

Fly Away Home

BIRDS THAT ARE BORN TO RETURN

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PATRICK MERRELL

As the CEO of Vero Beach Magazine, Beth Moulton is always looking for new stories. In the case of this story, it came looking for her.

“I was pulling out of our street onto A1A one Saturday morning,” she says, “and there was this bird standing on the edge of the road. I rolled down the window, and said to it, ‘You better move. You’re going to get run over.’ And it just stood there looking at me.”

Later that afternoon, after she’d returned home, her husband told her there was a pigeon in their driveway. “I went downstairs and, sure enough, it was the same bird standing right by our garage door,” she says. And it wasn’t about to move. “So I brought it some water, and it immediately started drinking. It plunged its whole head in the water.”

After a bit of Googling, Moulton determined from the band on its leg that it was a racing pigeon. She also found some advice on what to feed it, since racers rely on a more refined diet than their street-dwelling brethren. This bird, for example, wouldn’t touch the piece of bread she first offered it.

A fortuitous break came when a friend of hers mentioned that Chris Jacobi, a job supervisor working on a new house just two doors down from the Moultons, had grown up racing pigeons. His father, Paul, now deceased, was a founding member and president of the Indian River Racing Pigeon Club.

“When Chris Jacobi came over,” Moulton says, “he picked it up and said, ‘There’s nothing to this bird. You can’t release it. It won’t get back to where it came from.’” Through some more detective work, Moulton had determined that the pigeon was registered to a club in Cape Coral, 150 miles across the state on the Gulf Coast. The bird most likely became disoriented during a training flight and then grew too weak to fly any further.

There are many breeds of pigeon, but they’re all descended from the rock dove.







Chris Jacobi holds the pigeon that found its way to Beth Moulton's driveway, 150 miles from home and in desperate need of food and water.



A boy feeds a flock of pigeons in a town square in India, circa 1890.

Moulton tried contacting the club, but never got a reply. It's possible they never got her message, but it's also not uncommon for pigeon owners to lose interest in birds that aren't able to find their way home. Luckily, there was someone right here in Vero Beach who would give the bird a home, the current president of the Indian River RPC, George Mandara. He arranged to pick it up and then added it to his flock.

Mandara has a nice set-up for his approximately 170 pigeons, just outside the city limits of Vero Beach. It's not lavish, but his two lofts provide a good home for his spectacular-looking team. "He takes better care of those birds than he does himself," his wife, Natasha, says.

Mandara picked up the hobby from his father, who raised fancy pigeons in Hackensack, New Jersey. Fancy pigeons are just what they sound like – birds bred for their looks and sometimes entered in shows and fairs. Among the hundreds of fancy breeds are Jacobins, which have impressively tall cowl-like structures surrounding their heads, and Frillbacks, which sport a mass of curly wing feathers. Charles Darwin devoted much of the first chapter of "On the Origin of Species" to his breeding and study of fancy pigeons.

"At age 8," Mandara says, "I switched over from fancies to racing pigeons." Later, he became part of a combine in the Hackensack area, a group of nearby clubs whose members owned, all together, about 5,000 birds. He continued breeding and racing birds when he moved to Vero Beach about 10 years ago, as well as for one year when he and his wife lived on the western shore of the Black Sea in Bulgaria.

There are 1,000 breeds of pigeon today, but they're all descended, through selective breeding, from just one species, the rock dove (*Columba livia*). Although many people consider doves to be noble birds and pigeons a nuisance, they're actually the same bird. "Pigeon" is just a French word originally used to mean "young dove." The sight of white doves being

released at a wedding or special event is awe-inspiring, but it's really just a team of homing pigeons circling to orient themselves before they head back to their loft to get a snack and a drink of water.

The rock dove has existed for millions of years, and although it now inhabits most every corner of the globe, fossil evidence suggests it originated in southern Asia. The birds were likely domesticated about 10,000 years ago, roughly the same time as goats and sheep and dogs. It wouldn't have been a difficult task, since anyone who's spent any time in a city park knows, pigeons are clearly comfortable around people, especially when there are tasty scraps to be scavenged.

At first, domesticated pigeons provided a ready source of eggs and meat. Pigeon hens generally lay two eggs at a time and will continue to do so on a regular basis if the eggs are removed from the nest. Newborn "squeakers" will hatch in 18 days and leave the nest four to six weeks after that, when they're just about fully grown and able to fly. In the second half of their first year, hens will start laying eggs.

But pigeons possess another extremely useful trait — a compulsion to always return to the same spot. How it does this is still a mystery to scientists. Different hypotheses have focused on the bird's ability to navigate using the earth's magnetic field, the sun, stars, visual landmarks, infrasound

and even long-range olfactory input. There's still no consensus, and it's likely a combination of factors. However, one thing nobody disputes is that pigeons possess an incredible array of highly refined sensory powers — one could even say superpowers. Combine that with a surprisingly agile brain, a laser-like focus and a remarkable memory, and the pigeon is without equal in the animal world.

