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SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CONTROL OF VAGRANT DOMESTIC PIGEONS

Prepared in the Section of Food Habits
 Division of Wildlife Research

CONTENTS

	Page		Page
Their origin	1	Suggestions for control--Con.	
Status of the city pigeon.	2	Trapping.	4
Suggestions for control.	3	Shooting.	4
Avoidance and prevention	3	Poisoning	4
Frightening devices.	3	Gassing	4

THEIR ORIGIN

Pigeons similar to those now living in a semiwild state in the parks and streets of our towns and cities have been as closely associated with man throughout history as his domestic animals. The progenitors of these birds can be traced through medieval times, into the dynasties of early Egyptian kings, and even to the realm of myths before the recorded word.

Evidence presented by the birds themselves, in the form, coloration, and habits of even the promiscuously interbred pigeons that we now find in the streets, points to the likelihood that originally these birds came from the blue rock, or common pigeon (*Columba livia*) of Europe, Asia, and Africa. They may have been held in semidomestication by early man, or they may have taken advantage of easier living in human surroundings. Innumerable races, or strains, of pigeons have been developed by selective breeding and by the perpetuation of unique offshoots from parent stock. When left to their own resources, however, as are the members of the "tramp" flocks that make a living from the city streets, the birds tend to revert to a type suggesting the rock pigeon.

When one reads of the great flocks of pigeons in the public squares of the cities of Europe and Asia, flocks as old as the cities themselves, and then sees their counterparts in modern times, it is evident that the urban pigeon will continue to be a close associate of man and his works for years to come. Reasons for this are not hard to find. Observe the

food being offered by kind-hearted individuals on snowy winter days or by interested children on sunny mornings, and observe also that other essentials for avian existence, as shelter and places to breed, are abundant. These factors and a sympathetic or at least tolerant attitude towards the birds by a large part of the populace assure them a continuing livelihood.

The factors that favor their existence and increase their abundance, however, also aggravate certain problems connected with their presence under modern metropolitan conditions. Those who daily have had to contend with the litter and disturbance of large numbers of roosting or nesting pigeons--including custodians of public buildings, dwellers in apartment houses, and even private-home owners have at times been called upon in self-defense to take action to curb their numbers. Under such conditions, the pleasure and fascination of one individual may become the bane of another. When this occurs, relief measures are necessary for those adversely affected. To obtain relief from the objectionable features of overpopulous colonies of pigeons the present suggestions for their control and for the prevention of damage have been prepared.

STATUS OF THE CITY PIGEON

The flocks of varicolored pigeons that frequent the larger cities are, as a rule, made up of semiwild, or "tramp," individuals to which no one claims ownership. They may breed, nest, raise their young, and live their entire lives without becoming dependent on man other than for the shelter afforded by some tower or portico or for the available waste food.

In suburban communities and in smaller towns one may encounter flocks that, while paying some allegiance to an owner by returning home to roost, obtain most of their food from the city street; or he may see well-cared-for flocks that are sheltered and fed but make daily flights near their cotes. The latter flocks are readily controlled by their owners, and do not, as a rule, become seriously objectionable.

With respect to the legality of aggressive action against the semiwild flocks of larger cities, local police regulations must be consulted. There may be restrictions within corporate limits on the use of firearms, traps, poison, baits and other means of control. The recommendations here made presuppose that proper sanction will be obtained from local authorities before action is taken. In this connection mention should be made of the likelihood that individual pigeons of "racing" or "show" strains, which are usually recognizable by the numbered bands on their feet, frequently join the "city crowd." When such birds are found, they should be offered dry food and water and allowed to go on their way. If a bird persists in staying, an inquiry directed to some local pigeon fancier may be of help in locating its owner from the designation on its band. Birds of these strains, because they have been trained and are of value to their owners, should be given every opportunity for returning to their lofts. As an aid in tracing the origin of these pigeons, it may be worth while to mention the principal national associations handling racing or show birds. Pigeons recorded with these organizations are usually the only ones possible to trace.

Bands with the letters "AU" (sometimes in monogram form so that they are misread "AJ") are used by the American Racing Pigeon Union, present secretary, Edward Barnes, 214 Congress St., Jersey City, N. J.

Bands with the letters "IF" are issued by the International Federation of Homing Pigeon Fanciers, present secretary, A. T. Nelson, 2924 Northern Parkway, Baltimore, Md.

