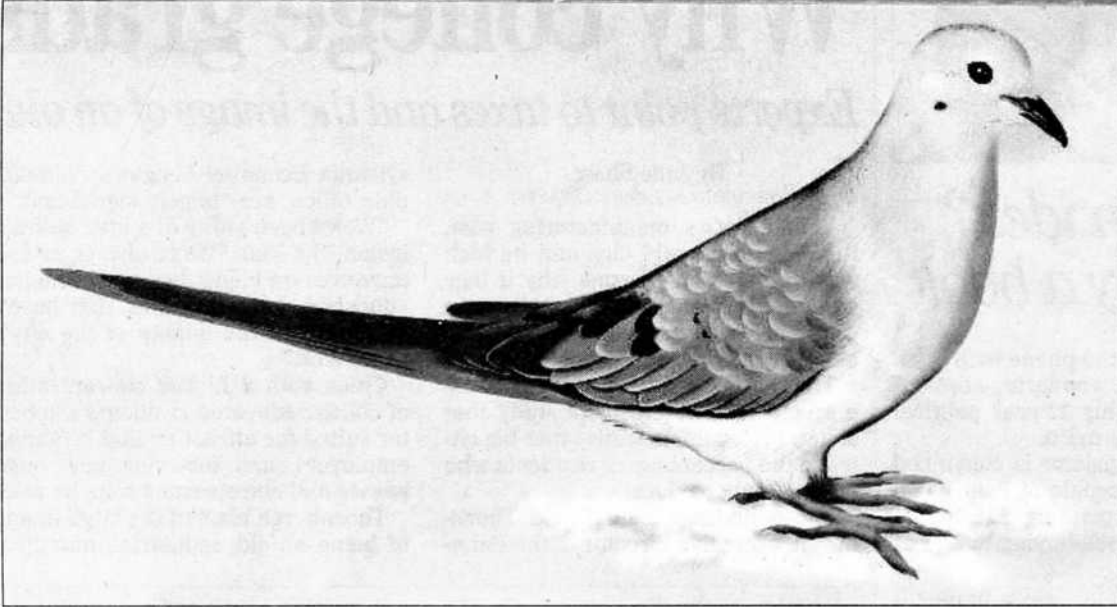


Pennsylvania



MARTY WESTMAN / Detroit Free Press

It's a coo for city gardening.

A lesson in the window box

By Myra Bellin

The flower boxes on the small, second-floor balcony of our Center City rowhouse usually remain empty in the early spring while I decide what to plant for the summer. To be perfectly honest, I'm not much of a gardener. Even the annuals that supposedly thrive in full sun often wither under the blaze of a hot spell. I actually considered planting a row of cactus this year, maybe some flowering ones, to add the color usually provided by red "wave" petunias.



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But when I stepped outside a few days ago to check out my tiny strip of a garden, a mourning dove was nestled in one corner of the wooden box. Its brown-gray body blended so well with the flower box that I had to blink hard to make sure I was seeing correctly. It was the dark black circle of the eye that attracted my gaze, which the bird steadily returned.

I've always favored mourning doves over the pigeons that populate Center City, although they are not nearly as numerous. They are more gracefully formed, at least to my eye. Their heads, about an inch long, appear small next to their bodies, which are

fully 11 or 12 inches in an adult bird and end in a long, pointed tail. The flowing lines of the bird's profile suggest it is an agile and swift flyer. And piercingly black eyes lend the gravitas of intelligence, an impression fortified by a small beak that looks both delicate and sharp.

The bird didn't budge when I slid open the glass balcony door and stepped outside, only about three feet away. The round black eye seemed fastened in my direction and the bird remained motionless even when my dog, a Brittany, joined us, sniffing the spring air.

"I think we're going to have grand-birds," I announced to my husband, after checking the spot for a few more consecutive days to find the same placid presence in the window box.

"Two eggs," he called to me about half an hour later.

"How do you know?" I demanded a bit huffily. "You didn't scare her, did you?"

"I didn't mean to," he claimed, but obviously had.

I'm feeling fairly protective of the expectant parents and don't want them disturbed. I've already been impressed by their dedication to their clutch.

I can spot the male because he is larger and has some fluorescent markings on the back of his head. He frightens less easily than his mate and it is possible to open the balcony door and walk out without ruffling his feathers. The female is smaller and much more skittish. She sits facing the balcony

door head-on, and the mere whisper of a sliding glass door sends her into flight.

It's fun to have the birds out there — a real live Discovery Channel special right on my own turf. My small household of two parents, one teenager, and one dog has become a critical part of the destiny of a pair of birds. And, like little kids, we race to the balcony a couple of times a day and quietly peer out the glass doors to monitor their activities.

I've read that it takes two weeks for the young to hatch, so by my calculations, we have about five days left before the chicks appear. And then it will take 25 days or so until they leave the nest. (All of this information comes by way of Googling.) I'm looking forward to watching the eggs hatch and seeing the chicks grow to maturity from a front-row seat.

It is reassuring, in a strange way, to find the life cycle of another species unfolding among the bricks and cobblestones of my own. It's another sign that we humans can't trump nature. While it is true that I wouldn't feel the same if rats took up residence in the basement, or termites appeared swarming in our backyard, these birds are different. They aren't threatening. Our only competition is for the window box. And I'm glad I don't have total occupancy rights to it anymore; I wasn't doing such a terrific job anyway.

Myra Bellin lives and writes in Philadelphia.