

Racing Pigeons In Australia

As a hobby, sport, source of income or science, the Racing or Homing Pigeon has been associated with man for thousands of years. There are records that show pigeons were domesticated as far back as 3,000B.C. There are also numerous references to pigeons in the Bible and The New Testament, the most familiar being the story of Noah's Dove.

Pigeon racing is one of the lesser openly publicised sports not only here, in Australia, but around the World. The reason for this lack of media support is probably because it's not a spectator sport as such, even though hundreds of thousands of men and women Worldwide are involved in the sport on a weekly basis.

It might say something for the sport of Racing Pigeons, that it is the national pastime in Belgium where there is over 160,000 flying members of clubs and federations and where the majority of lofts, in which the birds are held or housed, are built in the attic of the family home due to the lack of available land. Throughout Belgium one can even find betting shops, similar to our TAB.

Almost every weekend you will find a further few hundred thousand flyers take part in this exciting sport in the United Kingdom – including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland - throughout the Northern, Southern and East European countries, the Continent, the Arab States, United States, Canada, South America, South Africa, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Korea and Japan.

Australia & The Early Years

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of the first pigeon race in Australia, due to the lack of early records. It has been recorded, however, that the first race of any note took place in the 1870's. Pigeon races, in those days, were usually held between two prominent business men, were referred to as "Match Races" and were held over 600 to 700 miles. The prize or purse was of considerable value for that time. The first of such match races to be held in Victoria, took place on the 22nd July, 1875.

During 1880 the first Racing Pigeon Club was formed in Melbourne and by the mid 1880's Clubs were springing up throughout metropolitan area. The oldest Federation of Racing Pigeon Clubs in Melbourne is the Victorian Homing Association that began during 1890.

Today, each weekend, somewhere within Australia, hundreds of flyers take part in the sport with the number of birds released for any particular race being upwards of one thousand.

The Year 2000 & Beyond

The State of Victoria alone has around 150 clubs. Collectively, they have more than 2,000 members, the majority of which reside within the Melbourne metropolitan area. The overall value of racing pigeons kept in Victoria alone exceeds \$20,000,000. Whilst to purchase a single bird could cost the prospective buyer between \$200 and \$4,000, dependant upon the bird's pedigree and the performance of its sire and dam, both as a racer and breeder and the interest in the bird at auction.

Victorian Flyers spend more than \$1,500,000 on food and medicines each year to ensure that their birds are in peak condition all year 'round whether it be during the breeding season or racing season.

There is up to five Racing Pigeon Federations, Associations or Unions in each Capitol City within Australia. With more than 500 Clubs and 10,000 flying members. Each Federation and Club is structures as a non-profit sporting organization, the larger of which can have an individual turnover over of \$600,000 annually.

The Importance of Cleanliness

The majority of flyers understand that good Hygiene plays a leading roll in the day-to-day management of the racing pigeon. Without a clean, dry and disease free environment, the racing pigeon will not perform to its fullest ability.

Each compartment, perch and breeding box within the pigeon loft must be kept totally dry and free of left over food, droppings, dust and feathers. Dampness in and around the loft leads to the spread of disease and will certainly make success difficult with regard to breeding healthy youngsters and their racing activities.

Generally, it is the practice of flyers to ensure the loft is cleaned at least each other day and to dispose of all droppings and feathers. Therefore, the chance for odours to emanate from the loft would be virtually zero.

Another important factor, which is a must for the general well being of all birds in a loft, is the recognition that too many birds, or overcrowding, will definitely be detrimental to their health.

Daily Exercise

Regular, well-planned and controlled exercise and training regimes are also a very important part of the day-to-day management of Racing Pigeons.

Rarely, are birds left to fly freely from their loft all day every day as part of the training is to ensure that all birds enter the loft as soon as they touch down or land on the loft. This ensures quick entry by the bird upon the return from a race on race day.

Flyers usually release their race birds from their loft each morning and afternoon for their daily exercise. Each exercise session can last for up to one and a half hours, following which the birds are called in to their loft and compartments, where they are fed a measured amount of food and additives.

