

# Status of wild Pigeons and Doves in Hungary

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BIBLID [1137-8603 (2001), 16; 61-70]

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*Hungariako hegazi-faunan sei Uso-espezie daude. Horietatik bost, Columba livia barne, Hungarian ugaltzen dira. Streptopelia orientalis espeziea alderrai gisa bakarrik agertzen da. Columba oenas espeziearen populazio ugaltzailea egonkorra da. Columba palumbus espeziearen populazioa handitu egin da pixkana-pixkana 50eko urteetatik hona, eta, ondorioz, horren ugalketa-eremua ere oso zabaldu da. Streptopelia turtur espeziea nahiko hedatua eta erregularra da. Streptopelia decaocto espeziea hegazti iraunkorra eta hedatua da, gizakiaren asentamenduetan egoten dena.*

*Giltz-Hitzak: Columbidae. Hungaria. Estatusa. Banaketa. Kontserbazioa. Ehiza.*

*Existen seis especies de Colúmbidos en la avifauna húngara. Cinco de ellas, incluyendo la Columba livia se reproducen en Hungría. La Streptopelia orientalis únicamente tiene un registro como accidental. La población reproductora de Columba oenas es estable. La población de Columba palumbus ha aumentado gradualmente desde los años 50 y su área de reproducción se ha extendido considerablemente. En Hungría es un ave de caza aunque no muy popular. La Streptopelia turtur es un ave extendida y regular en Hungría. La Streptopelia decaocto es un ave permanente y extendida que permanece en asentamientos humanos.*

*Palabras Clave : Columbidae. Hungría. Estatus. Distribución. Conservación. Caza.*

*L'avifaune hongroise compte six espèces de Colombidés. Cinq d'entre elles, dont Columba livia se reproduisent en Hongrie. La Streptopelia orientalis a uniquement un statut d'espèce non sédentaire. La population de reproducteurs de Columba oenas est stable. La population de Columba palumbus a augmenté progressivement depuis les années 50 et son aire de reproduction s'est considérablement étendue. La Streptopelia turtur est un oiseau fréquent et répandu en Hongrie. La Streptopelia decaocto est un oiseau sédentaire et très répandu, demeurant en environnement humanisés.*

*Mots Clés: Columbidae. Hongrie. Statuts. Distribution. Protection. Chasse.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hungary is situated in the Carpathian basin in Central Europe. Its area covers 93.030 km<sup>2</sup>. About 70 % agricultural lands, forest cover 19 %. The human population is around 10.000.000. It means that the population density is 108 people/km<sup>2</sup>.

I am dealing with the Hungarian avifauna, its distribution and conservation in general, including doves and pigeons. When Antonio Bea from Spain and Richard Beitia from France visited the Hungarian Natural History Museum in the summer of 2000, they asked me to tell about the situation of Columbidae species in Hungary. After that, they asked me if I could present a lecture about this subject in the future Colloquium in San Sebastián, Spain. After that I started to prepare the theme in more detail.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

There was not very much research activity on doves and pigeons in Hungary in the past. There are only a few studies, most of them from Joseph Rékási (1980) who was dealing with the feeding biology and food composition of Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) and from Svetlana Bozsko (1979) who dealt with the ecology of the same species. Thus information is taken from general publications of Hungarian avifauna, like István Chernel, at the end of the 19th century; from Lajos Horváth in the 1940s, 1950s and József Rékási in the 1970s, 1980s. Bozsko (1983) summarised the population dynamics of Collared Doves in Hungary. Beside these I use my own unpublished data and experiences about these species.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are six species of Columbidae in the Hungarian avifauna. Five of them, including the feral Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia* f. *domestica*), are breeding birds in Hungary. The Eastern Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*) has only one record as a vagrant. One bird was observed and photographed in Szeged on 18 December, 1985. The bird was feeding among collared doves in a farmyard (Bankovics, 1990b).

### 3.1. Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*)

The breeding population of *Columba oenas* is stable. It was estimated recently between 2.000-5.000 breeding pairs (Magyar *et al.*, 1998). Their large flocks overwinter in the grassy "puszta" of the Hungarian Lowlands in mild winters. Their wintering habitats in the Great Hungarian Plain are mostly grasslands with scattered trees, and tree lines on saltic soil. Their feeding grounds besides the agricultural lands contain natural habitats, natural plant communities like *Festucetum pseudovinae*, *Puccinellietum limosae* with *Aster tripolum pannonicum*, *Camphorosma annua*, etc.

