

## ***Natural***

Ken Easley

When breeding pigeons, a fellow is always looking at information that will help him to do well. There are many different methods out there and someone has had success with them, or they wouldn't use those methods. My methods have always been to try and stay close to nature when possible. We can't always follow nature. For the most part we can do some things that make sense.

I have read articles where the author explains that our racing pigeons are not natural or wild pigeons and have been bred as domesticated animals for many years. They further explain that they cannot be bred in natural conditions with any success. I agree that they have been domesticated and there is nothing natural about how and why we pair our pigeons. They have evolved how we allow them to and not by natural standards.

I would however caution that just because we have domesticated a wild animal that we have not bred out nature. We never will completely breed out nature. Examples of this would be that pigeons have a crop and a gizzard. They are seed eaters. They go to roost at night. They eat grit. They feed the babies crop milk. This and many other aspects haven't changed for centuries.

Now if you want to show me how pigeons have been bred to be integrated into an iPhone and no longer have lungs or organs then I would agree they are no longer any kind of natural wild animal.

Until then we must agree that they are indeed still more of a natural animal with thousands of years of natural breeding rather than a few hundred years of man's breeding. In doing so we must also agree that they have developed certain traits that enhanced their survival in the wild.

For instance, pigeons like to nest in a dark place in the rock cliffs in the wild. They feel safer and they still prefer a dark corner to nest in when domesticated. They remembered where they found a good field with seeds to eat in the wild and where the nest with their youngsters is. We still to this day use these things to our advantage. We didn't change this ability. We didn't create this ability. We may have worked to enhance it, but it is still a natural instinct.

Think about it like this, if you had two dogs and one was raised outside on the farm running free and the other in the house going out only a couple times a day on a leash, which one do you think would be the healthier dog, Certainly not the little fat one on the dog pillow.

Pigeons and humans don't do well in a closed loft filled with dust that floats around and fills the lungs of man and beast. If they did, they would be sitting in a dusty place in the wild. It is not natural and not good. Pigeons sit in places with fresh air. Places where the droppings can dry out and many falls far below to dry out away from the nesting area. Pigeons like to sit in the sun to warm up and get fresh air and vitamins. This has not changed, and it will not. It keeps them healthy and happy. Think about pigeons in the city how they may sit on the side of a bridge or on a ledge in the sun on a cold morning warming in the sun.

If you want good healthy pigeons, they need to be in a loft that accommodates their needs and stop trying to medicate them into our way of raising them. These are not human beings. A loft sitting up in the air is more natural. My breeding loft sits 10 feet off the ground. The floor is expanded steel with diamond shaped 3/4" holes. The nest boxes are high up on the back wall in the dim light. They can come out into the morning sun and warm up at daylight. The best loft is facing south so they can use the sun any time of day to warm up.

The droppings fall to the ground far below keeping the loft clean and easy for me and my pigeons to breath without difficulty. Most respiratory sickness comes from closed in lofts. Whether it is holding in moisture or dust, it's all detrimental to pigeons. Why is that? Because they have been living free of this for thousands of years in the wild. Most breathing difficulties to humans come from too much dust floating around in a loft with bad ventilation too.

There are some drawbacks from using a steel floor, but they can be overcome with logic. The young birds can become cold when weaned on a steel floor in cold climates. They will become sick if not properly attended to. It is best to add a large tray 2' x 3' full of pine needles in the corner on the floor during the cold weather. After the youngsters are all up on the perches the tray can be removed.

In nature pigeons get exercise in almost everything they do. We cannot give all of our breeders the amount of exercise they get in the wild, but we can try.

The water should be high up on a shelf. The perches high up in the rear of the loft. The feed tray with a 2" lip sitting in the middle of the loft floor 2' x 4' with a layer of grit on the bottom. Pigeons like walking around in gravel and picking so this works perfect. The youngsters can fly up to the perches, then down to eat, then up to get a drink of water. They exercise and learn to fly well before being sent out to one loft races. If you are flying local, I sit the youngsters on the roof before they are big enough to fly more than 5-10 feet. This way they home in good and learn to trap. My trap is on the roof. The youngsters can walk around on the roof and then trap in when they hear me sprinkling the feed and calling them. I never feed them before letting them out, so they learn to come quickly when they see the feed being thrown into the tray and hear me calling them. Three days and they will be trapping like little soldiers.

