

Palomacy—It's Pigeon Diplomacy

Interview with Elizabeth Young

July 2020

[Hope for the Animals Podcast](#) – Episode 6: Bird Brainpower and Rescuing Pigeons with Elizabeth Young

Welcome to Episode Six of the Hope for the Animals podcast sponsored by United Poultry Concerns. I'm your host, Hope Bohanec. And you can listen to all our podcasts by going to our website, [Hope for the Animals podcast.org](#). And I welcome your thoughts and questions and comments. My email is Hope@UPC-online.org.

In this episode we are going to have a wonderful interview with Elizabeth Young, who rescues pigeons. She is the founder and director of Palomacy [pigeon diplomacy], Pigeon and Dove Adoptions. And we're going to hear all about pigeons and Elizabeth has such wonderful stories about these amazingly sweet birds. And of course here at UPC we focus on chickens, but not only chickens, all domestic birds, ducks and geese who are bred and confined and killed for a multitude of "commodities," turkeys are overcrowded and killed by the billions not only for the holidays, but year round for their meat. And I plan to do some Reason for Vegan supplemental shows about these specific birds and their plight and their lives.



So there are numerous bird species, not just chickens who are tortured and exploited in the industry, including pigeons, who we're going to hear about in a bit. But I wanted to start with some of the latest scientific information on birds and avian brains because what we're learning is, it's just so amazing. So of course, it's a common myth that birds are not bright. In fact, the insult, bird brain, of course, means that someone is dumb or they said or did something dumb. And that just arose from the size of the brain, that insult, bird brain, arose from the size of the brain because birds' heads of course, are small. But we're

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learning that brain size really has nothing to do with intelligence or ability to think or learn or feel or anything else. Birds are amazingly complex creatures. So it is scientifically proven that birds feel pain, the same as we do that is established in science, the American Veterinary Medical Association's guidelines for pain relief and euthanasia of animals always includes avian equally. And in the last few decades, there has also been an abundance of science around birds' emotion and intelligence and sentience. And it's become actually an active field of scientific inquiry with popular books, like the *Genius of Birds* is one of the books, and other ones called *Bird Brain* an *Exploration of Avian Intelligence*. And what we're learning about the avian brain and behavior, just in the last couple of decades, contradicts hundreds of years of misinformation and misinformed views about birds.

Much of what was previously thought to be the exclusive domain of human communication and maybe some primates, like brain and cognitive functioning and social behavior, we're now discovering these complexities in chickens and other birds. We're learning that avians are far more intelligent and cognitively sophisticated than previously believed. Birds have sophisticated brains with abilities previously thought to be uniquely human, such as mental time travel, it's kind of what it's called when you have the ability to remember the past and plan for the future. They exhibit self-recognition, empathy, problem solving, imagination, insight. They express emotions like grief and fear and enthusiasm, anxiety, frustration, boredom, friendship. They are unique individuals with no less mental capacity as any other animal.

Now I want to give a disclaimer here and say that we should never weigh the value of someone based on intelligence. We should never evaluate if an animal should be used or abused or commodified or not simply because of their brain power abilities. The question should always and only be, can they suffer? and we know the answer to that is yes, they can suffer physically, but they can also suffer emotionally and mentally. And that's what we're learning through this science.

Another caution that I want to offer when we are talking about the intelligence of animals. We shouldn't ever compare birds or any other animal to human children. This is something that Karen Davis of United Poultry Concerns feels very strongly about. And I certainly agree. There are studies that will say, you know, some animal is as intelligent as a five-year-old human child. But this is really an insult to the adult animal. Can a five-year-old child take care of a nest of 12 chicks? Could a five-year-old child feed her family, protect them from predators? An adult animal can do many intelligent things that a human child cannot. It's really an unfair and insulting comparison. While I understand that activists who are repeating these studies feel that they're elevating the animals, it's really the opposite. We need to move away from our current human-centered way of thinking about intelligence and what intelligence is, and realize that these adult animals have abilities and intelligences that surpass us in many ways. I mean, would we know what plants to eat if we got lost in the forest? Could we travel for thousands of miles back to our homes? Without GPS? We need to think of intelligence more broadly.