In severe winters they migrate further south to the Mediterranean area in Southern Europe, although we have not enough ringing data to know the exact migration routes. We have only a single ringing recovery of the Stock Dove. This bird was ringed as a pullus individual in Tavarana during World War I. on 17 May, 1916 (the locality is now in Slovakia) and was recaptured the next winter 16 January, 1917 in Barat, Albania, 921 km south from the ringing place. The population size of Stock Dove shows a slight increase in Hungary in the 1980s and 1990s.

### 3.2. Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*)

The status of Wood Pigeon in Hungary has changed greatly in the course of this century. Chernel (1899) found it as a common species all over the country at the end of the 19th century. He did not mention that it would have nested in the vicinity of human settlements except the larger natural (English) parks.

Until 1950 the Wood Pigeon was a regular and widespread breeding bird in moderate number far from human habitations. Its nesting habitat included the forests and woods of low mountains and hillcountry but also the lowland forest patches. That time this species avoided the human settlements as well. It nested only in forests far from villages, even far from farmhouses. The recreation area in the southern beach of Lake Balaton was an exception.

Its population has probably increased from the 1950s and is still continuing to do so. The first two observations of the species urbanisation are from 1956: one in Jobaháza (western part of Hungary) and one in Siófok. Tibor Jaszenovics observed a few Wood Pigeons in tree canopies of the churchyard in Jobaháza in February, 1956. These specimens were probably not nesting there later that year, they were just early arriving birds from the winter quarters. This was the first known sign of the urbanisation of Wood Pigeon in Hungary.

In the Balaton area along the southern beach the bird settled in large gardens and light Austrian pine woods (*Pinus nigra*) with scattered weekend cottages. I observed this situation in the Siófok area in June, 1956, and in July, 1957. Later it became very numerous all around the Balaton according to my observations in the 1980s and in 1997.

I saw this species nesting in a low tree in the centre of Paris in 1985, and I knew that this bird was already very numerous in agricultural areas in Western Europe and well urbanised that time. But the situation was still different in Hungary in the early 1980s, therefore I was surprised to see the first Wood Pigeon nesting in a tree line in open habitat, along the country road at Ürbö (near the Kiskunság National Park) in 1989 not far from farm houses. This was the first observation of habitat preference change towards urbanisation east from the Danube river in Hungary and since then I found more and more examples of it. At the same time the species not only urbanised but also increased and spread its population in natural habitats.

I give one example. The bird population of the Bátorliget Natur Reserve (53 hectares) was studied in 1952, 1982, 1990. In 1952 Greschik & Horváth (1953) did not find the species there, while in 1982 and 1990 there were 3 nesting pairs of Wood Pigeon in the same area both years (Legány, 1983; Bankovics, 1990a).

The bird settled in Budapest too, but until now not in the city centre as in Paris, but only in the suburbs and urban parks like Margit-sziget, Óbudai-sziget (along the Danube in a remnant riverine forest) in 1991. After that I found it breeding inside the border of Budapest in other areas like Pestlőrinc forests (1992), open woods near Őrs vezér square (1998), Orczy-kert (1999) and parks of the Szent László Hospital (2000). The first appearance of a single bird one of the garden on Svábhegy in Buda was April 1999, and again in April 2000, but still it not nests there (Ágnes Berczik, *pers. com.*).

The urbanisation process was not conspicuous in long decades, so Rékási the author of *Columba palumbus* in the book "Breeding birds of Hungary", does not mention it in 1984, even not in the updated new edition. But now, in the 1990s this process is visible. Its growing population was estimated about 70.000 breeding pairs in the year 2000.

The Wood Pigeon is a game bird in Hungary. Its hunting season lasts from 1<sup>st</sup> August until 31<sup>st</sup> December. Its yearly hunting results were 2.432 pieces in 1997, 2.450 pieces in 1998, 2.393 pieces in 1999 (fig. 1, fig. 2, fig. 3).

Fig. 1. Comparison of the hunting results of Wood Pigeon in different counties of Hungary in 1997 (grand total: 2.432).

