

PREFACE



The author Leo Turley

There has been a whole raft of pigeon books written over the years and the question has to be asked up front, “*why another?*” That is a very good question and I can only say that after some sixty years in the sport and in which I have just about seen everything (and still learning) there are elements of the sport that are best left to individual specialists to write about and there are important fundamentals, that are not often documented and everyone should know as part of gaining a strong foothold in this fascinating occupation and that is what I want to achieve here. There is a Western Australian flavour throughout the book, but it remains representative of anywhere across Australia or across the globe.

I use the term ‘*occupation*’ advisedly. Pigeon racing is frequently described as a hobby and just as often a sport. I think we fit somewhere in between and it is an individual pastime where we occasionally come together to compete against one another, compare notes and even argue over theories, but mostly it is what covertly goes on in the individual’s back yard, in their loft, that is more important – and more satisfying. We are not team players, far from it, more like the “Secret Service,” which just about answers the question on why good information is so hard to come by, albeit we all maintain a select group of close friends and like specialist groups everywhere very much communicate in our own ‘language’ using special words and expressions designed to be a complete puzzle to ‘outsiders’.

I must say upfront too, I have given much thought to successful pigeon racing and the downside and sacrifices it often entails and a good book should cover this aspect as part of being complete. Racing competitively; being in the higher echelon of competition places a huge demand on time and effort and can be considered an inherently selfish occupation when attempting to balance work and family into the mix, particularly if also shouldering official club and federation responsibilities, as part of the broader occupation. Unfortunately, precious time lost from a growing family is not recoverable. One needs to be aware of this fundamental preoccupation that goes with the hobby and set time aside; take on a partnership to share the workload, but most important be aware that pigeon racing is a three hundred and sixty-five day of the year occupation. (p.477) It can be very “*addictive*,” it is in the blood, especially if one continually strives for par excellence – and quintessential par excellence is necessary to be up with the best, but, sometimes, one just needs to stop and “*smell the flowers*”, have a break, take a holiday and come back afresh and spread one’s time across the birds and the family. It does help at times to put some balance, some perspective back into this all-embracing, always

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character-building, greatest-leveller occupation and I believe this advice is just as important as every other facet found in the book.

It can also be asked how does one become involved in an occupation such as this and why it captivates some over such a long period - a lifetime and, alternatively, not as much for others. For some it is the magic of pairing select pigeons together after studying highly complex pedigrees, their nest, eggs and finally youngsters and then watching them grow and begin to fly and roam across the sky for longer and longer periods before coming back to the home we have created for them. The peace and tranquillity they bring while sitting in the garden just watching, on the ground or in the air, can transport one away from other daily preoccupations, no matter how important. For others it is more. The training and racing, the anticipation waiting on birds returning from races and the mental calculations and mind's eye visualisation; to fix in the mind where the birds are; to be with them at every minute of their journey and then that first glimpse in the distance, diving in under power with wings folded back like a falcon, rocking from side to side to maintain speed and often termed "*a rock-in finish!*" Whether it is from one-hundred kilometres or a thousand, the feeling is always the same. The dreaming, scheming, planning for tomorrow, the weekend, next week and the week after that and next year; always, always another season. One may well ask why? It is very hard to put a finger on it, it just simply is. Looking back too, it has been a magnificent journey. Without the birds, it makes one wonder what other turns in life could have shaped the past sixty and more years. Almost without exception, lifelong friendships can be traced back to the birds, in one way or another and even extends to many of our children's connections as well and it is very much like an extended family, with all its attendant issues too I might add. Pigeon keeping and racing is truly a way of life and its uncertainties invariably represent the passion that makes it so fascinating.

As suggested by the titles, common sense is not so common and uncommon sense even less. The occupation is awash with unfounded notions and notions and is probably one of the last bastions of a bygone era and change is always at a snail's pace. Someone once said that we are drowning in information and starving for knowledge and I genuinely want to do something about it. Good pigeons coupled with common sense are all that is needed for successful racing.

This preface, like the essays themselves, represent a patchwork quilt of thoughts and ideas which sometimes flow from one to the other and sometimes not. It is the nature of the pastime that dictates the way everything unfolds and some have even suggested there are three books here in one. Part personal journey as a means to validate, to personalise the work; part historical; part developed insight, but always arranged to challenge the conventional mindset - to reach out – to be educational.

Many of the sections, not all, were written on invitation from that excellent publication the *Australian Racing Pigeon Journal* (ARPJ) and here they are brought together to provide readers with a more accessible single volume. I have placed the question and answer theme for these pieces more appropriately in chapter twenty-four entitled "*Questions Answered,*" although most of these are applicable to the various chapters by subject and I make reference to them, as appropriate, throughout the book.

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Some texts are more of a random nature, such as Jim Krynen, cycling, p.163, understanding cats, p.276, Terry Mulholland loft report, p.303, Raptor people, p.328, Council addresses, p.463 and other interactive notes are related here as part of the wider educational environment.

There is a lot of information and it was important to develop the index section in fine detail to provide ready access for student study, such as that found in a manual, or a user guide, as well as to extensively cross-reference related works and readers are encouraged to make use of these reference tools as part of their travels throughout the book. Similarly, last minute thoughts and suggestions have been taken on board and as appropriate included as appendices at the rear of the book. One reader even suggested the inclusion of a ribbon bookmark and what an excellent idea and another more recently drew attention to the ways and means to look after the book and I have included that too. (p.783). Our reader is right – it is too easy to inadvertently damage the book through inappropriate handling, given that in most cases it is simply a matter of not knowing.