The amount of food offered to the birds following each exercise session is dependant upon whether the race birds are being trained for a race series or the stock birds are feeding youngsters in the nest. Normally, all birds would only be offered a measured amount of food needed to sustain their flying and or breeding activities, thus eliminating the opportunity for excess food being left in the food trays when the birds have finished their feeding.

All Food Must Be kept Fresh, Dry & Clean.

Racing Pigeons are fed a wide range of different foods the amounts of which are decided by the flyer in line with his or her mode of management.

All grains and additives are kept in clean and closed receptacles eliminating loose grain situations and access to the grain by mice and or rats. Vermin, or vermin contaminated grains can be deadly to the Racing Pigeon.

Lofts of All Shapes & Sizes

The racing Pigeon Loft can come in all shapes and sizes. Generally, flyers are proud of their loft and so design and build one which is in keeping with the environment. Indeed, a well designed and build loft is preferred and is usually more visually attractive when compared with the common garden shed or other out buildings.

Health & The Environment

The presence of Racing Pigeons and their effect on the environment is a positive one, as native birds gain confidence towards living in and around the metropolitan and country garden. This may be due to the easy going and relaxed temperament of the Racing Pigeon and their friendly attitude to the flyer and the flyers family. Again, this is all part of the importance of a good management regime.

There isn't any evidence that the housing of Racing Pigeons within close proximity to the family residence, has any ill effect on the owners family, nor indeed, to surrounding neighbours.

The Racing Pigeon is Misunderstood by Most

Much of the misinformation with communities regarding Racing Pigeons arises from the presence of the wild, feral or street pigeon. That scruffy little fellow that flies around our parks and squares and resides on the roofs of Town Halls and city buildings and who leaves an autograph or two on the statues of famous people.

Unfortunately and wrongly, the association between with the Racing Pigeon and the street pigeon has been wrongly placed.

The street pigeon is thought to have evolved naturally from the Blue Rock Pigeon (*Columbia Livia*), which to this day inhabits the coasts of Ireland and Northern Scotland.

The Racing Pigeon, although having the same ancestry, has, on the other hand, evolved through careful and selective breeding over thousands of years. More recently, over the past 175 years, the line and in-breeding by thoughtful fanciers has brought the Racing Pigeon to the point where there are few birds that will endure the climatic and geographical changes and over very long distances, to return to their home loft at speeds that would make any other vertebrate's eye's water to just contemplate the task.

Pigeons At War

The use of Homing or Racing Pigeons is one of the most ancient methods for the transmitting of messages. In 43 B.C., Mark Antony besieged Janus Brutus. Brutus used Homing Pigeons to fly over the heads of the besiegers to communicate with his council. Further, during the siege of Paris in 1871, hundreds of thousands of messages were conveyed by Homing Pigeons into the beleaguered city.

Furthermore, with the aid of microphotography, each bird could carry a message of a million words, as the matter on the despatch was 600 times smaller than the original.

As history has proved, the Racing Pigeon was made an integral part of wartime communications for the British Empire. At the request of the Imperial War Office in London, thousands of birds were despatched from Australia in specially constructed lofts to be sent to the very front lines. People were stirred by the many stories of these mighty birds battling tremendous odds to reach home base and when King George V took up flying, the sport soared to a new level. Today, Queen Elizabeth 2nd has carried on the Royal tradition with her own lofts at Sandringham.

The roll played by the Australian Racing Pigeon during the Second World War is fairly well documented also, thanks to the Australian War Museum at Canberra. We can therefore, draw an accurate picture of their involvement with the Australian Corps of Signals' Pigeon service.

Several Australian racing Pigeons received the Dickin Medal for Gallantry, which was instituted to recognise outstanding feats at war performed by animals. Two of these birds were the first to receive this medal in the South West Pacific and are on exhibit at the Australian War Museum at Canberra.

All in all, the achievements of the Australian Racing Pigeon are indeed of epic proportions, both in the theatre of war and in domestic life. These heroic birds battle with dogged persistence as wide a range of climatic conditions and terrain as nature can provide. We can only admire their courage and dedication, their speed and versatility and their indomitable spirit.

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