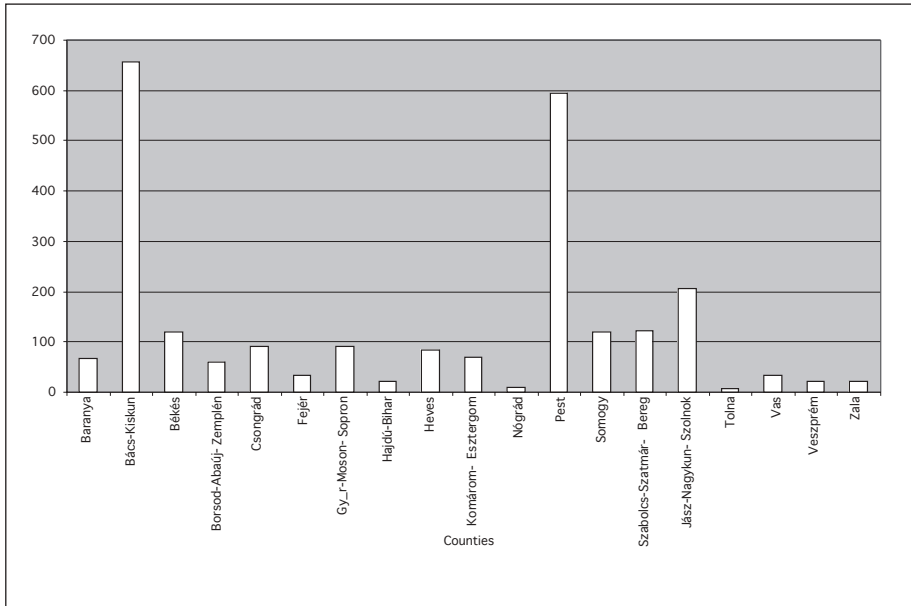


Fig. 2. Comparison of the hunting results of Wood Pigeon in different counties of Hungary in 1998 (grand total: 2.450).

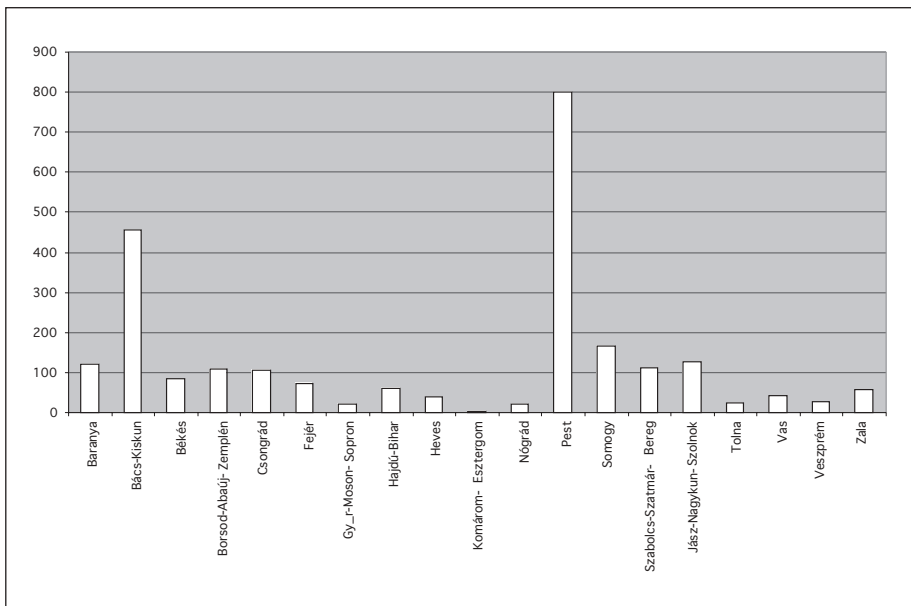
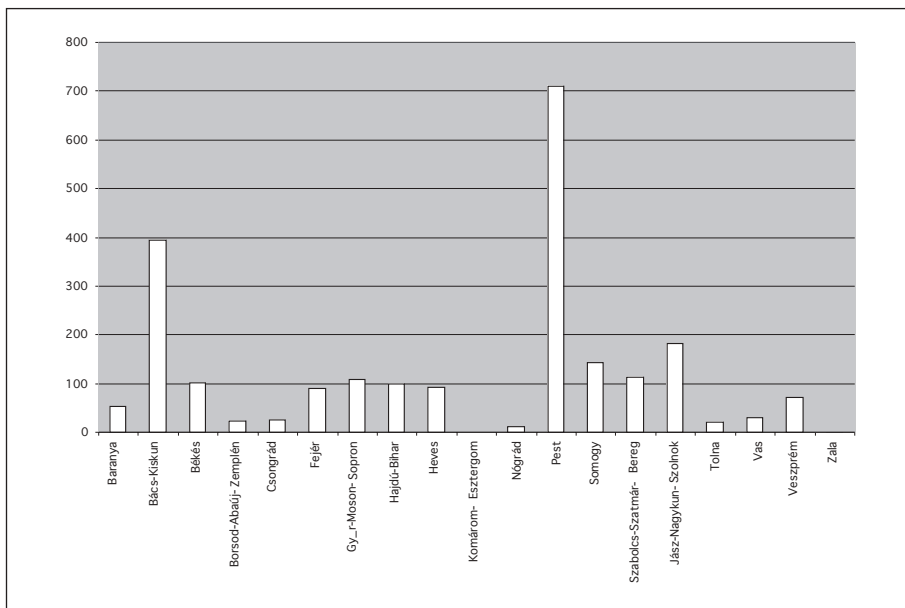