Pigeons need fresh air, but they must not have a draft on them. Same as in nature, they sit up out of the wind. It is good to have windows in the loft. You can figure out which ones work best and how much to open them to get the ventilation just right. If you put them on three sides you can try different combinations until you get the ventilation perfect. You never want any ventilation going across the perches. This area should have very slow-moving air. Then out in front of the perches the air can be moving a little more. It typically comes through the windows and vents out the floor taking any dust with it as they pigeons' flap around. You can sit in the floor and light a cigar and watch the smoke floating and see what the path of ventilation and the speed. If it is going out too fast it may be too much circulation. If it is too slow then you need more. You never want the air blowing straight into them or across them while they are roosting. I can regulate this by having a partial wall on each side of the perches. The rest can be welded wire walls inside the loft to separate the sections. This way air can circulate but not onto or across the perch area.

Pigeons like baths and they do best with a routine. Sunday is always bath day here if it is 40 degrees and rising. I will start them in the morning, so they are dry before going to roost in the evenings. You don't want them wet before nightfall especially in winter. I like to use Belgium bath salts to keep their feet clean and feathers healthy. Pigeons take baths in puddles in nature. They like to take baths and so it is natural and good to give them baths. The exception being when you have any sock pigeons. Baths must be suspended until all is well again.

A good perch system is vital for good health too. The pigeons need to have perches that shed the droppings to the ground far below and don't collect for

them to stand in. This is unhealthy for their feet. They must not shed droppings onto the pigeons that may be below them. I like box perches where the birds face forward and there is a hole in the rear, so the droppings fall through. Droppings can shed out as well and it is also unhealthy for them and us to breathe.

Pigeons love to eat on the ground. I think it is healthy for them to peck on the ground and lounge about the yard some until training starts. After road training starts, they must trap quickly. On Sundays after a bath, it is good to let them lounge about and enjoy their home. After a race they return on Saturday's and have all they can eat of the best feed. Then on Sunday a good bath and allowed to mill about in the yard and just be pigeons. They are not robots and need to bond with their home and comrades.

One loft racing is difficult. Most lofts are built well but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out where the poor lofts are. Poor returns are a direct result of a poor loft design. I guarantee it. Believe what you want or make a step forward and understand that good lofts make good races. In one loft racing you need a tough pigeon. They must have a good immune system to survive let alone compete the series. The only way to achieve success in one loft racing is with super genetics. No tricks, potions, motivation, or systems will help you. You have one thing you can control, the breeding pairs in the loft. Natural smarts and natural health are the number one in the stock loft for success. The one thing you cannot control is the loft or the manager. Both can be either great or terrible.

You will never make a mule win the Kentucky derby and you will never make a good plow horse from a thoroughbred. Learn what each race needs to succeed and breed for it. It starts with being smart. Use nature to help you. Sunlight, ventilation, sure loft design, and top genetics. Look for races with good returns. I have sent some pigeons that were not my best to test one loft races before sending good ones. The best managers with a good understanding of loft set up and training will get even your mediocre pigeon's home. I have seen it myself firsthand. Poor managers and poor loft designs will lose even the finest bred pigeons. There is the additional problem of sickness. A loft with poor protocols during the entry phase of the race can very easily turn a good race into a disaster. It is not easy to have good protocols. The best lofts and protocols have been with the managers that have been racing pigeons for a long time and have learned all the tough lessons long before opening a race. There are some top-notch managers out there.

The management style usually mirrors their style of racing pigeons in their local club. Some guys raise a mob of pigeons and then turn them loose into less than favorable conditions. They believe the good ones will come through and this is the only ones they consider worthy to move forward. They believe they have done themselves justice in finding the best of the loft. I agree we cannot coddle the pigeons completely, but I also believe they should have every opportunity to succeed. I have on many occasions sent pigeons to races that were simply not good enough to win. I learned this by sending them to good loft managers who were able to send them to every race including the final.

