

Learning to read the birds.

Ken Easley - 2011

I have been with pigeons most of my life and have always been fascinated with them. I am observant and have studied them closely for many years. I notice the little nuances, the changes in behavior, and mood of the pigeons at a glance. I know their personalities in a short time. I keep quiet about it for the most part because I don't want to disrupt someone else's journey. I have learned to lay back and let others come to the conclusion themselves maybe with a small hint here and there or as my father used to say, a perfectly timed question.

I have always been a fan of natural methods in feeding, water and grit. By natural I mean that I like to give them super feed mixture that matches the fuel required for the races or training they are flying. I like good clean filtered water and a high quality grit. The biggest reason is because it works and it feels right.

I fly my birds to a perch for the most part. At the end of season I have been known to add a nest box and pine needles to the young bird race loft. Usually it only motivates one or two of the most dominant cocks. I train 50 miles Wednesday and 100 Miles every Saturday leading up to the first race. The rest is loft flying and rest.

One might ask what are your results using this method? Please continue reading, I promise not to brag anymore. Using this simple method and nothing else I was able to win these young bird results in only one season:

1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th 8th, 9th, 10th 11th, 12th places out of 450 birds.

1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th 9th, 10th 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th - 341 birds.

1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th 8th places out of 288 birds.

9th, 10th, 11th & 12th 300 miles flown in opposite direction West from Arizona.

1st, 2nd, 3rd, 8th, & 9th place 400 mile young bird final race opposite direction East from Texas.

7 National AU Ace Pigeon qualifiers, 3 AU National Hall of Fame pigeons.

26 e1st and 4 pure 1st place.

1st place Champion Loft, 1st place Average Speed Club 33 champion birds. 1st place State champion pigeon with the lowest unirate according to the AU National Data Base, 17th Ace Pigeon for Zone 3: Southwest (AR, LA, TX, OK, NM, Mexico, Costa Rica)

38 diplomas for race winners.

6th loft in all North America 2010 Young Bird Digest Ace Lofts, which includes all USA & Canada.

Also 8th Ace Sprint Pigeon Digest Award - North America.

I have won more in the seasons following such as 1st & 2nd in the 400 mile race. My point is you can win without giving your birds a lot of stuff in the water and on the feed. My worst seasons flying pigeons ever was when I used commercial products on the feed and in the water thinking this was the magic. It was not. Results don't lie. That is why it is so difficult to try new things because I know what works. I know it is important for pigeons to have rest. I know it is important for them to build up natural immunity.

I understand it is good for them a little here and there but I ask you, how can a pigeon build up natural immunity when you are giving it apple cider vinegar in the water every day or other products designed to keep the water acidic? The body heals itself when it is in the alkaline state and not in the acidic state. The body carries oxygen to the muscles when it is in the alkaline state.

I have watched this in action. I have given products in the water to keep the birds acidic and it is true they didn't get sick but as soon as I stopped giving it they became off and some got rattles or respiratory or even a touch of coccidiosis. This is not an accident. This is nature.

What is the biggest problem I have encountered flying pigeons? Listening to guys who have won big giving all kinds of products in the water and on the feed that live in different areas. So what is the difference? Is it because I live in a dry climate and they live in a wet climate where they need things to keep the birds healthy? I don't know but I do know what experience taught me and that is natural is best. How some people think they are smarter than millions of years of natural selection is beyond me? I believe in giving PMV vaccinations most of the time. I have been tracking it and my best season I used no vaccinations whatsoever. When sending to one loft races it is advisable to give them due to the exposure they encounter from other lofts.

Some would say you're playing with fire? I disagree, I say I am emulating nature who is far superior to any human and selection. What better proof than result? There is no better proof.

To be sure I have tried it all and each time I have failed miserably. I ask myself, why? Why would I deviate from a system I know works? It is called peer pressure. We are all susceptible because we all want to win. I have felt the sick feeling of seeing my team deteriorate and knowing I caused it because I listened to someone who was so convincing that they knew it all. They constantly sang the praises of their results.

I later thought maybe I should check their results to see if I was really improving my situation to try their methods. What I found is that they didn't perform as well as I did using my own method. Momentum and hype can really work on a guy. Only the strong minded have the fortitude to look seriously at what has worked and stick to their guns.