Fig. 3. Comparison of the hunting results of Wood Pigeon in different counties of Hungary in 1999 (grand total: 2.393)



### 3.3. Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

The Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) is a common breeding bird all over the country. It first appeared in Hungary in the 1920s, and has become common everywhere already by the 1960s (Bankovics, 1984). The normal breeding season in Hungary April-July. But at the beginning of its occupation decades it used to breed sporadically and irregularly also in late autumn (September-October) and the end of winter (February) as well. It seems that this irregular breeding habit has been given up in the last decade, in the 1990s.

The Collared Dove is a well urbanised resident bird in Hungary. It breeds only in or near human settlements and only in man-made habitats. It nests in the cities on buildings like on balconies, windows, under the roofs, and also in the tree canopies nearby. It also nests in urban parks, gardens, suburbs, breeds in villages, farmyards, farms, in tree lines near farmhouses, forest edges. I never found it nesting in closed forest or woodlands far from human settlements.

Its population size in Hungary based on estimation of the early 1990s is about 120.000 breeding pairs. It seems that its population decreased in the last decades, since the early 1980s. It was much more numerous around the ripen wheat-fields in summers end of the 1960s and early 1970s. The Collared Dove is not protected, it is a game bird in Hungary. Its hunting season lasts from 1 of August until 15 of February. It is not a popular game bird among Hungarian hunters. Most of them are shot by Italian guest hunters. Its yearly hunting results in Hungary were 41.016 pieces in 1997, 37.455 pieces in 1998 and 36.216 pieces in 1999 (fig. 4, fig. 5, fig. 6).

Fig. 4. Comparison of the hunting results of Collared Dove in different counties of Hungary in 1997 (grand total: 41.016).