Bands carrying the letters "NPA" are issued by the National Pigeon Association, secretary, Harry B. Baldwin, Box 502, Kansas City, Mo. These last are used only on fancy show pigeons, not on racing homers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTROL

Avoidance and Prevention

An objectionable flock of pigeons is often the direct result of unintentional encouragement. A church tower may serve as an ideal nesting loft for dozens of the birds, or certain ledges protected by overhanging eaves may attract a daily flock that has reached undesirable proportions. Likewise, promiscuous feeding of poultry in open yards may serve as a potent incentive for pigeons to stay.

The logical cure for troubles of this kind is to remove the inducement, if possible. Church towers, lofts, and belfries can be screened with rust-proof wire, poultry runs can be covered, and under some conditions ledges can be obliterated by installing sloping boards to prevent the birds from roosting. Individual crannies used as nesting sites can often be blocked so as to prevent the entrance of birds. Although the cost of screening may at first seem excessive, the results are practically permanent. The screen used should be galvanized and should consist of 2-inch-mesh poultry wire. In areas where starlings may also be objectionable, 1-inch-mesh poultry wire should be used.

Frightening Devices

Frightening measures are effective usually in proportion to the more drastic measures that accompany them. Noise-producing devices, which may also be disturbing to human beings, usually have little permanent effect on roosting pigeons that are accustomed to the varied noises of cities. Lights are of little avail. Slingshots, with pebbles for missiles, may be used to advantage on small groups of roosting pigeons, provided the birds are disturbed nightly as they are going to roost. Most attempts to dislodge roosting birds through the use of slingshots or other means depend for their success on the persistence with which the operations are carried on. These must be continued until the birds have definitely re-established themselves at some other point.

Where more birds are involved, the city fire department may be induced to cooperate. Turning a stream of water from a fire hose on the roosts for several successive nights may lead the birds to decide that conditions are not to their liking.

Trapping

Pigeons may be readily trapped when food is not overly abundant. Objectionable small groups of these birds can soon be removed with a little ingenuity, patience, and time. For such operations a trap of the "ash-sifter" type, 4 or 5 feet square and with a frame about 6 inches deep, will suffice. Such a frame, with 1-inch poultry wire forming the "sieve," should be propped up on one edge by a stick 10 to 12 inches long to which a pullcord is attached. When the pigeons have become used to feeding on baits placed in and about the trap, the bulk of any small flock should be captured in one or two springings. Removal of the birds from the trap may be effected by driving them to one corner, where entrance may be made by loosening a section of the screen from the frame or through a small sliding door built into the frame itself. Similar traps of larger size may be employed for larger flocks.

Shooting

As a rule, the use of firearms is either prohibited in metropolitan sections or resorted to only by or under sanction of the police. For this reason gunfire cannot be recommended as a general procedure against objectionable city-dwelling pigeons. Approval of the police, however, can usually be obtained when the birds involved are few in number, and are particularly objectionable. A 22-calibre rifle, using ammunition loaded with fine shot, or a shotgun of small size (.410 gauge) should be used in such control operations, thereby reducing both the danger of ricocheting bullets and the disturbance caused by the discharge of firearms of larger bore. Some types of higher-powered air rifles will also serve.

Poisoning

Although the use of poison baits can be effective and reasonably safe in experienced hands, this method of pigeon control in cities is not recommended for the general public. Most poisons are indiscriminate in their action, and there is danger that cats or dogs may feed on the freshly killed birds and obtain lethal doses from the grain eaten with birds' crops. Furthermore, the open exposure of poison within the limits of towns and cities is, as a rule, prohibited by law.

Where municipalities have in their employ men who have had experience in pest-control operations, poisoning may be given consideration. Even with such operatives, the procedure should be carefully supervised to prevent mishaps. Should conditions point to the need of poisoning as a last resort, the Biological Survey will be glad to give to properly qualified persons added information as to procedure.

Gassing

The fascination attached to accomplishing control at one fell swoop has led many to the belief that toxic gases are effective in bird control. Under certain peculiarly favorable conditions their use has given satisfactory results, but as a rule, the objections, obstacles, and dangers to be overcome far outweigh the advantages. Here again there is need for the employment of experienced handlers working with the sanction of municipal authorities under proper supervision. Gassing is not recommended for use by uninstructed persons.