I have gotten birds from some of the big names and not just a handful, a bunch of birds to breed through. What happened? They could not handle this mountain-desert course and never lasted past 300 miles. Not one single out of area pigeon has ever made it home from the 400 mile station in young birds from my loft which sits at 7,000 feet elevation.

So why write all of this? To remind me and others that we need to have confidence in what we have learned over many years of actual experience and what works rather than wasting time trying things that have failed time after time. Also to share with others who may be falling to the bottom listening to the hype? Before you begin feeding creatine, oils, mineral powder, apple cider vinegar, b-12 in the water, and much more look at what you know to be true. When you won, what did you do? What actually worked?

What I have found works best is to watch the birds. If they don't want to fly they have something wrong. First analyze what it may be. Think about what has happened over the last few days. Have I flown them every day to 70 miles and they are tired? This one is easy, just rest them. Did they pick something up from the waterer in the race trailer? Are they suffering from a light case of ornithosis? That is also easy action. Put a teaspoon of Doxycycline powder in a gallon of water and give for one to two days. That is enough to cure most otherwise healthy pigeons. For tough cases give for a week.

If they are standing on their toes and flapping their wings when you enter the loft, they are healthy and ready typically. If not tread lightly or you may lose some good pigeons. Pigeons suffering from cocci and respiratory won't navigate well. Once you have them ready to go another big issue is to stop the cause. Is it the loft?

The loft can be a major concern. I had an old well ventilate loft facing south which is my preferred loft position after years of experience. The sun shines in all winter long and benefits the pigeons in many ways, not to mention it keeps them warm. Does the loft have proper ventilation? You read this but do you truly understand it? Believe me when I say it matters!!!!

The pigeons must have air but it cannot be a cool draft. If so you can kiss them goodbye. It's guaranteed you will lose them. Pigeons must stay warm, but have fresh air. This is not easy to accomplish and takes a lot of thought and planning. Tweaking a loft is important. I built my new loft facing east because it was comfortable and I had heard it was also a good choice. Wrong! It depends on where you live. I live on a mountain at 7,000 feet, The Mountain goes up behind me to 11,000 feet. This creates a wind pattern that doesn't exist in other places. It whips up the side of the mountain and right into the loft. I lost quite a few pigeons leaving the windows open at night in the summer which I had done many times with my loft facing south. It gets colder here and may drop to 48 degrees at night on the mountain in the middle of summer then rise to 85 degrees that same day. That is a 33 degree jump. Pigeons have trouble adjusting to large temperature changes. It is true they will get used to it but young birds are susceptible. I spent many days flying birds and watching their reactions and overall responses as I added windows to the loft and how much to open them and at what time of day worked best to make changes. I arrived at opening the windows in the morning once the loft had warmed up on sunny days. This would keep the loft from getting too hot. Then I learned to set my iPhone alarm to close the windows every evening at 6 pm in the summer and 5 PM during the winter. Also I keep them closed on the front if there is any wind blowing in the front. I also learned to crack the windows a little when the wind is blowing to keep the draft out but a little fresh air flowing.

I added windows on the both ends of the loft as well. This gave me even more adjustments. I noticed in the summer I could leave the window on the south side open all the time but the window on the north side must be closed at night.

A sure sign of a bad loft is if it smells like pigeons. They are not any different than you. If it smells bad to you it does to them too. If it feels nice and smells fresh that is good as long as there is no draft blowing through the loft. You can overdo the fresh air too. So plenty of fresh air but it needs to come in slowly and diffused. This means through a screen. A screen makes a big difference how freely the air blows through. Of course this a bigger concern during the cold months.

I have noticed over the years that if you have a bird that is off it is best not to give baths. I cannot tell you how many times I had a couple birds off and gave a bath and next thing I knew they were all off. They spread things through a bath quicker than any other way I know of. So, if you have sick pigeons, do not give baths until the problem is resolved. Even then it is advisable to use a little Belgian bath salts in the water.

If it is not racing season they can go through minor infections with no help and you may want to speed up the process by giving a bath just to get it over with. We all think we can stop sickness. We can slow it down but most of the time it is just a matter of slowing it down. It continues through the birds when the opportunity arises. The only time I would worry about stopping it is during race season. Even then it is difficult.

