

Pigeon keeping

Pigeon keeping is the art and science of breeding domestic pigeons. People have practiced pigeon keeping for about 10,000 years in almost every part of the world. In that time, mankind has substantially altered the morphology and the behavior of the domesticated descendants of the rock dove to suit his needs for food, aesthetic satisfaction and entertainment.

The keeping of pigeons necessitates building specialized structures in which to house the birds. These pigeon houses often contain specially constructed openings to allow the pigeon keeper to give his animals liberty for purposes of exercise while allowing them to re-enter the house without special assistance from the keeper. At the same time these houses are constructed to keep the pigeons safe from predators and inclement weather and give them nesting places in which to raise their squabs.

People who breed pigeons are commonly referred to as pigeon fanciers. The hobby is gaining in popularity in the United States, after having waned within the last 50 years. Both the hobby and commercial aspects of keeping pigeons are thriving in other parts of the world.

The Rock Dove, which is generally believed to be the ancestor of domesticated pigeons, was probably domesticated around ten thousand years ago. There are hundreds of breeds of domesticated pigeons arising from this common ancestor which are currently cultivated by pigeon fanciers. Because of the large number of domesticated breeds, pigeon fanciers find it convenient for certain purposes to group sets of domesticated pigeons into larger groups.

In the United States, there are three major recognized groups of breeds of domesticated pigeons:

- Flying/Sporting
- Fancy
- Utility

It is worth noting that pigeon fanciers in other nations use different schemes in grouping domesticated pigeons; for example, a nationwide pigeon organization in Germany uses a far different grouping scheme. The Australian grouping system is similar to the UK/European groupings.

Flying/Sporting pigeons

Main articles: [Flying/Sporting Pigeons](#) and [Pigeon racing](#)

These pigeons are kept and bred for their aerial performance and for reproduction. Racing homers are a type of Homing pigeon, trained to participate in the sport of pigeon racing, and have been used to carry messages during times of war. Such races often have large cash prizes of up to \$60,000. Fanciers who fly racing pigeons sometimes win long-distance races and even break records. Other flying/sporting pigeons are bred for unique flying characteristics other than homing, such as rolling, high-flying, and diving. These birds, which may be flown in competitions, include but are not limited to Rollers, Tumblers, and Tiplers. It should also be noted that a few varieties, for example, the Parlor Roller, are considered to be within the flying/sporting group even though they do not fly. This is because they

compete on basis of their performance and not their appearance. Competitors in pigeon sporting competitions such as pigeon races can win large sums of prize money when their pigeons return home the fastest from a race. The use of pigeons to carry messages is commonly called Pigeon Post. Pigeons can also carry small light-weight packages, and have been used to smuggle drugs into a prison.

Fancy pigeons

Fancy pigeons are pigeons which are specially bred to perpetuate particular features. Examples of fancy pigeons would include Jacobins, Fantails and Pigmy Pouters. Their owners compete them against each other at exhibitions or pigeon shows and judges decide who has the best by comparing them to each other and their respective breed standard. There are many breeds of fancy pigeons of all sizes, colors and types.

Utility pigeons

Utility pigeons are bred for their meat and as replacement breeding stock. The meat of pigeons is customarily referred to as squab and is considered a delicacy in many parts of the world. Examples of utility varieties include Kings, several different varieties of Mondaines and Carneau.

- All of the above pigeon breeds may also be exhibited in pigeon shows but true utility pigeons and flying/sporting pigeons are rarely exhibited. This is because true utility pigeons are bred for meat and true flying/sporting pigeons are bred for their aerial performance so that in both cases appearance is usually a very minor consideration.

Pigeon housing

Houses for pigeons are generally called lofts. Pigeon houses are also sometimes referred to as "coops" although the word seems to have originally applied to the breeding pens inside the housing. There are as many different kinds of enclosures used to house pigeons in as there are pigeon fanciers. There are no real constraints on the design of housing for pigeons but there are some things that most fanciers find desirable.

Multiple pens

Many pigeon fanciers build their pigeon loft with at least two pens. This allows a few positive outcomes for the pigeon fancier:

1. They are able to separate their males from females in order to control breeding.
2. They are able to separate young, unmated pigeons from mated and settled pairs. This allows the mated and settled pairs to breed better.

Most fanciers have at least two pens for their pigeons and often you'll encounter fanciers with more than two pens or possibly multiple pigeon lofts. Extra pens allow for the keeping of spare, unmated females and males which can be useful to replace existing pigeons which might perish from disease or predation.

