



PIGEON RACING

BY
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HERE TO STAY OR
GOING THE WAY
OF THE DODO?

“**H**ow many people can say they have something wild that comes home from 500 miles away? I dropped the wife off at the store a few blocks away and haven’t seen her in 30 years,” says Jeff Mawbey with the Mid-Island Racing Pigeon Association. That’s one reason why he races pigeons—they always come home. And Hardeep Sahota, president of the Capital City Racing Pigeon Club (CCRPC) in Victoria, says his wife always knows where he is—in the backyard with his squab squadron.



MAWBEY (AKA THE Birdman of Duncan) proudly shows me the loft just steps from his home where his racing pigeons reside. He opens the loft’s hatch and a few rush to the opening. In a flurry of feathers his little spitfires take to the sky, swooping so low you can hear their wings and then circling, like they’re taking a few lazy laps around the track. With each circle another bird joins until they grow higher and form a miniature murmuration. After 20 minutes or so they start to come home, flapping their wings like flexing their muscles upon landing. “They aren’t allowed on the house roof when company is here, so they know they are naughty now. I might have to chuck them a tennis ball,” says Mawbey, laughing.

I expect the birds to be flapping around their loft in fetid air and everywhere thick with bird poop but that

isn’t so. Mawbey scoops poop daily and delivers droppings to Providence Farm for fertilizer. Sahota’s neighbours and the community’s gardeners come by to collect the poop from his 24 pigeons. What a life: all-you-can-eat buffet, on-call medical care, daily housekeeping in their condo lofts—no wonder these birds always come home.

I asked more about the neighbours. “Two kids across the road come here all the time and pick up the pigeons. And they bring friends over,” says Mawbey. “Kids take them to school for show-and-tell in a carrying box, let

them loose outside and they fly home.” Not all neighbours like that. For instance, the District of North Vancouver ruffled feathers in 2019 when it proposed to prohibit the keeping of pigeons. The City of Surrey holds that “racing pigeons maintained on any record lot shall not exceed 15 birds per 1,000 square feet of area,” and Delta banned pigeon racing in 2020.

Pigeon racing has existed in Canada for almost a century. According to vice.com, there are currently 5,000 pigeon racers competing across 101 racing clubs nationally, but only a handful in BC. I asked Sahota if racing pigeons will go the way of the dodo in our province. “The sport is very popular in many countries and immigration allows us to recruit new members—a few Filipinos recently joined,” Sahota says. Unfortunately, kids are a hard sell. “My kids loved the hobby until



Above: Pigeons are putty in Mawbey’s hands. **Left:** Just days old, they grow up so fast!

they got into computers, but we are working hard to first educate parents and get youth involved—we can help build a loft and give them a few birds.” (If kids see the old Animal Planet TV show starring boxer Mike Tyson and his pigeons, it might help spark interest.)

HOW DO THEY DO IT? Racing pigeons are closely related to feral pigeons (Woody Allen famously coined them rats with wings), which are urban relatives of *columba livia*, the rock dove. Street pigeons vs racing pigeons are like normal people vs athletes because, over thousands of years, they have been bred to find their way home in a hurry. Quite how they do so isn’t completely understood, but researchers published a study in *Biogeosciences* (2013) that determined they find the finish line using the Earth’s magnetic

field, the sun, odours and winds as their compass.

Mawbey’s little flying machines seem genuinely interested in each other. The flock’s cooing sounds like they’re contented; their handlers say they are happy. Whether they love racing or just think about eating and flying is yet to be determined.

“Sure, they squabble over nest boxes and mates but for the most part they are happy birds,” Mawbey says. There’s been a lot of action in the breeding loft. He cups in his hand one future chevron born this morning and picks up another born March 20 (determined from the band on its leg) and too young to fly. Of course, this begs the question: “To keep the population down I let them lay eggs and sit on them for 10 days then I throw them out,” answers Mawbey. It makes sense to get rid of the eggs. What happens to

the babies if Mum doesn’t make it back from a race?

Humans like to race, from chariots to Formula 1, and pigeons are a lower-cost sport for people who can’t afford horses or hounds—although vitamins, food and shelter can cost thousands of dollars per year (and the price of grain will likely skyrocket, soon)—but some animal activists say pigeon racing is cruel. Breeders, however, say such criticism is for the birds—and that racing is a fun sport like any other and can be a valuable educational tool to teach kids such things as responsibility. “Sure, racing is dangerous—pigeons are frantic to get back to their nest before a hawk gets them, but there are worse sports, such as cockfights,” says Lynne Brookes, Ph.D., naturalist and educator at the North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre. “And how a racing animal is treated depends on their handler.”



Above: A few of Sahota's many trophies. **Right above:** Sahota's pigeons fly the coop. **Right below:** Thousands of messenger pigeons saved countless lives in both World Wars.



