

The How To Book of Keeping and Training Homing Pigeons

Intro: This book is for the beginner and intermediate pigeon fancier. I will cover the basics; The Loft, Acquiring New Birds, Feeding, Health, and Training.

Beginning with the Loft.

I start with the loft because you will want to have your loft built before you acquire your birds. You wouldn't go and buy some fish until you have your fish tank set up with water in it. The first thing to consider is how many pigeons you will be keeping. I started with a very tiny loft with 2 birds and they grew to over 50 before I knew it. I had to build more lofts. I kept going until I had three buildings in my back yard. My wife and my neighbors weren't happy with me because my suburban back yard looked like a shanty town. I just this year took down the three buildings and built one attractive loft. I wasn't thinking ahead. I knew I wanted to race pigeons and didn't account for the fact that I would need a loft for young birds, a loft for old birds, and a breeding loft. I then ran into the problem of separating the hens from the cocks. I didn't have the room to separate them and they just kept breeding. I would pick up their eggs and not allow them to hatch. After reading as much info as I could I discovered that it wasn't healthy for the birds to just keep laying eggs.

For racing pigeons 4 sectioned off areas are ideal. If you end up with other peoples pigeons that can't be let out you will need a section for those prisoner birds. I have lost prisoners because they got out with the flyers when I wasn't careful enough. I lost a pigeon that I paid 500.00 for. The bird got out and flew away never to be seen again. Section 1 for young birds, Section 2 for Old birds, Section 3 for breeding cocks, and Section 4 for breeding hens. Some racing fanciers prefer to separate their racing cocks and hens as well. You may want to keep it small and race just a few pigeons. There is nothing wrong with having just a dozen racers. You will find that most people have 50 birds on their young bird team. I can tell you that 50 pigeons is a lot of work. Caring for and cleaning up after 50 birds is a daily chore. My first season after coming back to the sport I had 15 birds on my race team. I knew each bird individually and could recognize each bird when it was out flying. I walk into my loft now and can only recognize birds that are colored differently or shaped differently than the others. My goal is to cut my numbers down to 15 again. The theory of quality and not quantity is definitely the way to go. Starting out from scratch makes the quality part a bit more difficult. You really don't know the quality of the birds living in your loft until you begin racing them. 1 year of racing will not prove if you have quality or not. There are too many variables other than quality of the genetics in your flock that can affect race results. You can be competitive with fewer pigeon than the rest of the guys in your club. It will just take you longer to achieve that goal. More about quality and purchasing pigeons in a later chapter.

For keeping Non Racing pigeons, two sections are plenty. You will just need to be able to separate hens and cocks. The size of the loft will be dictated by the number of birds you will want to keep. It is better to have too much room for your birds than not enough. An overcrowded loft will lead to sickness and death. As a rule you should have two square feet for each pigeon. This is not the law but it is a good starting point. If you build your loft 8 foot by 10 foot that would equal 80 square feet and according to the rule allow for 40 pigeons. If you are keeping only 4 or 5 birds than can be housed in smaller than 10 square feet if they are allowed out to fly on a regular basis. Some pigeon lofts are as small as a bird house. I have seen pigeon houses that look like a tiny cottage hanging from a tree with square footage only being about 2 feet. This is fine if you don't breed and cram 6 more into the tiny house. A rabbit cage made from wire and 2x4s would suffice as long as it only contains the amount of birds it was designed for.

The main things your loft should provide for the birds are Shelter from the elements and security from predators. If you live in an area that is extremely cold then your loft should provide a closed in box section for them to get out of the wind. Pigeons can live in the very coldest of temperatures to the very hottest of temperatures. **The loft should be kept dry.** This is important! Your loft should be water proof. The health of your birds depends on dryness. Wet or damp droppings can cultivate the nastiest of bacteria. Pigeon droppings are not infested with all sorts of diseases but they can become that way if they are wet. wet droppings areas the perfect breeding ground for ecoli, salmonella, and other bad stuff. Keep it dry.