Because it can be difficult to determine the sex of a young pigeon it is also handy to have extra pens for pigeons that have been weaned but which have not given external indications of their sex yet.

Trap/landing board

For those pigeon fanciers that fly their pigeons (not all pigeon fanciers allow their pigeons to fly freely outside of their aviary) the pigeons need a means of egress to the loft. A trap or at least bobs and landing board allows the pigeon to get back into their home when they are ready to do so. There are different variations of trap and bobs used. Racing pigeons are commonly trapped home using a bob wired trapping arrangement that the birds push against the bob wires to gain access, but are restricted by the wires when trying to get back outside. Another form of trap typically called a *Sputnik trap* (pictured) uses an openings set on an angle which are just wide enough for one bird to gain access by dropping through into the loft.

Flypen

Sometimes pigeon fanciers cannot allow their birds complete liberty due to complaints of neighbors. However, pigeons have much better health and seem to be in much better spirits when they're given room to fly. So most fanciers, including those that let their birds fly, will build a large enclosed area free of obstacles where the pigeons can fly as freely as they wish. This is usually referred to as a flypen.

Nest boxes

Pigeon fanciers will often provide their mated pairs with nest boxes in which to build their nests. Because pigeons are quite territorial about their nesting area pigeons co-exist much more harmoniously when each mated pair has two nest boxes of its own.

Perches

Again, pigeon fanciers will often provide their birds (both mated and unmated pigeons) with more perches than the birds need. Because pigeons are also quite territorial about their perch it is best to ensure that every pigeon in the loft has lots of places to perch.

Pigeon fanciers often have their pigeon lofts in suitably modified garden sheds. In Glasgow and other areas of Scotland there has been a tradition of pigeon keepers building their own freestanding urban pigeon lofts, or dovecots, standing about 4m high in areas of waste ground close to housing estates. In New York City, pigeon fanciers often build pigeon lofts on the roof of the building

Portrayal of pigeon keeping in the arts

There have been several portrayals of pigeon keeping and pigeon fanciers in the arts. One of the more famous portrayals of this hobby involved the film *On The Waterfront* where the main character, Terry Malloy, is a pigeon keeper. There have been portrayals of pigeon keeping in other art forms as well. The artist Zina Saunders has painted portraits of New York pigeon keepers as part of her *Overlooked New York* project. Photographer Zak Waters shot a black and white project documenting the lives of pigeon fanciers in the UK called 'Birdmen'.

Commercial pigeon keeping

Since their initial domestication by people, pigeons have been seen as a cheap source of good meat. The Romans certainly kept pigeons for food as evidenced by the fact that they were familiar with the practice of force feeding squabs in order to fatten the young pigeons faster. Pigeons were especially prized

because they would produce fresh meat during the winter months when larger animals were unavailable as a food source. In the past wealthy landowners often had pigeon houses and kept pigeons. Strict laws were enacted to protect the inhabitants of these structures. As time passed and storage of winter feed supplies for larger livestock became more practical, it was no longer as important to keep pigeons for food. However, the flavor of the meat of the birds was prized by many people and so organized commercial enterprises marketing squab meat arose.

Improving yield

Ten pairs of pigeons can produce eight squabs each month without being fed especially by the pigeon keepers. For a greater yield, commercially raised squab may be produced in a two-nest system, where the mother lays two new eggs in a second nest while the squabs are still growing in the first nest, fed by their father. Establishing two breeding lines has also been suggested as a strategy, where one breeding line is selected for prolificacy and the other is selected for "parental performance".

Famous fanciers

- Mike Tyson former heavyweight boxing champion is a lifelong Pigeon Fancier.
- Duncan Ferguson famous former Everton soccer player enjoys the sport of pigeon racing¹.
- Queen Elizabeth II also enjoys the sport of pigeon racing.
- Karel Meulemans, one of the best pigeonfanciers worldwide lives in Arendonk Belgium.
- Paddy Ambrose (1928-2002), Irish international footballer was said to prefer pigeon-racing to the sport that he became famous for
- Joseph P. Fishman has dedicated himself to aiding the pigeons of Chicago. His stated goal is to "keep our feathered friends healthy and vibrant."
- Nikola Tesla, famous inventor, fed the pigeons of New York City, nursing those who were sick or injured. Of the birds, he said, "These are my sincere friends."