It is my firm experience that giving mineral powders or any B-12 type products will catch up with you if they don't have some rest in between using them. The pigeons beat themselves up because they have more energy. Sooner or later if you don't rest them you will pay the price. I can't tell you how many times I have heard a big winner with a special bird say they lost him. I asked why? The answer was always I flew him one too many times. I think the real answer is he couldn't take anymore so yes you did fly him one too many times unnaturally. Had he been flown all natural he would still be there but maybe not as many prizes.

The best method in my experience is slowly building the birds up with correct feeding practices and correct rest and exercise. Building them slowly to maximum health and power before the race. Then after the race a recovery

and rest program which is a higher protein feed. Lots of high quality feed after the race. A warm bath and relaxation. Then we start the slow build up again for the next week.

I think it is very important to take the birds to the same place for release when training. This is far less stress on them and will build a strong picture of a navigation tool they will use over and over again when racing. I like to become close to my birds through hand feeding and talking to them. I want them to feel comfortable. I want them to miss home when they leave. A pigeon that loves home will work hard to get there. Gently herding the pigeons into the basket instead of grabbing them quickly off the perches. Birds don't like being grabbed roughly. I go to the loft at 5:30 am for a 50 mile toss and lift them off the perch gently and sit them in the box quietly. I drive 50 miles and get there just before 7 am and release at 7:15 am. If I go later in the morning or on shipping day I walk them into the box without touching them at all. It doesn't take very long to teach them this, in fact they will go in very easily when you sit the box down after you have done it several times. They know the routine.

Pigeons learn fast and repetition is the key. I never flag the birds on top of the pigeon loft. That is their safe haven and any flagging is not allowed there. If you must flag young birds wait until they are in the air away from the loft. If you can't get them going then box them up and take them across the yard. I have been doing that as long as I can remember and it works great. I know it is customary to handle the pigeons and look at the breast muscle, feathers and other things but I don't do that with my race team to figure out the good ones. I see how they act. Do they control the water shelf? Do they have a perch they defend? Do they stand on one leg when relaxing on the perch in the evening? Do they hit the floor when I walk into the loft and loft their wings and begin to flap them on their tippy toes? Are the facial feathers tight? Are the wing shield feathers smooth? Do they show light lace and iridescent colors on the sunlight on the back feathers? Are the feet red and healthy? Is their band clean? Are the droppings round firm and marble size? These are signs of a healthy and fit pigeons.

Sometimes everything looks right and you lose one. I have found many times if I inspect the rest I will find where one has brushed a highline wire or missing some secondary feathers from a falcon attack. We have to be careful flying birds when the wind is blowing hard. The pigeons drop down lower to tack in the wind. They may fly through some highline wires and one pigeon may not see it coming. I have gotten birds back with busted keels, broken legs, skinned breast, and others. The one who didn't make it probably hit under the throat. I was training a young bird team one day and the wind was blowing pretty well and they went through a telephone wire over my home and a nice hen in the rear hit the wire, broke its neck and fell dead on the sidewalk in front of my house. Only time I have ever witnessed that. It was enough to teach me to not take unnecessary chance with high winds.

When I was a kid I used to give a Spartrix tablet to a youngster with canker for several days until it was well. Then I started just giving them one and if they got well I thought it's a good pigeon. Now I just toss them to the coyote. I don't want to deal with canker so I don't. Guess what? I haven't seen canker in a great while. (many years)

I have forgotten a lot of things I have learned over the years. I sometimes relearn it and think to myself, I knew that before, why did I forget? I guess you can only remember so much. After many years of flying I have come to the conclusion to keep it simple, read the birds and only give what they need, not what someone else tells you they need. The pigeons will do the talking if you look and listen. They are the ones flying so best to listen to them.

Pigeons can't be too far different from us. We developed on the same planet in the same conditions. If we want to win a race we must condition ourselves with proper nutrition and proper exercise. Athletes that get hurt many times hurt themselves from over work that they were able to do using products. Without the products they would have felt the alarm bells going off and saved themselves. One might say, well I want to win a race. Pigeons will be gone soon after the race. Fine, but I still think you can win without it through proper feeding techniques, a healthy loft and the right exercise. Importantly, don't forget rest. It is as important as exercise. I guarantee it.