In hot climates like here in Florida, ventilation becomes a factor. Every loft should have good ventilation so that the birds don't suffer from respiratory problems created from their own feather dust. Ventilation is movement of fresh air into the loft and not too much as to cause a draft. In warmer climates good ventilation will help cool the loft. If you notice your birds are panting in the middle of the afternoon sun then your loft obviously is too hot. Pigeons can tolerate more heat than humans because their normal body temperatures are hotter than ours. Some guys will put a fan in their loft and wire into a thermostat. When the temp gets to a preset degree the thermostat will turn the fan on until the temp cools below that preset point. Home Depot or your local hardware store carries many thermostats that will work for this.

Building your loft is definitely less expensive if you can do the work yourself. If you are not that handy with tools you can hire a handy man or carpenter to do the work for you. My first loft was a plastic 8x10 ft shed that I bought at Lowes. I still had to build the perches and cut holes for windows. Learning how to cut wood, drive nails, drill holes, and work a staple gun is fun and can be a useful skill around the house. I encourage you to give it a try. The less money you spend on the loft the more money you will have to buy birds and feed. Here is a link to a program you can download with lots of tool shed building plans that can be adapted into a pigeon loft. [Building Plans](#). If you surf around the internet you can probably find some free plans. Here is a cool website with [free plans](#).

The location in your yard is another factor for you to think about. Your first idea is to put the loft under the big tree for shade. Not the best choice. Being in the direct sunlight will help keep

your loft dry and when your birds return from a race they can easily maneuver on to the landing board without crashing through the branches. The wind direction is something else to give consideration to. In a warmer climate you may want to position your loft so that the door way and windows line up with the wind to help cool things down inside. In cold climates avoid too much wind. If you are like me I didn't have a choice. My suburban yard is small and my wife gave me one option- over in the corner. You may want to also go online and check your city ordinances and make sure keep pigeons is OK. In my area keeping poultry is not OK but pigeons are not poultry so they are OK. Some cities will make it absolutely clear NO PIGEONS.

My best advice is taking it slow and think ahead. You may find that this fun hobby all of the sudden became a Job. Some days I wish I didn't have so many birds. I can't go on vacation and leave them behind without finding someone who will come and care for them. When I take off for a long day I have to consider how will the birds get fed and watered. Make your loft nice to look at. You will get sick of looking at a shanty shack in your back yard. Trust me; I know what I am talking about.

Where do I get pigeons from?

So you have built your loft and now you want to get some birds. The first place to look is in your own area. You can visit the AU pigeon website and see if there is a club in your area. Contact the club and ask if you can get some birds. You may want to go to the club and meet some people and let them know you have a loft and would like to get some birds. When I joined my club no one knew me and no one gave me a single bird. I bought all of mine. Now that other club members know me everyone wants to give me birds. There are usually very kind people who raced pigeons, about 90% of them. Getting to know someone will definitely help you get some birds. The quality of these birds will probably be good. Racing fanciers don't keep worthless pigeons. However, the worthless ones are the first birds they want to get rid of. I don't want to offend my fellow fanciers, so I will confess that if someone wants a pigeon and they do not intend on racing their birds, I will give them a bird that I want the least. I have given away some of my best young birds to see if they do well under someone else's training and management.

The next place to look is on the internet. There are many websites to buy birds from. There are auction sites where you can bid on birds and there are web sites where you can buy birds. **Don't believe the hype!** You don't know what you are getting. I have gotten some good birds and some worthless ones as well. My very best pigeon that has bred winners for me, I paid 25.00 for. The most expensive pigeon I have bought online did nothing for me. My advice to you is to buy young birds at a good price and then fly them. You will know what you have when you begin to train them and race them. If you buy breeding pigeons you will have to have a section to keep them locked up as prisoners. If you buy young birds you will never have to keep prisoners. You can breed the better ones and make more. I started back into this sport with a bunch of overpriced pigeons that all looked exactly the same. If I would do it over again, I would buy young birds and start flying them right off the bat instead of having to breed them and then wait for the young ones to be old enough to fly. Keep the good ones and get rid of the bad ones. This

brings up another touchy issue. The issue of culling (getting rid of the ones you don't want). This is the ugly part of this sport. Most fanciers will humanely kill the pigeons that bring down the quality of their flock. Others will sell their unwanted culls on the internet. Culling is a necessary evil. You can't keep them all. For some of us, we feel there is just no reason for this practice. Even though I am a hunter and shoot ducks. I dislike killing these birds as much as anyone else. I am sure there isn't anyone who enjoys culling their birds. The one thing I remember is that these birds were bred and are alive because man has caused their existence. We have the moral obligation to humanely dispose of the birds we are not going to use. To send them into the wild is the most miserable death they could have. These birds are domestic and cannot find food and water in the wild. They starve to death. Culling is a common practice with horses, cows, sheep, dogs, and any other animal that is bred by man. It is how we have the purebred versions of domestic animals we have today. If you are not going to race your pigeons then culls would be a cost free way of acquiring birds. These birds will probably already have been flown and you would have to keep them as prisoners.