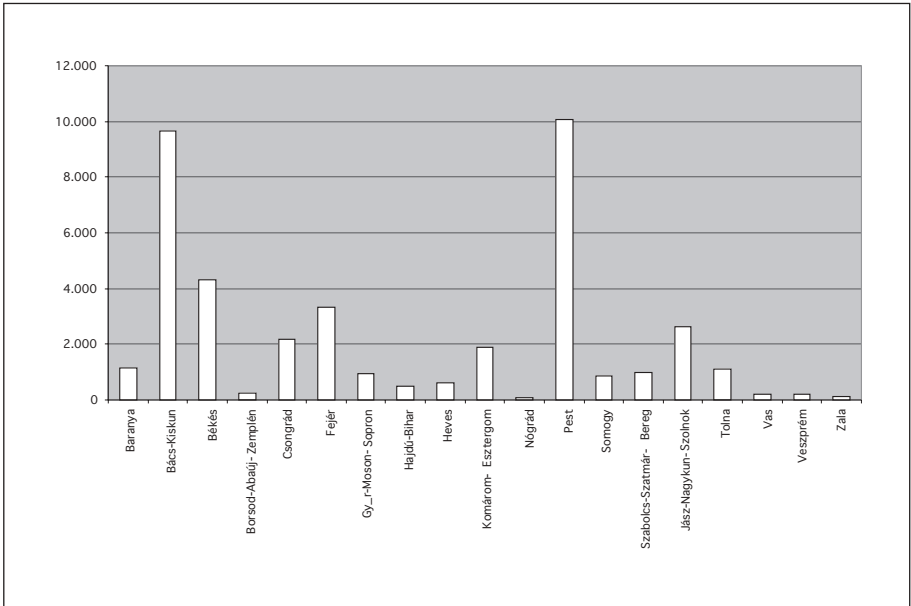


Fig. 5. Comparison of the hunting results of Collared Dove in different counties of Hungary in 1998 (grand total: 37.455).

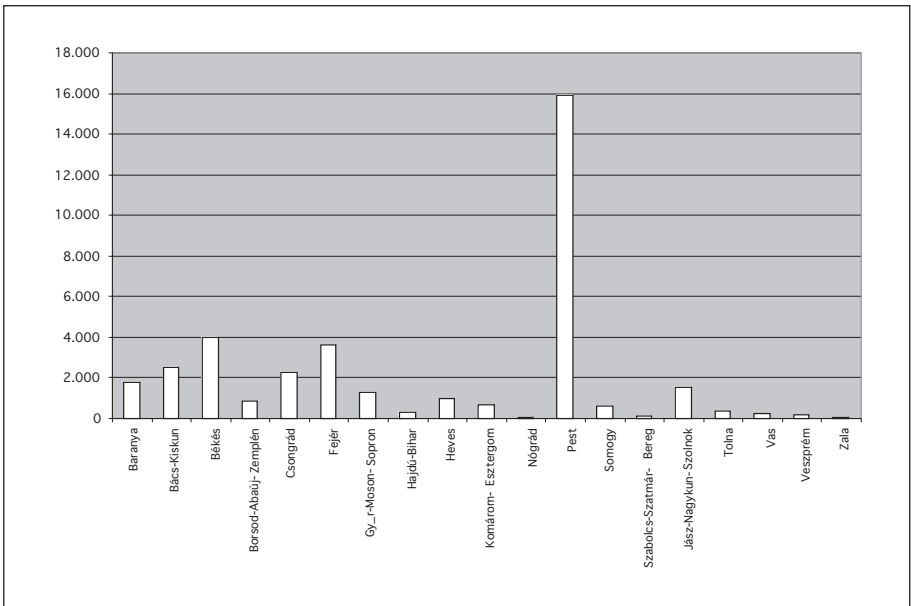
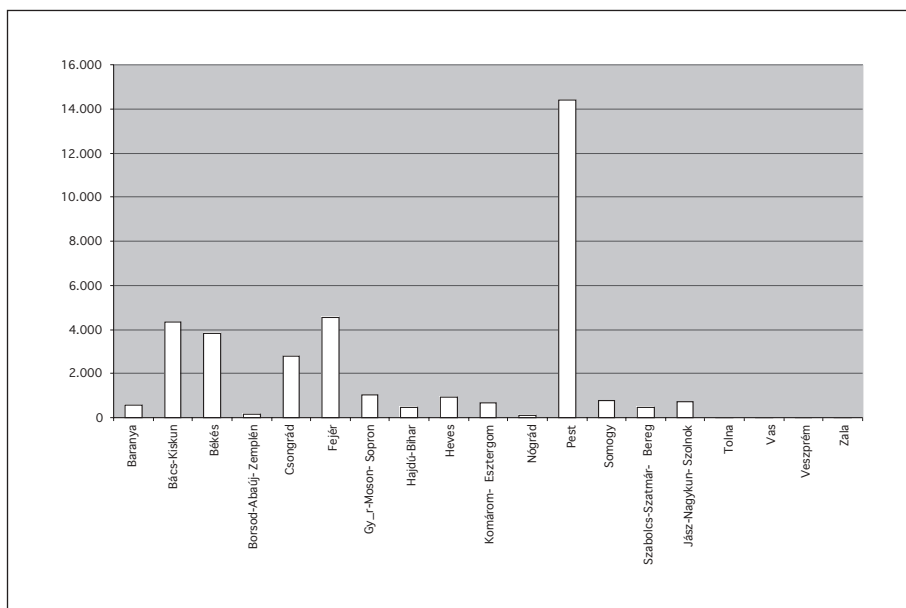


Fig. 6. Comparison of the hunting results of Collared Dove in different counties of Hungary in 1999 (grand total: 36.216).



