

The Variability of Pigeons



The
Grandeur
of Life



Far Left: Common or rock pigeon, by Edward Lear, from *Prideaux John Selby, Gallinaceous Birds, Part III: Pigeons, 1835.*

Top: Pouter pigeon, by Edward Lear, from *Prideaux John Selby, Gallinaceous Birds, Part III: Pigeons, 1835.*

Left: Fantail pigeon, by Edward Lear, from *Prideaux John Selby, Gallinaceous Birds, Part III: Pigeons, 1835.*

Bottom: Jacobin pigeon, by Edward Lear, from *Prideaux John Selby, Gallinaceous Birds, Part III: Pigeons, 1835.*

The first chapter of Darwin's *Origin of Species* is titled "Variation under Domestication." Here Darwin tried to explain how breeders can create varieties by selecting certain traits in their stock, and how these traits can be enhanced by knowledgeable breeders over many generations. Much of Darwin's own experience with domestic breeding came from pigeons. A great variety of show pigeons were popular in genteel Victorian society, with descriptive names like Pouters, Fan-Tails, Tumblers, and Jacobins. Darwin strongly suspected that all of these varieties were descendants from one species, the common Rock-Pigeon. For Darwin, this demonstrated both the fact of variation, and the power of selection, in this case, artificial selection.