There are some pet stores and feed stores that will sell homing pigeons. You will have to call around to find them in your area. There are regular domestic pigeons that are not homing pigeons. These birds can be let out to fly but if they get too far from home they will get lost. When I was a boy I caught some wild pigeons and kept them for pets. As I look back I now realize they were just mouths to feed. I did enjoy them though. One would actually eat out of my hand. When I got my first homing pigeon, the man who gave him to me said I had to get rid of the wild ones. They had diseases and would be harmful to my new bird. This homing pigeon was so much more handsome than his wild cousins and was so much tamer. What was I thinking keeping those wild street pigeons? Unfortunately making the wild ones leave wasn't that easy. They liked the free meals too much to just go away. I finally crated them all up and took them down town and turned them loose.

Pigeons come in all colors and you may want some fancy colors to look at. Pure whites, reds, grizzles, pied, blacks, yellows and splashes are just a few to name. I like colors because it makes it easier for me to recognize individuals in my loft. Some would say that it is a waste of time trying to race colored pigeons but I like them anyway. Some guys in our club will only race blue barred pigeons. My wife has 20 pure white pigeons that she uses for ceremonies like weddings and funerals. She has found a way to make some extra money by releasing her birds at these events. www.homingpigeonsforsale.com is my website where I sell a few pigeons to help offset the cost of feeding and caring for them. I sell young and old birds for a nice affordable price, and if you want my culls I will give them to you.

The First Time You Let Them Out

Many young birds are lost right from their own loft. Use caution when letting them out while they are young. Young birds that are not very strong flyers will usually stay in the yard while the stronger flyers will get up in the air and fly off. You may be thinking they are homing pigeons, why can't they find their way home from just around the loft? If you were raised from birth in

your house and you had never been outside before, someone could put you in a car and drive you down the street and let you out at the corner and you would not be able to find your way home because you have never seen the outside of your house. You know you live on this street but you just don't know which house. This is what happens to young birds. The very best thing to do for the youngsters is to let them out while they still are not able to fly. They will hop up on the roof and back down to the loft. They are getting familiar with their neighborhood. As they get stronger they will fly a few laps around the house. They will be learning every time you let them out. This is a time when they are most vulnerable to predators like hawks. The hawks know that they can't fly well and are an easy snack. I like to stand up in front of the loft while these youngsters are out to deter any predator. If you keep pigeons long enough you will experience a hawk attack.

For older youngsters that are able to fly well it becomes even easier to lose them the first few times you let them out. If a hawk dives into the yard and scares the youngster he will fly off in a panic and will likely fly too far to be able to return. It can be something as simple as a loud noise that will send the birds into a panic flight. One good technique is to get the older YB wet before you put him outside. Hold him in a bucket of water until his feathers are good and wet and then let him out on the landing board. He won't be able to fly very far, if even at all. The younger birds that can't fly well will only fly to a tree or the grass if spooked and a wet bird will do the same. Let the bird miss a meal so that when you are ready for him to come in you can whistle and he will come right down. Your birds should be conditioned to come in when whistled. This is done by whistling every time you feed them. They will associate your whistle with food. Use the same whistle every time you feed them. Use either your mouth or a plastic whistle. The tune and volume should be the same each time. Having your birds trained this way will help you get them in quickly if you spot a hawk in the area. Continue wetting the bird until you are sure he is ready to fly out a bit.