I have also won what many would call survivor races. These races are usually from a tough manager or hard courses. They can also be from a combination of things like a bad loft, poor decisions, and poor health. I think we all can think of one of these types of races. When learning about one loft racing a fellow can send 20 birds to a survival type one loft race and have 3 left at the end. Then he can turn around and send 20 to a race with a great manager and loft and have 18 to activate for the final race.

The best races are pretty easy to spot. Great managers will have more than one pigeon that responds to their management. Great managers will have 3/4 of the loft respond to the good management. You will see this easily on the final races with many pigeons coming together and even the ones not coming together will be in logical spacing of power and endurance. Well managed pigeons don't stop coming, they may fall behind, but they will continue. This is more evident on easy courses. On difficult courses there will be more separation.

When I see pigeons break out to the lead for more than 20 minutes, I know there was a hawk attack or something unnatural. Weather perhaps? Maybe a land obstruction? A lake or mountain.... On flat land I would suspect big drops in a race with a great manager.

I remember flying in the club and the years when my loft was super, the health was super I always had big drops. I may have 32 birds on my team and have 28 on the drop, 18 on the drop or 12 on the drop with the others coming close behind.

One loft races don't have the luxury of going completely all natural or pushing the birds too hard. They have to be careful. People spend big money on

pigeons, and they won't take kindly to finding out all pigeons were lost to sickness or a bad toss. It also hurts their bottom line and reputation.

The worst thing can happen in a one loft race is sickness. A big loss on a short training race can many times be mistaken for a poor decision due to weather or location when in fact it is a case of Ornithosis. Ornithosis causes the pigeons to have trouble orienting. What might be a normal 50-mile toss can turn into an absolute disaster. The one loft manager watches the birds very carefully for any signs that something is off. A slight case of ornithosis may be hard to detect. Birds look normal but maybe they don't flap their wings when the manager entered the loft. When pigeons are healthy, they will start flapping their wings when the manager enter the loft. They feel good and are ready for whatever is happening. Pigeons that are off may jump to the floor but no flapping of the wings.

In these cases, I recommend the loft be treated. A one loft race is different than your home loft where one can be more careful about mass treatments. In a one loft race it is best to be safe. A call to your local vet would be prudent for some testing. The birds can sit for a couple days. Resist the temptation to say the show must go on and they will be fine. That would be your first and potentially your biggest mistake.

If I were running a race and saw the birds were off, I would suspend training immediately. No baths during sickness to lessen the spread. Give them treatment for Ornithosis. Then wait to see the wing flapping again before resuming training.

I think in one loft racing the loft is critical. A good loft keeps the birds healthy. The loft should not have any drafts. I can't say this enough. It has to be warm. You have to come up with whatever method it takes to accomplish both. Warm fresh air. My choice has always been turning loft toward the South and have the perch area protected from any drafts.

I really enjoy seeing a loft manager get big drops during training. My expectations go up immediately. I know he has them healthy. We want some separation on the final race of course and the distance must be adjusted to accomplish this. The distance may vary depending on weather conditions. Head wind requires less distance to get separation. Tail wind more distance to attain proper separation. I know some have complained about the birds coming in a huge drop on the final. Two things this tells me, the man has the pigeons healthy and he should have taken them a little further. If we are going

to have a mistake I would rather it be a big drop and healthy pigeons, so all pigeons are given the opportunity to compete. It's not the best scenario but it is definitely second best and that's not bad.

One last thing to keep things natural is the proper rest. I have had much discussion about the need for good training. What I have yet to have good discussions on (except with Europeans) is rest. Rest is a tool that is natural and vital to success. I know some believe that the birds must be pushed to the breaking point to get rid of the duds. Not true at all. I bred rollers for many years. The best producing cock I ever owned was stubborn and would not roll. I flew him two years then gave him to my father who flew him two years then gave him back. When I started flying him within two weeks, he began spinning up to 40' deep and sometimes up to 60' as clean and pretty a spin as I've ever witnessed. He went on to become the backbone of my strain.