The book has been about twenty years in gestation and regularly punctuated by unplanned stops and starts. It has taken time to write and will probably take even more time to digest. I could fill many pages on such issues as the external and internal anatomy, the digestive system, the male and female reproductive system; fertilisation and so on and while important is one of the elements best left to those mentioned above – specialists and in particular I always defer to our first-rate pigeon veterinarians.

It is sufficient to know that, externally, our pigeons have individual feathers applicable to tail, wing and body. The tail consists of twelve feathers and represents the rudder and for braking, while the wing comes in three parts comprising, primary, secondary and tertiary flights. The secondary group, that number fourteen, makes it hard to know how to deal with the final three or four feathers – the tertiary group, which collectively represent the first segment of the wing outwards from the body and is for lift, just like an airplane wing and then follows the ten primary flights numbered from one to ten counting from inside outwards and are often termed the flight fingers of the hand and are key to the bird's flight, particularly its manoeuvrability.

The coverts provide a protective sheath, a layer over the spines of the main primary and secondary flights and are seen in the photograph below. And while, in this case, it is hidden by the author's thumb, there is another small oddity called the "*bastard wing*" (meaning spurious or fake) or alula (plural alulae) meaning winglet, which is a small projection on the anterior edge of the wing. The alula is the freely moving first digit, a bird's "*thumb*," and typically displays three to five small flight feathers.

Generally, the alula is held flush against the wing; however, it can be manipulated when flying at low speed or for landing. The bird moves its alula slightly upwards and forward creating a small slot on the wing's leading edge allowing the wing to achieve a higher than normal angle of attack and thereby lift – without resulting in a stall. Our pigeons' wings are a marvel of nature and are too often just passed over at a glance.

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Photo 1

This illustration is termed a “full wing” with all flights and coverts in place. Counting from left to right clockwise is number ten primary flight, then nine, eight and so on back to number one, which is seen to be slightly raised (the step) above the first secondary flight number fourteen. In the southern hemisphere, the most critical flight for racing is primary flight number nine and should be fully moulted and in place despite all other changes going on around it. Photo by author while holding the pigeon.

It is worth noting too that healthy youngsters will begin active flying and ranging away from home within fifty days of birth and simultaneously, in the southern hemisphere, have dropped the first primary flight; such is their importance that primary flight renewal is a continual process and only pausing temporarily during mid-winter. Back in the “*primordial soup*”, the primary flights were fingers or toes (or thumbs as mentioned above) and today they are used for steering, manoeuvrability, just like an airplane uses its hinged flaps or ailerons on the trailing edge of the wing to control banking movements and more important for evasion on being attacked by predators. The body feathers provide specialist movement depending on where they are located. Unlike wing and tail feathers, that are replaced annually, body feathers are moulted over several seasons. For our purpose, in competition, our birds need to have every feather in place to safely home and win.

As I have already mentioned, the most crucial feathers are the primary flights, especially the eighth, ninth and tenth. These need to be in place, or at least two of the three, or the bird will be severely compromised, especially under attack and everything to do with our bird's feathering and body conformation has as its basis preservation in face of predation. It is of pure academic interest that our birds, of the modern genus *Columba*, with *Columba*, among other things, meaning having ability to suck water and is very much the only bird species that can do so (p.583) evolved some 2.6 million years ago in Australasia and moved out from there. Our pigeons are of the sub-species *Columba livia domestica* of the wild types *Columba livia/affinis*. It really is a question of which came first, *livia* or *affinis* (p.347) with both generally recognised as having developed in the old world – Europe, the Middle East, Asia and north Africa and primarily over eons in domestication as ship to shore messenger pigeons and for other business-oriented and strategic war-time communications.

In passing, our pigeons are direct decedents of dinosaurs and original dinosaurs had feather-like body cladding. These feathers were later refined to scales in response to temperature changes and one of

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the legacies of that origin is the scales on our pigeons' legs and similarly our pigeons' eyes are in common with reptilian families as a further leftover. (p.87).

Most birds fall within the classification "*Passerine*" of the order Passeriformes (from the Latin term *passer* for Passer Sparrows and similar small birds) and sometimes known as perching birds and comprise more than five-thousand identified species, which is double that of the largest of the other animal orders. On the contrary however, our pigeons belong to the more select group identified as Non-Passerine. Non-Passerine's fly with their legs (and their feet) held straight backward, hinged from the pelvis and tucked under the tail and can be more identified with long distance flying; whereas Passerines have their legs clutched forward into their breast and commonly fly from tree to tree and limb to limb. Non-passerine relates to, or is characteristic of, birds that are not perching birds in the true sense. That is, they prefer to roost on flat surfaces, as opposed to rounded tree branches, as a result of a less articulated foot structure and probably answers the question why feral pigeons favour town halls instead of staying hidden way in tree foliage and is why we have flat 'V' and box-type perches in our lofts instead of branches. It follows that our bird's typical non-passerine stilted and inflexible joints are recognised in humans as "*pigeon toe*" and this lack of flexibility relates to how leg and ankle joints are angled and rotated. The purpose for mentioning this is that our birds are highly