Never fly your young birds with older birds. The birds will get confidence and one day will take off and fly laps around the yard. Eventually they will begin to route off farther and farther until they will be gone out of sight for over an hour at a time. It is good to have several birds learning to go outside at the same time because they will watch each other and gain more confidence. When one bird flies a little farther than normal the others will begin to follow. Don't rush this. Be patient. Don't scare them to make them fly. They will go when they are ready. If you let your young ones out with older birds the older ones can route off with your younger ones in tow. They will get far from home and the babies will get tired and land somewhere far off. When the flock leaves them, they will be confused and can get disoriented. I have lost some good birds this way. You invest so much time being careful to introduce them into the world. They begin flying really well only to be carried off by the older flock. I have found that if I let my older ones fly first and then when they have returned from their voyage and are tired and ready to come in, I can let the younger ones out to fly with them. But this is risky; the older birds may see a hawk in a tree nearby and decide to leave the area again.

Don't fly them late in the evening. This year I was flying my first round of specially banded

young birds late one evening, and the birds got spooked and got up really high. I assume they saw a hawk because this is typical behavior when a hawk is around. The flock kept flying and it kept getting darker. Eventually it got pitch dark and the last I saw of my 24 young birds was them following the dimly lit western skyline. The next day only one came home. Over the next few days 3 more came home. 20 were lost and I never saw or heard from them again. Each band that those birds were wearing cost 25.00 apiece. Losses will happen and your heart will get broken.

When the birds are routing away from visual sight of the loft for extended periods this is the sign that you can begin to train them to "home". Basket the birds in the morning and take them 2 miles away from home and release them. Allow the baskets to sit for 10 minutes before you let them out. This will help them get their bearings. Next; go 5 miles, then 10, and then so on up to 50 miles. This will be more stressful for you than them. You will get home and they won't be there. You will think to yourself "I have just lost all of my birds". Be patient. From 2 miles they can see their home. They are just off exploring. I begin from 20 miles for the first training toss but am criticized by others for doing so. My first year of racing I started at 40 miles and they all came home. I read a book by the late Joe Rotando and he said to always start at 40 miles. Most pigeon racing fanciers will start at 1 or 2 miles. Once your pigeon can get home from 50 miles he is then capable of getting home from 600 miles, if he is in good enough physical condition to fly that far. If you sit on the couch for 6 months you can't jump up and run a marathon. You first need to exercise and get ready for such a demanding task. Getting a pigeon ready to fly a long distance requires daily exercise and good nutrition. During racing season my birds fly twice a day and are taken out on the road 3 times a week for a 50 mile flight.

I have created a blog for training young birds for the 2010 young bird season. You might want to read through it for ideas. [Training young birds](#)

Feeding/ Water

Pigeons will eat what you feed them. They will over eat if you let them.

I buy my feed from a feed store. There are many companies that make pigeon feed. You will have to find a feed store that carries pigeon feed or ask a feed store to order it for you. Wild bird seed from Walmart will work fine if all else... A table spoon of feed each day is enough. If you have performance pigeons They will eat more and less depending on their level of training. While hard training for a race they will need more calories which means they will need more feed.

I will put feed down for my birds twice a day, morning and evening. I will observe their behavior to determine when they have had enough. When the majority of the birds begin fighting instead of eating, I know they are almost finished. When they head for the water or the perch that means time is up. There will be a few still picking but for the most part I pick up the food and remove it. If the birds are picky eaters and leave the corn and peas I will serve it back to them the next meal until the corn and peas are finished and then they get a fresh scoop.

Keep your feed dry and away from Vermin like rats and roaches. I use charcoal containers made

by Kingsford and sold at Lowes. These containers will hold exactly 50 pounds of feed and will snap tight when closed.

Some breeds of fancy pigeons require small seeds because they are just not going to be able to choke down a large kernel of corn. There are also Pellets that will work fine. Purina makes chicken pellets which contain all the ingredients your birds require.

Give your birds GRIT. Pigeons use grit to grind seed into a substance they can digest. They will eat the grit along with their feed. Keep a container of grit available to the birds at all times. Grit is made of calcium rocks and oyster shells. Grit is also available from your feed store.

Keep clean fresh water available to your birds at all times. If you don't keep water available they will find it elsewhere. They will drink from mud puddles or your neighbor's pool. Clean the water containers regularly. The water source will also be the source from where they will pick up bacteria and viruses from the other birds. I clean my drinkers twice a week with straight bleach. Don't forget to clean the feeders as well. Keep the fecal matter away from where they are eating. You don't want a bird accidentally eating another bird's poop. Clean the loft regularly as well and the good hygiene will pay you back with healthy birds .

