

PROJECT IDEA STARTER

Pigeons

by Ron Parian, American Racing Pigeon Union Lakes Zone Director. Reviewed by John Anderson, Poultry Program Research Associate, Department of Animal Sciences, The Ohio State University and Ellen Shaw, Office Associate (and pigeon enthusiast), Ohio State University Extension, 4-H Youth Development



Archeological evidence shows that people have been breeding pigeons for thousands of years. Pigeons have been raised since medieval times in dovecotes for meat and for their droppings, which make excellent fertilizer for crops. They have also been used to convey messages since at least the Roman conquest of Gaul (which is now France) in 50 B.C.

The modern racing pigeon is believed to have been developed in the early 18th century in Belgium and England. The first known recorded race was held in Belgium in 1815. The first races covered only a few miles, but with the development of the railroad system it was possible to take the pigeons farther and farther for races. During the last half of the 1800s homing pigeons were imported into the United States, and by the 1890s, clubs in New York and New Jersey were having pigeons return from 500-mile races on the day of release.

Homing pigeons were also used extensively during both World Wars and are known to have saved thousands of lives. Cher Ami, a famous British pigeon war hero, was credited with rescuing “the Lost Battalion” near the end of World War I. The Lost Battalion advanced farther into enemy lines than expected and found itself surrounded by German soldiers. All wires were down and the battalion was taking fire from not only the Germans,

but friendly fire from American artillery. Several pigeons had already been released with messages to stop the firing, but each had been shot down by the Germans. Cher Ami was their last hope. Cher Ami managed to cover 32 miles before the Germans shot her. Despite a chest wound and a leg dangling by a thread, she delivered her message. Cher Ami had saved the 196 men of the Lost Battalion.

In 1943 the Dickin Medal was inaugurated in England to honor the valor of animal war heroes. Since its inception, it has been awarded to 18 dogs, 3 horses, 1 cat and 32 homing pigeons. The pigeons were all British with the exception of G.I. Joe, an American bird.

Though the military has disbanded the Pigeon Corps, homing pigeons (also called racing pigeons or racing homers) are still used for an amazing variety of tasks. Among the more interesting jobs are delivering blood samples across large cities, delivering film from the bottom of the Grand Canyon

PLAN YOUR PROJECT

Use this idea starter AND publication 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide* as the starting place for your 4-H self-determined project. The *Self-Determined Project Guide* is available from your county OSU Extension office or on the Web at ohio4h.org/selfdetermined. You may choose to do a little or a lot depending on your level of interest. Be sure to register your project with your county OSU Extension office.

to the rim and measuring the air quality in Los Angeles with special equipment fitted to their bodies.

While homing pigeons are the only pigeons capable of returning home from long distances, hundreds of other breeds of pigeons exist. Giant Runts, Carneaus and White Kings were developed for their meat. Some breeds were developed for the unique way they fly, such as rollers, which actually tumble in the air. Still others, such as fantails and croppers, were bred for their unusual appearance. Shows are held throughout the country each year where these types of pigeons compete based on certain show standards.

Queen Elizabeth II currently has homing pigeons and participates in races. Actor Jimmy Smits also enjoys this hobby.

Selecting a Breed

Before determining the type of pigeon you would like to obtain for your 4-H project, you should learn a little bit about the different types of pigeons available. The more than 400 different breeds can be categorized into three different groups: fancy, sporting and utility.

Fancy breeds come in many different shapes, sizes and colors. They are bred mainly for their distinctive feathers and include Fantails, Modenas, Jacobins, Trumpeters, Pouters and Tumblers.

Sporting breeds are used for racing, homing, endurance flying and performing. Rollers, Highflyers and Racing Homers fall into this category.

Utility breeds are raised for meat production and include Kings, Runts, Mondains and Carneaus. These birds are much larger than birds found in the other two groups.

If you enjoy watching your birds fly or you enjoy competing against other flyers in pigeon races up to 500 or more miles, then racing homers may be for you. However, as with any athlete, if you do plan to race your homing pigeons, it takes a commitment of more time than with the other two types of pigeons. You must teach them to trap (or to come inside their dovecote), and take them for training tosses in order to prepare them for the races sponsored by your local racing pigeon club.

Fancy pigeons require much less time and work, and for younger fanciers this might be your choice. Many fancy breeds don't fly very well and thus can be more easily tamed and are more likely to stay closer to home. Utility pigeons would have many of the same advantages as fancy pigeons, but their large size might make it difficult for younger fanciers to handle them.



AREAS OF INTEREST AND THINGS TO DO

Every self-determined 4-H project can be broken down into areas of interest. These are the specific things members want to address during their project adventures. Using 4-H 365 *Self-Determined Project Guide*, identify at least three areas of interest with at least three activities per area to explore. Take your ideas from the list below or make up your own.

Choosing a Type and Breed

- Research the three different types of pigeons and learn the characteristics of each type.
- After narrowing your choice of pigeon to a particular type, investigate some of the specific breeds.
- Make a list of things that helped make your decision of the type and breed you selected.
- Learn and be able to name the major body parts of a pigeon.
- Investigate where you might purchase one or more pigeons from a reputable pigeon fancier.

Care and Feeding

- Investigate and make a list of several types of grain that pigeons like to eat.
- Learn which types of grain are highest in protein, carbohydrates, fat and fiber.
- Learn which grains are best when pigeons are breeding and which are best when racing.
- Make a water dispenser for your pigeons out of an old bleach bottle or milk jug.

- ❑ Make or purchase a feeder for your pigeons.
- ❑ Determine where to purchase grit for your pigeons, then explain its purpose.

Training and Racing Pigeons

- ❑ Make a settling cage for your young pigeons, and teach them to trap for food.
- ❑ Make or purchase a pigeon crate so you can transport your pigeons.
- ❑ Read a book about the various methods of training racing pigeons.
- ❑ Train your pigeons to return from training flights of at least 25 miles.
- ❑ Enter at least one pigeon race with your local racing pigeon club.

Showing Your Pigeons

- ❑ Learn and be able to identify the major body parts of a pigeon.
- ❑ Describe how to prepare your pigeons for a show.
- ❑ Learn the show standards for your specific breed of pigeon.
- ❑ Based on those standards, select your best candidates for a show.
- ❑ Enter your pigeon(s) in a show in your area.

Housing Pigeons

- ❑ Identify several loft conditions that may contribute to a pigeon's poor health.

- ❑ Build a loft for your pigeons, or convert another building into a loft.
- ❑ Learn about different types of pigeon traps, and decide which to use with your loft.
- ❑ Make a landing board for your pigeon loft.
- ❑ Build perches and nest boxes for your pigeon loft.



RELATED RESOURCES

American Racing Pigeon Union,
www.pigeon.org

National Pigeon Association,
www.npauusa.com

Oregon 4-H Pigeon and Dove Project, extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/4h/4-h154.pdf

Wisconsin 4-H, Animal Sciences Pigeons Member Guide, uwex.edu/ces/4h/pubs/showdoc.cfm?documentid=329

ohio4h.org/selfdetermined