### 3.4. Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*)

The Turtle Dove is a widespread and fairly common breeding bird all over Hungary. It breeds from the lowest point until the highest point of the country. This is not a very wide range in Hungary. The deepest point is 79 m above sea level near Szeged, and the highest one is only 1.014 m in the Mátra mountains.

Its preferred habitats includes riverine forest, along the biggest rivers like Danube and Tisza, but it nests along smaller rivers and streams, as well. It prefers also forest patches and those narrow, so cold "wood-stripes" surrounded by agricultural land. Beside these it nests in different forest types, like spruce (*Picea abies*) plantations in the highest level of the mountains, and also in young beach forest (*Fagus sylvatica*) and oak forests (*Quercus petraea*, *Q. robur*) both in the mountain and the lowland. They like also open, and semi-open karst-forest with *Quercus pubescens* and *Prunus mahaleb*.

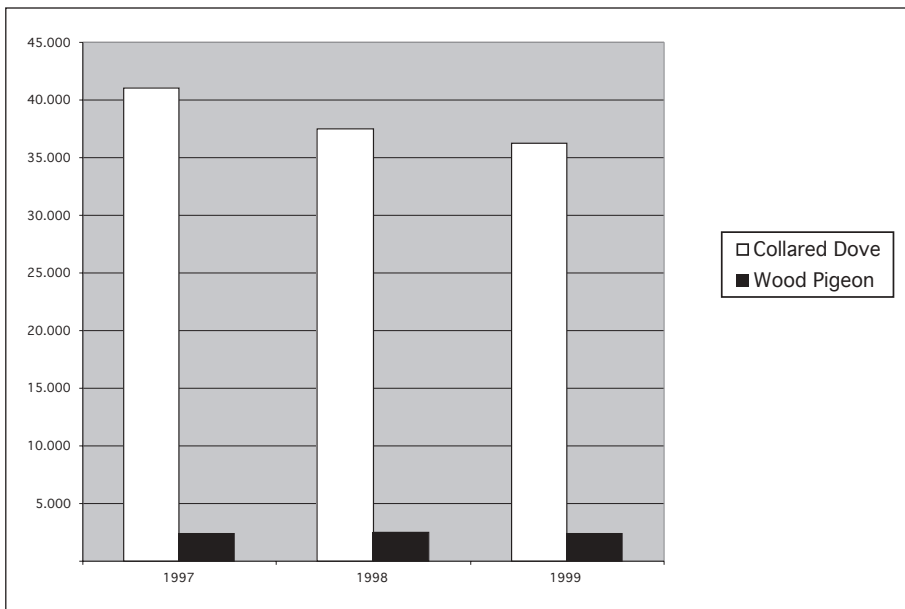
It avoids human settlements, although I found it nesting in the early 1960s in a small town Jászberény in the canopy of a Robinian tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). Beside that –also in the 1960s– I found it together with the Collared Dove in the tree groups of a farmhouse in Southern Hungary. But recently I did not find it nesting inside or near human settlements.

Its spring arrival to Hungary is very accurate. The first birds accurately appear on or around 20 of April. But their migration continues during May as well. The nesting period is rather long and fills the time-period they spent in Hungary very well. The first nest with two eggs, that I found, was 15<sup>th</sup> of May, and the latest nest with two downy young I found early in Au-

gust. In the Hungarian Great Plain the Turtle Dove is gathering in large flocks from end of July or early August. That time they feed on the ripen sunflower (*Helianthemum annuum*) in the fields.

