

# In Praise of Pigeons

by Jan Parrott-Holden  
Vancouver, Washington



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Capistrano is noted for its swallows. So why, on my first visit, did I take pictures of pigeons? Why, too, did my husband and I use every last coin in our pockets to purchase packets of wheat to feed these ordinary birds? And why did I want to kick the old lady who scolded her grandson for carrying one of the slate gray birds upon his shoulder?

I can still hear her cranky voiced command, "Don't touch those pigeons! They're dirty birds."

Perhaps I might have felt more sympathetic with the old woman several years ago. For it wasn't until recently that I discovered the value of *Columba livia*. Since that time it has been my secret hope to help dispel many of the deep-rooted prejudices within our society toward an all-together remarkable, but thoroughly misunderstood bird—*The Pigeon*.

For centuries the pigeon has dwelled in cities and towns across our wide world, growing in numbers while maintaining an uneasy alliance with man.

Man, in truth, doesn't bother thinking about the birds he sees pecking nervously at bits of popcorn or the leavings of someone's brown bag lunch. Perhaps he feels they don't even merit thought. But, if you ask that casual observer to tell you the first thing that comes to mind when you say the word "pigeon," chances are he would, like that old woman, mention the word "dirty."

Pigeons weren't always held in such low esteem, and this statement can be proven by a brief look at history.

We humans are always asking "What will it do for me?" The Orientals found pigeons had worth during the time of the Manchu emperors, when the birds and their eggs were considered a valuable food source. The ancients, too, were extremely zealous in their pigeon breeding. Not only were the birds valued as messengers but their fertility was considered an attribute worthy of worship. The Romans

became extremely sophisticated pigeoneers with wealthier fanciers owning numbers in the thousands. It is interesting to note that the name "Columbidae" has been considered a derivative of the Latin term "Columbarium" which was used to describe what the modern fancier calls a dovecote.

Literary works, penned by both ancient and contemporary authors, helped promote the dove, the smallest member of the pigeon family. Among these references, the Biblical story of Noah is probably one of the best known. Practically every member of the Judeo-Christian world has heard of Noah's use of doves to signal that the flood level had subsided enough for a bird to return with an olive branch. But this is merely one of several Biblical passages concerning the pigeon.

More recently, noted writers like Shakespeare and Dickens have displayed interest as well as surprising knowledge concerning pigeons. Incidentally, these noted authors equated the dove with images of peace, modesty, innocence, beauty and purity. At least to their minds, the pigeon was not a dirty bird.

Pigeons continued to win admirers as messengers, especially during wartime though most of us don't reflect much upon their use during the reign of Caesar and Napoleon. In fact, few people consider the birds' tremendous role in saving lives during World Wars I and II. Yet the Signal Corps thought enough of their pigeons to give them monikers like "Winkie," "Spike," "President Wilson," and "Cher Ami."

Cher Ami, French for "Beloved Friend," proved to be one of the greatest heroes of World War I, credited with the distinction of saving "The Lost Battalion." When flares and rockets were useless, Cher Ami was tossed into the air as a final resort. Though badly wounded, the bird rallied and made for home with an important message. That message proved responsible for saving hun-

dreds of lives. Again, pigeons proved their worth to man. Thankfully, the military recognized this worth and made Cher Ami their mascot. Today, the bird's body is mounted for public view in the Smithsonian Institution, U.S. National Museum, Washington, D.C.

Military pigeons were racing homers. But all members of the *Columba livia* family are not homers as so many people assume. Actually there are literally hundreds of varieties of pigeons with appearance and mannerisms that vary greatly. All do not possess that unique instinct that causes them to return to their home loft. In fact, some varieties are so profusely feathered that it would be a miracle if they were able to find their loft. For those who have thought all pigeons were slate gray, more surprises are in store.

Pigeons aren't peacocks. They are not macaws or canaries. But they do come in an astonishing array of colors including blue, silver, red, yellow, black, dun, bronze and almond.

Fanciers have spent hundreds of years developing the colors, patterns and feathering of their favorite breeds. The Old Dutch capuchine, my particular favorite, is a good example. The original capuchine stock, like many other pigeon breeds, is believed to have originated in the East or from the shores bordering the Mediterranean Sea. It is quite probable that the Dutch seamen brought the earliest specimen to Holland from India prior to the 1500s. The capuchine of that period in history certainly bares only a faint resemblance to the modern version. For instance, the earmark of today's beautiful capuchine is its elegantly feathered hood which literally hugs the head, much like the hood on a friar's robe. Below this extends a graceful chain of feathers on either side of the bird's neck. Without these features a capuchine is simply not a capuchine. Yet in the 1800s the same bird possessed almost no hood or chain. Standards simply were altered through the years along with the breeders' tastes.

