

THE “HUMAN” NATURE OF PIGEONS



Pigeons are highly intelligent birds and model parents. Their hearts and minds are akin to our own. Pigeons have keen eyes and versatile perceptions. They can fly over 90 miles an hour and find their way home from thousands of miles away. Pigeons can live up to 10 or more years.

COURTSHIP AND FAMILY

Pigeon pairs stay together for life. They normally raise 5 or 6 families a year, two chicks at a time. When pigeons are courting, they coo and nibble each others' necks affectionately. The male pigeon feeds his mate regurgitated food, which she receives by putting her beak into his in the practice known as “billing.”

City pigeons lay their eggs in nests they make together out of twigs, which they bring to windowsills and other high ledges. We seldom see the eggs or the babies, since usually either the mother or father pigeon is sitting on them, keeping them safe and warm. After about 17 days, the baby pigeons peck their way out of the eggs. The parent birds attentively feed and care for their nestlings for the next 4 or 5 weeks.

“I look out. It happened! There are two baby chicks. They’re poking out from under the big pigeon. . . . As I watch, the big pigeon bends down and puts his beak right around a baby’s mouth, feeding the baby pigeon milk. Then he feeds the second one. . . .” – Miriam Schlein, “Notes of a pigeon-watcher,” *Pigeons*

Pigeons are the only birds who feed their babies milk. Pigeon milk comes from the parent bird’s crop (the pouch in birds’ throats where food is stored). The baby pigeon sticks its bill – practically its whole head – into the parent’s mouth, to be fed. Both mother and father pigeons feed their chicks milk.

“The sitting bird is alert to every sound and movement. If the approaching animal is a cow or horse, the bird stays on its nest. If a person – a hereditary enemy – approaches, the pigeon weighs the chances of remaining undetected. . . . If, at the last moment, it becomes evident to the pigeon that the human has noticed it, the bird hastily departs. . . . The ability to delay response to a threat or an enticement while awaiting developments, as pigeons and many other birds do, is an indication of intelligence. A pair of pigeons can simultaneously attend a nestling that has fallen prematurely from a high nest and one that remains in the nest.” – Alexander F. Skutch, *The Minds of Birds*, p. 120.

WHY DO PIGEONS LIKE CITIES?

City pigeons are descendants of wild rock doves, birds who nest high on cliffs and rock ledges. Tall city buildings – windowsills, steeples, towers, roofs –

are like “cliffs,” so pigeons feel at home. Their long, thin toes can curl around and get a firm grip on any ledge. Pigeons eat a lot of food, and very fast, but they test their food first to make sure it’s safe, picking it up and dropping it 3 or 4 times to get the feel of it. *“And if they do happen to eat something that makes them sick – say, a certain kind of berry – they will never eat that same kind of thing again”* (Schlein).

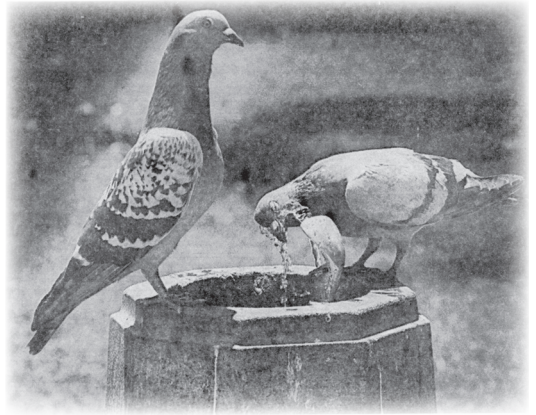
SCIENCE SHOWS PIGEONS ARE EXTREMELY SMART

Pigeons demonstrate an amazing ability to handle complex geometrical, spatial, sequential, and photographic concepts and impressions, to solve all kinds of complicated problems, retain precise memories, and invent ways to communicate their understanding, intentions, and needs to human beings.

For example, when shown photographs, pigeons can recognize water as a drop, puddle, pool or an ocean. They recognize a tree whether they see it whole or in part. *“They could even learn to distinguish pictures portraying fishes in various orientations from pictures without fishes. Evidently, pigeons’ ability to form categories is not limited to things important to them in natural habitats – such as trees that give shelter and sites for their nests, and people who might harm them – but is much more general”* (Skutch, p. 120).

So intelligent have pigeons and other birds been shown to be over the past hundred years that an international group of avian (bird) scientists is calling for a whole new vocabulary to describe the various parts of a bird’s brain – now known to be *“an intricately wired mass that processes information in much the same way as the vaunted human cerebral cortex.”* - Rick Weiss, *“Bird Brains Get Some New Names, And New Respect,”* *The Washington Post*, Feb. 1, 2005.

Pigeons are a wonderful part of the community of life. They deserve our respect and protection.



Pigeons suck up water very fast, like they’re using a straw. Other birds lift their heads to swallow, then bend down for another sip.



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