

One Flew Over the Pigeon Coop

By Jim Fregonara

Occasionally we are contacted regarding a peculiar bird sighting. The unknown bird may come out of nowhere and can stay around your property for some time. This mystery bird is similar in looks to a mourning dove but larger, looking like a city pigeon, has a few colored bands attached to its legs, and acts very tame. Usually this bird appears to be healthy with no obvious signs of injury. This bird is a racing pigeon, otherwise known as a homing pigeon.

Racing pigeons have been used for thousands of years. Emperor Caesar used them during his conquest of Gaul. A message declaring the defeat of Napoleon's army at Waterloo was sent by a pigeon. Pigeons were used during World War I, and during World War II more than 50,000 pigeons were used by the U.S. Army. Pigeons were so important in warfare that a memorial was erected in Brussels to honor these fearless flyers.

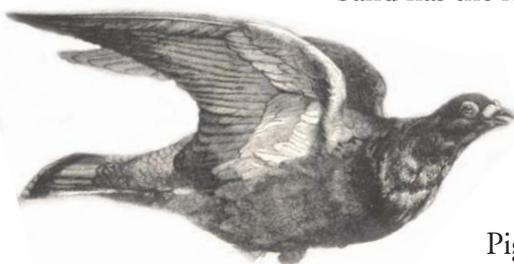
A bird downed in your backyard may have been in a race and could be either lost, blown off course, or forced down by severe weather or a flying predator. They are usually tired, hungry and thirsty. To care for the bird, provide it with water, food and shelter. Fresh water should be given in a small bowl at least one inch deep.

Since pigeons are grain eaters, grains such as popcorn, canary seed or commercial bird food should be offered. Racing pigeons do not eat bread like their cousins in the park and will probably ignore it. Any cage that can hold a cat or dog, or a cardboard box will suffice. Keep the bird dry and warm while it refuels.

Once the bird has rested and eaten, it may simply fly away and continue the race.

These birds usually have leg bands with numbers signifying the racing club and owner. Fortunately, there are several websites and telephone numbers available to help reunite the owner and bird. The important information you will need is right on the bands. If the band has the letters "IF" the

owner belongs to the International Federation of American Homing Pigeons Fanciers.



USFWS Photo



Racing pigeons have bands on them with club information.

Pigeons or rock doves can have various plumages from mottled grey to pure white.

You can go online at www.ifpigeon.com or call (732) 255-3041 to help reunite the bird and owner. Please note they can only help with IF birds.

If the band has the letters "AU" it is a member of the American Racing Pigeon Union. Contact www.pigeon.org or call (405) 848-5801. Other letters signify other racing clubs.

Do not place a note to the owner by wrapping a note through the bands. This can cause fatal injury to the bird due to the extra weight and tighter compression around the foot.

Once the owner is contacted, arrangements can be made for returning the bird to its owner or releasing it to continue its journey. So the next time you find a tired or confused looking pigeon wearing bands, simply give it food, water and rest and call one of the listed phone numbers. Enjoy your feathered transient friend since it may have a long way yet to go.

Jim Fregonara is a wildlife biologist stationed in Elkins.