Recognizing the pigeon's homing skills, people soon began employing them as messengers. The ancient Egyptians did it 5,000 years ago, which we know from their hieroglyphics, but the practice might have even predated them. In the centuries that followed, King Solomon, the ancient Greeks, Chinese emperors, Hannibal and Julius Caesar all used pigeons to carry messages. In the 13th century, when the Mongol Empire stretched all the way from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe, news and mail was relayed by pigeon post.

In more recent times, pigeons were used extensively during both World Wars, by numerous countries. The U.S. military created special units of "pigeoneers" that dealt solely with training and caring for messenger pigeons, many donated by patriotic pigeon owners. The birds would be taken into battle, released from submarines and even dropped behind enemy lines with miniature cameras strapped to their bellies to take reconnaissance photos. English double-decker



George Mandara stands outside his main pigeon loft. Nearby is his breeding loft, with females roosting on one side and males on the other.



Mobile lofts, such as this converted bus, were used during World War I.

buses were repurposed as mobile lofts, allowing pigeons to be redeployed, always returning home to their new location.

Nearly a million pigeons were used during the World Wars, with a delivery success rate estimated at 95%. The birds were also responsible for saving thousands of lives. Several pigeons have been celebrated for their heroic deeds, one of the most famous being Cher Ami.

During an offensive in 1918, more than 500 American soldiers became stranded in France's Argonne Forest. German troops had them pinned down and then their own side started bombarding the area with heavy artillery, not knowing they were there. The Americans' only hope was the three pigeons they'd brought with them. The first two were shot down by the Germans and so was the third, Cher Ami. But amazingly, despite a chest wound, being blinded in one eye and a dangling right leg, Cher Ami got back up and continued on his mission. A half hour later, the message was delivered and the "Lost Battalion," as it came to be known, was rescued. The pigeon was awarded the Croix de Guerre, one of France's highest military honors, and soon after retired to Fort Monmouth, NJ.

Between the wars, when the Great Depression hit, pigeons served a more immediate need for some Americans. Families would keep pigeons in their yards or build nests over their front porches. The pigeons were free to come and go, foraging for food nearby, and then return to roost at night. Eggs would be collected and then eaten or sold to restaurants. Some of

the young birds would likewise be used for meals or to make money. Even the pigeon droppings, extremely high in nitrogen, would be used to fertilize a family's vegetable garden.

In the decades that followed, the bulk of the U.S. pigeon population became centered in larger cities, where the bird's useful and gloried past was forgotten. The greatest blow to its reputation came in 1966, when the New York City Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving characterized pigeons as "rats with feathers." An underling followed up with an inaccurate claim that the birds were disease-ridden. Hoving received "two thousand letters calling me a louse or worse," but the damage was done, and the dirty image stuck.

Not all pigeons live in cities, of course. Pigeon farming still exists, although that's a niche industry in this country. There are also fanciers who raise pigeons for shows and others, such as George Mandara, who race them.

Today, the American Racing Pigeon Union recognizes 700 racing clubs across the country, a handful of them in the Treasure Coast area. Local and regional races typically have a central starting point, with each bird flying back to its home loft. A chip on the bird's leg clocks its time of arrival and then calculations are made to determine a rate of travel – time over distance – and a winner is declared.

Spring Hill, Florida, west of Orlando, is home to the Gulf-coast Homing Club, the largest pigeon racing club in the country. Its annual race series, held in early December, culminates with a 350-mile event that takes about eight and a half hours. That's an average speed of roughly 40 mph, nonstop. The total prize pool is \$300,000, with a top prize of \$50,000.

"The most I've won in a race is \$20,000," Mandara says. "And I had nothing bet on the bird." Wagering is a common part of the sport. The bird's sex doesn't matter, Mandara says. "I won with a black hen, from a family I developed called Black Angels. And her mother won seven races in a row. I had a cock bird that won seven races. It depends on the family."

The world's most prestigious competition is the South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race, held each year in early February. It's a one loft race, meaning baby birds from promising blood lines are shipped from around the world to one location, quarantined and then trained to race home to the same loft. Entry fees are \$1,000 a bird, with a prize pool of \$1.6 million dollars and a \$500,000 prize for the winner of the main race, which is approximately 350 miles long. Over 5,000 birds from 25 countries will compete.

The South Africa race is often won by just a few seconds, maybe a few minutes, but the result in 2020 was downright bizarre. First of all, the winner took about four hours longer than usual, clocking in at well over 12 hours. The second place finisher arrived 16 minutes later and the third bird nearly an hour after. And then there was the rest of the pack – which began trickling in a full day after the start! What happened? A severe thunderstorm unexpectedly swept in midway through the race, forcing all but three of the birds to take cover and wait it out. Apparently those three had sensed the storm and flew a longer route northward to avoid it. ☁



George Mandara's pigeons come in many colors – white, mottled, red, black, brown and in the lower left here, the traditional blue bar coloring.