

Pigeons in History

Pigeons have been around for several million years (it is thought they first originated in Southern Asia), while modern humans first appeared about 120,000 years ago. They have a typical lifespan of about 15 years, though pigeons have been known to live for over 30 years – the oldest known pigeon lived to be 33 years old.

Pigeons are able to return to their home roosts even when released in a new location several thousand miles away, by sensing the Earth's magnetic field through the use of a magnetic "map" inside their beaks. The ancient Egyptians and Romans recognized that this made pigeons reliable messengers, and pigeons have been providing this service to civilizations ever since. Reuters News Service was originally created as a line of pigeon posts to bridge gaps in the telegraph system.

Pigeon Properties and Talents

Pigeons have the stamina to cover astounding distances. The most epic recorded flight took place in 1854 from a homing pigeon that was released in Namibia, Africa and made his way home to London, England. The flight took 55 days and covered over 7,000 miles.

But that doesn't mean that pigeons won't, just like us, sometimes take the easy way out if they can! To save flying time and energy, pigeons who nest in the suburbs in London commute into the city on the Underground to areas with better food sources.

Pigeons also share with humans a strong sense of family and devotion to their children. Pigeons pair for life, and both parents care for their young. Pigeons flock in large numbers in order to protect themselves against cats, hawks, owls, and rats. During breeding season when there are many babies on the floor, all parents will feed all babies, whether or not they are their own.

Pigeons are also very intelligent. They commit new images to memory fast, organize information in the same way as humans and can even distinguish between paintings of different styles and by different artists.

Besides these attributes, pigeons have excellent vision. Not only can they see color, but also ultraviolet light. They can see far better than humans and can also concentrate on a visual task for many more hours than we can, a discovery which led to a joint Coast Guard and Navy venture called Project Sea Hunt in which pigeons were trained to peck a key when they spotted the bright orange color used for life vests. The birds, suspended in a transparent box from a helicopter, were extremely adept at spotting the vests floating in the open ocean, thus saving lives.

Pigeons During Wartime

Pigeons have a long and distinguished record of service during war, including both World Wars, the Vietnam and Korean Wars, and the Gulf Wars, where they proved essential as their messaging capability was not affected by electronic jamming. In the World Wars pilots carried pigeons in their planes to release the bird for help in case of

an emergency, and these pigeons saved countless lives. Pigeons have even been used by the CIA for aerial photography, and their service is honored in the CIA Museum.

In WWI, a homing pigeon called “Cher Ami” delivered a vital message on his final mission: the location of the famous “Lost Battalion”. Cher Ami saved nearly 200 human lives through his last heroic flight, but was mortally wounded on his way and died soon after he had delivered the message. He was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with Palm for his sacrifice.

In WWII, a homing pigeon called “GI Joe” saved over 1000 allied soldiers’ lives in a single mission by making it back to camp in the nick of time carrying a message that allied troops had just occupied a city about to be bombed. He flew at 60 mph in order to complete the mission successfully. He was awarded the Dickin Medal for gallantry by the Lord Mayor of London.

Today, the French, Swiss, Israeli, Iraqi and Chinese armies still use homing pigeons.

Famous Pigeons and Famous Pigeon Fanciers

Pigeons have had star treatment several times, including in the Michael Landon film *Where Pigeons Go to Die* and the Charlton Heston film *The Pigeon That Took Rome*, but most recently the service of homing pigeons in WWII has been highlighted in the 2005 star-studded animation *Valiant*, which tells the story of Great Britain's use of pigeons by the Royal Air Force to fly vital messages across the English Channel about enemy movements.

Humans have long recognized the various fascinating and likeable qualities of pigeons, and many people have made pigeons a large part of their life. Such people, known as “pigeon fanciers”, include royals such as Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain, Prince Bernard of the Netherlands, the King of Belgium, and the Sultan of Jahore. Sporting greats such as quarterback Terry Bradshaw, boxing champions Marvin Hagler, George Foreman and Mike Tyson also have a great affinity for pigeons. Fanciers in the film and television industry include Yul Brynner, Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, Roy Rogers and Jimmy Smits. The fascination has also extended as widely as to include Elvis Presley, Charles Darwin, Walt Disney, iconic designer Maurizio Gucci, Claude Monet and Pablo Picasso.