I suppose it was the Old Dutch capuchine which first sparked my interest in *Columba livia*. I ran across a handsome pair sunning themselves at a bird farm. After examining their aluminum leg bands, dated 1976, I could see they had been placed in retirement by some breeder who no longer had use for them as stock birds. Despite their

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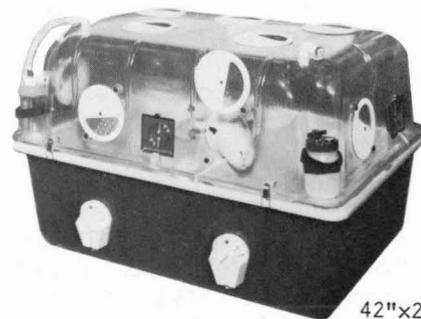
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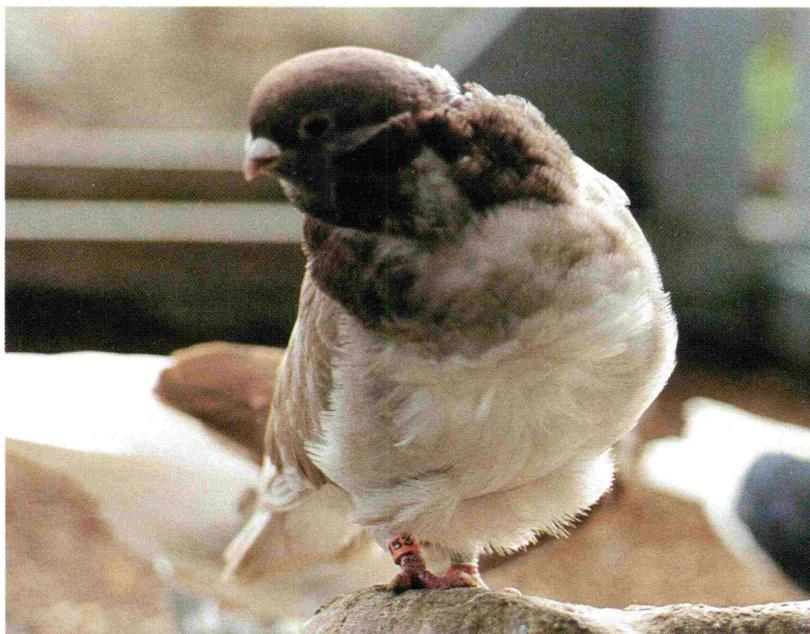
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*Ibid.*



*The Chinese owl is a dainty breed and very popular with fanciers today.*



*This Indian Fantail is hardly through his baby moult and already aspires to "rule the roost."*

*A tendency to make your birds pets is one of the pitfalls of pigeon breeding. But what a delightful pitfall! Shown: author and a few of her "pets."*

senectitude, I brought the pair home. Three months later they rewarded me with my first pair of squabs. I didn't realize it then, but breeding these fancy pigeons was destined to become my most delightful pastime.

In my brief history as a "pigeon person" I have encountered my share of difficulties. Many of these lie in the fact that "man-made" breeds, though highly prized, are not easy to raise. (Don't let anyone tell you differently!) It takes a great deal of patience and study to strengthen a bloodline without losing the look that these birds are noted for. I expect it will take me

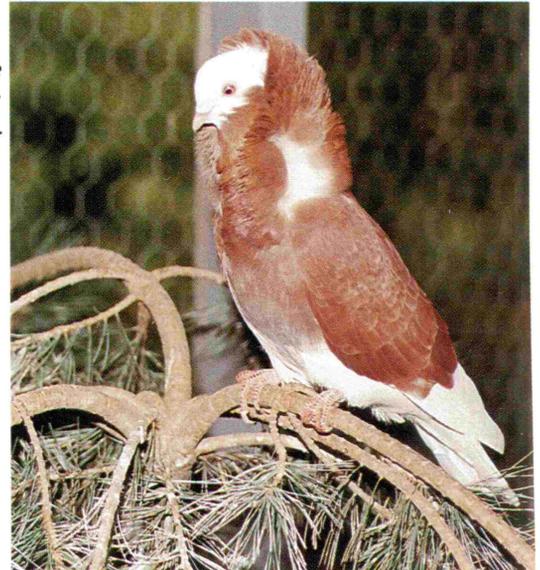


*This capuchine's color is called kyte, a color obtained frequently when a red and black are mated.*



*A yellow capuchine perches on a border pine in his flight pen.*

*The Ice pigeon is noted for its delicate "ice blue" coloration and muffed feet. It is a direct descendant of the common German field pigeon.*



*This bird belonging to the author is a good representation of the modern Old Dutch capuchine. Color: red.*



Photos by Steven Holden

the rest of my life to acquire enough expertise to produce prize-winning birds. Whether I do or not, the true joy lies in helping to perpetuate a worthwhile creature, a creature that wouldn't fare too well if forced to hunt and peck with its wild brothers and sisters. Ferals may be doing alright without man's help, but breeding domestics is quite a different story. You must be involved. And, you must apply the same principles of health and nutrition to these birds that you would any cage bird.

Throughout history the pigeon has shown itself to be an asset to man. In addition, those slate-gray birds in our parks and cities have proven pretty shrewd customers. Despite the traps, the poisons, even the little old ladies, pigeons have survived. For me and thousands of fellow fanciers that's great news! ●