Had I eliminated this pigeon for nonperformance I would have lost the best pigeon I ever bred. It was many years ago and I still remember his band number, Easley-932. If you can't remember a pigeon's band number, the pigeon is no good and that is a fact. Good pigeons I can remember them. My best pigeon as a boy was 51. My best producing hen ever was 370. My best producing racing pigeon is 949. You can point out a pigeon in my loft and I can tell you his parents, results and lineage. How? I'm not a genius so the answer is obvious. The pigeon comes up in my mind so much that his number is forever etched into my mind. That my friends is how we know a good pigeon. This is without question. Ask yourself right now who your best producing pigeon is and what's number is. You know it don't you? There is a reason for that.

Getting rid of pigeons is part of the natural process also. How do we know who to cull? This is a huge question for all of us. Years of experience begins to teach us a pattern. I won't say that it is a fool proof method because there isn't one. The best method is by racing them first, then taking the best racing pigeons and breeding them, then keeping the best producers. Everyone says, well Ken, that's pretty obvious isn't it. Yes, but actions speak louder than words. How many pigeons in your stock loft today were acquired in this way? You raised them, raced them, then stocked them, then kept them after they produced well. Out of all breeders how many did you attain this way?

Don't lose heart, most of us are in the same boat and develop a method we can live with. Pigeons produce low percentages of winners and we all get

impatient. It doesn't take long to get lured away by the big 1st prize winners. I must have some to win.....Maybe so.

Just remember bringing in a new pigeon brings in new avenues for failure too. I bring in pigeons to try and do better each year. I think there is a manageable amount you can bring in. I like to keep about 16 pair of regular proven stock. I also like to try three or four young pair each year. Looking for my next up grade. If you have 16 pair it will usually be made up of at least 8 pair of your best base pigeons. Then you have four pigeons you purchased that seem to click with your strain. That's 12 pair. Then you probably have four pair of totally unrelated to your strain that you are trying to uncover a jewel to bring into your strain. Then 3 or 4 pair of young pigeons back from races you want to try out or that special late bred that no one can convince you is not the next champ producer.

There are guys breeding from 50 pair. They may have more time on their hands, maybe more organized, maybe they have help? Maybe a partnership? OK, I can see some exceptions here that make sense. Then we have guys with 100 pair. This is a business. It's very difficult to manage that many pair of pigeons. The method I have used over the years is "always looking for a pigeon to get rid of". I have the mentality of a guy on a ship lost at sea and I only have enough rations for 65 pigeons total. Anything else has to go. 16 pair of stock is 32. 4 young pair is 8 so that's 40 pigeons. Then an extra 25 which may include 3 or 4 extra old hens and cocks and late bred youngsters I haven't sent out to one loft races. I will sell these. They must be without any faults I can see, and I haven't bred them. If I have bred them, they must have bred a top 10% pigeon in a race. Otherwise, they are soup.

During young bird season I may have 25 youngsters in a group, and all must go to races. Holding back a pigeon because it looks nice is a mistake. You won't ever trust it no matter how great it looks. Chances are 99% it won't breed anything. So why not fly it? Only reason to have a unflown young bird is because it is a replacement of a very valuable old bird. A close imitation of your best. I have a couple like that myself right now. Even then it's a high chance it's rubbish. Why? Because that is the way pigeons work. Still, we must try.

All of us, even the ones with only 16 pair or less would go to our loft today and decide to cut them in half would be better off. That is a fact. I cut my stock loft in half every other year. I force myself to. I don't regret it. I have sent away some very good pigeons. Others have gained from my cutting activities, but I

have always felt better too. I was able to keep a better understanding of what is left and do right by them.

If you go into nature you will quickly notice that groups of pigeons live together, and you rarely see more than 100 in a group. Usually more like 30 or less. Keep it natural. There are reasons for this.

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