

Fowl play: Neanderthals were first bird eaters (Update)

August 7 2014, by Brian Reyes



Cut-marked bone (ulna) of Rock Dove specimens from Gorham's Cave Credit: Ruth Blasco et al., *Scientific Reports*

Neanderthals may have caught, butchered and cooked wild pigeons long before modern humans became regular consumers of bird meat, a study revealed on Thursday.

Close examination of 1,724 bones from rock doves, found in a cave in Gibraltar and dated to between 67,000 and 28,000 years ago, revealed cuts, human tooth marks and burns, said a paper in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

This suggested the doves may have been butchered and then roasted, wrote the researchers—the first evidence of hominids eating birds.

And the evidence suggested Neanderthals ate much like a latter-day Homo sapiens would tuck into a roast chicken, pulling the bones apart to get at the soft flesh.

"They liked what we like and went for the breasts, the drumsticks and the wings," study author Clive Finlayson, director of the Gibraltar Museum, told journalists of the bone analysis.

"They had the knowledge and technology to do this."

The scarred remains were from rock doves—a species that typically nests on cliff ledges and the entrance to large caves—and the ancestors of today's widespread feral pigeon.

The discarded remains were from a time that the cave was occupied by Neanderthals and subsequently by humans.

It was long thought that modern humans were the first hominids to eat birds on a regular basis.



Photograph from the sea of Governor's Beach, southeast side of the Rock, Gibraltar, showing Gorham's Cave, which is the focus of this research. Credit: C. Finlayson

Yet at Gorham's Cave, "Neanderthals exploited Rock Doves for food for a period of over 40 thousand years, the earliest evidence dating to at least 67 thousand years ago," said the paper.

And these were not sporadic meals, as borne out by "repeated evidence of the practice in different, widely spaced" parts of the cave.

"Our results point to hitherto unappreciated capacities of the Neanderthals to exploit birds as food resources on a regular basis," the team wrote.

"More so, they were practising it long before the arrival of modern humans and had therefore invented it independently."

Even more human

Finlayson said the bone analysis added to a growing body of evidence that Neanderthals were more sophisticated than was once widely believed.

"This makes them even more human," he said.

Other recent studies have shown that in addition to meat, Neanderthals ate vegetables, berries and nuts, that they took care of their elders and used sophisticated bone tools.

An enigmatic branch of the human family tree, Neanderthals lived in parts of Europe, Central Asia and Middle East for up to 300,000 years but vanished from the fossil record about 30-40,000 years ago.

Only a small proportion of bones found in regions of the cave inhabited by Neanderthals had cut marks on them, but the authors pointed out that rock doves were small and easy to eat without utensils.

"After skinning or feather removal, direct use of hands and teeth would be the best way to remove the meat and fat/cartilage from the bones," they wrote.

"The proof of this is the human toothmarks and associated damage observed on some dove bones."

It was not known how the birds were captured, though the team speculated they would have been relatively easy to snatch from their nests "by a moderately skillful and silent climber".

The researchers conceded the scorch marks were not conclusive proof of cooking, as they could be from waste disposal or accidental burning.

More information: Paper: [dx.doi.org/10.1038/srep05971](https://doi.org/10.1038/srep05971)

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Citation: Fowl play: Neanderthals were first bird eaters (Update) (2014, August 7) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-ancient-pigeon-bones-reveal-secrets.html>

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