Something about their hunting. Although the Turtle Dove is a protected bird species in Hungary, because of their high number, it was allowed to hunt in the second half of the 1980s in some counties, where the largest sunflower fields were distributed. Previously farmers complained and claimed the hunting of the Turtle Dove. They said that there are some places with more than 100.000 Turtle Dove in the Hungarian Great Plain. At first we did not believe it at the Hungarian Institute for Ornithology, but later I was convinced that it was true. In the Dévaványa Landscape Protected Area I easily estimated one early morning on 22 of August, 1983 at least 60.000 bird flying out of their roosting places, which was a small forest patch at Dévaványa.

Fig. 7. Comparing the Wood Pigeon and Collared Dove hunting results (in individuals) in Hungary in recent years.

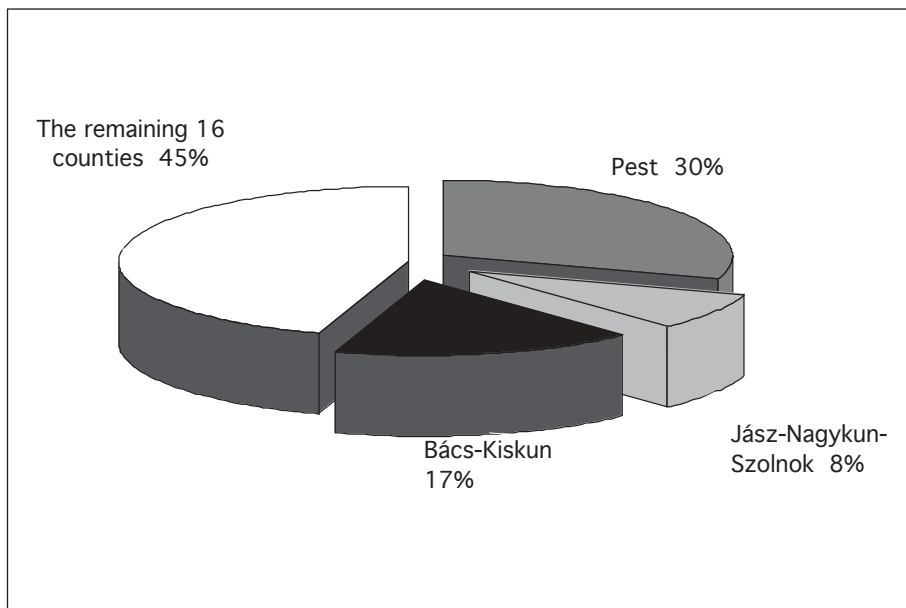


### 3.5. Hunting results

From the Columbidae family the Wood Pigeon and the Collared Dove are game birds in Hungary (fig. 7). Comparing the hunting results of Wood Pigeon in the 19 Hungarian counties, it can be said that most birds were shot in the Hungarian Great Plain, in 3 counties as follows: Pest, Bács-Kiskun and Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok. For example: in 1983 the total number of shot Wood Pigeon were 2.393 bird, from that 1.286 were shot in the above mentioned three counties that means 54 %, more than the half of the country hunting result of Wood Pigeon came from these areas. Only 46 % of shot Wood Pigeon came from the remaining 16 counties (fig. 8).



Fig. 8. The largest county hunting results of the Wood Pigeon in Hungary in 1999 (grand total: 2.393).



One reason for this particularly high number is of course, that sunflower is grown in these counties, they have the largest sunflower fields. The other reason is that hunting associations usually organise "pigeon hunting" tours to these counties, especially for Italian guest hunters. For the same reasons most Collared Dove were shot in the same three counties.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

- The Wood Pigeon is a common breeding bird in Hungary. Its population increasing; this year in 2000 it was about 70.000 breeding pairs. The urbanisation process of this species is accelerated in 1990s. It is a game bird in Hungary, but not very popular among Hungarian hunters.
- The Collared Dove colonisation process finished in Hungary in the middle 1960s. It breeds only in or near human settlement, it does not nest in natural habitats.
- The Turtle Dove is widespread in Hungary, its population shows a slight increasing since the 1980s.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Antonio Bea and Federación Guipuzcoana de Caza for supporting my participation in the meeting "II. Coloquio Internacional sobre Colúmbidos Silvestres". Thanks to Gyula Fábíán for the hunting statistics. I am grateful to Tibor Jaszenovics and Péter Fekete giving me distribution data and also to Tibor I. Fuisz and Peter Nemela correcting the English text and to Ms. Annamária Lakati for the drawings.

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