Breeding

If you keep a male and a female together they will reproduce. Separate them to stop the population explosion. Pigeons will lay 2 eggs. Both eggs will hatch and both parents will care for the young. 10 days after the pair mates the hen will lay one egg and then a couple of days later she will lay the second egg. The hen may not sit on the first egg very much. She is waiting for the second egg so that incubation will be the same for both eggs and they will hatch at the same time. Around 18 days after the egg is laid, it will hatch.

Make a nest box for the pair and provide a bowl for them to lay the eggs in. A box will give them the privacy they desire and a bowl will prevent the eggs from rolling away. If nothing is provided the pair will lay their eggs right on the floor. The floor is not a good place for them to raise their young.

A nest box should be big enough for both birds to enter and be able to walk around each other. The nest bowl can be made of any material so long as it doesn't move when the parents stand on the edge of it. Provide the birds with some grass or hay for them to line the nest bowl with. When the eggs hatch the bottom of the nest bowl should be lined with a material that the young can grip onto with their toe nails. Tobacco stalks are good for a pest control as well. Nest bowls, nest boxes, nest materials, and other supplies are available from pigeon supply companies.(see the bottom of the page for links to their websites). If they can't keep their feet under them they will develop severely crooked legs and maybe not even be able to walk when they mature. Keep the nest bowl clean. In a couple of weeks the young will begin pooping a lot. At this time you will want to clean their bowl out every two days. In 5 to 7 days the babies are old enough to put a seamless band on their leg. If you put the band on too early it may fall off or cause the bird to have a folded toe. If you wait too long the band will be very difficult to slip the band over the leg. A helpful hint is when you have to pull the back toe out from under the band the timing is

perfect. If the band slides right over the whole foot and back toe you may want to wait another day or two. If the bird's foot has gotten too big to slip the band on, try lubricating the foot and twisting the band as you push it on, Seamless bands are available from pigeon supply companies. Banding your birds will help you keep track of your birds and know who they are and will help in the recovery if the bird ever gets lost. Keep records of which parents bred which birds. You may end up with a really good pigeon and you might want to put the parents back together to breed more. You might have forgotten who the parents are. Just check your breeding records and your memory is refreshed.

Your young will be healthier if you keep their bowl clean. At 28 days the young will be weaned enough to remove from the parents. They will already out of the nest and on the floor. They will be eating and drinking on their own. Don't worry when you find one of the babies on the floor and out of the nest. You don't need to put him back in the box. The parents will find him and feed him on the floor. This is part of their progression to adulthood.

Health

Keeping your birds healthy simple. Give your birds clean food and water and keep the loft clean and dry. Don't allow strange pigeons in your loft. Bird illnesses come from mainly other birds. If you buy a new bird and put him in your loft you could be bringing in all sorts of bacteria and viruses. Keep new pigeons quarantined separately for two weeks before letting them into your loft. If your loft is isolated from the world you probably will not have to deal with illness. The American Indians were fine until European settlers came and gave them diseases. Same with your birds. Pigeon pox is un avoidable if you have mosquitoes in your area. As a human will get chicken pox only once in their lifetime a pigeon will only get pox once and then will be immune to the virus. Pox will show up as sores on their beaks and feet. Pox isn't normally deadly, it, in most cases, will dry up and the bird will be fine. Sometimes the sores can look horrible, don't worry the bird will heal. Worms are a concern for all warm blooded animals including humans. A general de-wormer from a pigeon supply company will be a good measure once a year. There are vaccinations and antibiotics that are available from pigeon supply companies should you need them. For racing pigeons I give my birds a de-worming, PMV vaccination, a pigeon pox vaccination and that's it. Racing pigeons get thrown into crates full of everyone else's pigeons each week, so they are exposed to all of the afflictions known to birds. Here is a good resource on pigeon health. [Pigeon Ailments](#)

Here are some helpful resources:

Pigeon supply companies:

[Global Pigeon supplies](#)

[Siegel Pigeon supplies](#)

[Jedd's pigeon supplies](#)

[Fov's pigeons supplies](#)

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