When Sahota's birds are too old to fly, he retires them. "It's about quality of life; as long as they can eat, they have a home, just like your pet cat or dog," he says. After visiting Mawbey and Sahota, I gleaned their recipe for success: provide a good home so they want to come back, don't get too attached and don't name them unless you are 12 years old.

"When I was 12, I had pet pigeons and as more showed up, Dad said they were getting expensive to feed and he threatened to get rid of them, but I knew they would come back," Brookes reminisces. "I used to put them in a big basket on my bike, ride to the end of the street and let them loose—I taught them how to go home. Dad didn't have a clue. Finally, we took an hour's drive to ditch them and guess what, they beat us home. So, Dad let me keep

them, but I had to make a deal. I did extra chores and I collected bottles for their feed. I first found a bird that looked hungry and threw it corn, then I learned about pigeon feed. It stayed. Then another one joined a few days later and I soon had about eight birds. They lived in big rabbit hatches in the garage; I fed and watered them and let them out during the day to do their pigeon things. One had babies and I got to watch them grow up. Star was so tame she was like a parakeet."

An article titled "Pigeon Racing and Working-Class Culture in Britain, c. 1870-1950" told the complaint of a Welsh miner's wife: "He thinks a damn sight more of his birds than he does of me. Same thing applies to the kids. He'd see them eat nothing else but 'shinkin' [bread and tea], scrag end and pwdin bara [bread pudding] as long as

his precious pigeons got their linseed oil, maple peas, tick-beans and Indian corn... The bugger, to get his pidgins through the traps into the loft to have a good night's rest, coos to them, but he never gives a sing song to the kids to get them to settle down in the cradle."

Retired fire chief Dave Hill joined the CCRPC over 60 years ago, and like Brookes got interested in pigeons at age 12. "An elderly pigeon fancier gave me a few birds, so Dad and I built a pigeon loft in the backyard," he says. "Sometimes we bought birds at auction, but it was tricky getting the right stock to perform." In 2020, a female racing pigeon named New Kim sold for around \$1.9 million at an auction in Belgium. Neither Sahota nor Mawbey are gamblers but they, along with fellow club members, like to bet a few bucks to "bump up the

fun," says Mawbey. "The competition can get pretty hairy at times and you can lose by a hair, so it's also exciting." Still, you don't need to be wealthy to race but you could make a few bucks. The famous race in South Africa draws 7,500 pigeons from around the globe who will compete for US \$1.25 million in prize money.

THE RACE By April, Mawbey and other Mid-Island Club members have their squab squadrons in training. At the crack of dawn, they are whisked off to Nanaimo for a short race. And another the following week, further afield, leading up to the main event: the race from Port Hardy. The winner is determined by how long it takes to

reach its home loft divided by the distance because the birds fly to different homes. "Every race is like my first," says Mawbey. "They come in like a bullet at 60 mph, fold their wings as they come into the yard and drop to the landing board."

Of the 60 birds Mawbey races, about a dozen will be lost to predators, mainly hawks, which helps the success rate of nesting raptors. (Lynne Brookes says eagles are after bigger prey.) "Last year we flew them 675 ki-

lometres to Kitimat and they arrived home in 12 hours."

"Last Friday night we basketed between 400 to 600 pigeons at our clubhouse in Langley and drove them by trailer to Hope," says Brian Nicholson, president of the North Road Racing Pigeon Society in Langley. (He joined the club at 12—that magic age again.) An electronic band on one leg (their regulation number is put on the other leg when they are about a week old) scans them with a computer clock at the clubhouse. The next race is 1,324 kilometres to Medicine Hat but not as the crow flies—what happens from release to return is a mystery. Nicholson says they are released at 6:00 a.m. and they are home in time for dinner at 6:00 p.m. "They average 40 mph on a head wind and up to 60 to 70 mph with a tail wind."

Racing/homing pigeons imprint on their home loft at about six weeks old and will return to it for their entire lives, regardless of how far away they are taken. They have been known to make the ultimate sacrifice. For instance, in 1845 a pigeon owned by the Duke of Wellington was released off the coast of Namibia. It was found dead in a gutter one mile from its loft in London, having taken 55 days to fly the 5,400 miles home. And Cher Ami was the plucky pigeon—now stuffed in the Smithsonian—who saved the lives of 200 US soldiers after they became

encircled by Germans during the First World War.

BESIDES THE EXCITEMENT of the race, Mawbey credits the hobby with keeping him out of trouble and he gets to spend more time outside. "If you're stressed out, their cooing calms. I pull up my chair and watch them for hours. If not for pigeons, retirement would be boring," he quips. Sahota says his birds listen and don't talk back. Sounds like my parents referring to us kids. 🐦