But there has been some really interesting science around these questions, and I want to get back into it. So there was an article in *Scientific American* called "The Startling Intelligence of the Common Chicken" and it stated that chickens can be actually deceptive and cunning. They possess communication skills and sophisticated signals that convey their intentions. When making decisions, chickens take into account their own prior experience and knowledge surrounding a given situation. They can solve complex problems, they can empathize with individuals in danger. For people who know and love chickens, this doesn't seem surprising at all, but it's good that science is recognizing these abilities and dispelling myths and showing that chickens are not stupid and do know what is going on. And they're very aware of what's happening to them when they're confined and are suffering and are miserable.

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Birds showing empathy is an important piece that's seen in the scientific world as being highly emotionally intelligent. Scientists have observed ravens expressing empathy, they are sensitive to the emotional states of other ravens, especially mates and those in their social circles, their friends. If one bird was the victim of some conflict, others will comfort them with gestures like preening and touching, consoling them. So this one was really, really interesting... Eurasian Jays, a relative of like Blue Jays or scrub Jays. The male Eurasian Jay brings food to his mate as a way of courting, he makes choices about what food to bring her, not based on what he likes, his own appetites, but on what she has eaten before that he had observed her eating before. So he seems to understand that she has a mind of her own and desires that differ from his. I mean, this is better than some male human courting behaviors for sure. And it's a component of social intelligence called theory of mind, which is the ability to attribute mental states, beliefs and desires to others. And to understand that these states may differ from your own, which is considered the foundation of empathy and therefore emotionally intelligent is fascinating.

It's important that science is recognizing not only intelligence and emotional complexity, but also the sentience of avians. The years of scientific evidence of animals' consciousness and sentience culminated in a statement from prominent animal neuroscientists and other animal behavior experts. And it was called the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness. And in this declaration the scientists stated, quote, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, also possess these neurological substrates.

There is so much we are learning about birds and their unique and complex lives. If you're interested in learning more, I encourage you to go to UPC's website, that's UPC-online.org. And there are numerous articles in the archives about the emotional lives of birds and so much more.

Hope

So we are going to now bring in our speaker for the day. We are happy to have Elizabeth Young. She is the founder and director of Polomacy, Pigeon and Dove Adoptions. Elizabeth graduated with a degree in English from UC Berkeley. She worked 13 years as a director of a nonprofit whose focus was on reducing poverty and aiding people in developing self-reliance. Then in 2007, she became an accidental pigeon rescuer. Elizabeth had always loved animals, and she was volunteering with the San Francisco animal care and control shelter. And she learned that it was common for pigeons to come into the shelter but not get out. And all the other animals, the dogs and cats, rabbits and rats, parrots and snakes, all animals had at least one rescue group to help them. But pigeons did not have anyone. So Elizabeth hadn't intended to start a rescue, but now with Polomacy, Pigeon and Dove Adoptions, she has saved the lives of more than a thousand birds directly and helped countless others across the country and beyond. So we are just so happy to have you with us, Elizabeth. Thank you so much for being here.

Elizabeth

Hope, Thank you. I'm truly honored to be on your podcast.

Hope

Yay. All right. So let's get into it. I want you to tell us about Palomacy. What is it that you do? Oh, what does the name mean, I'm curious. And yeah, tell us a little about your pigeon and dove rescue and adoption organization.



Photo by Jill McMurchy

Elizabeth

So polomacy means pigeon diplomacy. And we actually had to invent a word for what we were doing because nobody was doing it. There are along with all the city pigeons, the feral pigeons that everybody's familiar with, there are literally millions of domestic pigeons who mostly and some who are bred and used for all kinds of businesses and sports, quote, unquote, you know, air quotes around sports, hobbies. There are lots of casualties that result. And they're totally predictable. And they're actually treated as if they are disposable. And most of them who get hurt when they're being used in these different ways, just

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die out in the world because everything eats pigeons and doves. So they don't last very long. But a few lucky, the lucky of the luckiest to get hurt, but get found and get taken to a shelter, were then being killed. They'd stand in a cage for a week.

And the shelters didn't know what to do with them. And they didn't publicize them. They didn't name them. They didn't take them to adoption events or anything like that. They didn't put them on the website. So, you know, unsurprisingly, they didn't get adopted. And it was just this cycle and they were just kind of, again disposable. All the other animals had, you know, everybody, everybody had at least one rescue, especially here in the Bay Area. I mean, we had rescues for neonatal kittens. We have rescues for old dogs, senior dogs, mutt bulls, amazing what they do, we have rescue for black dogs and cats because they're harder to place. You know not to mention all the rabbit and the rodent and the pocket pets and the parrot and farm sanctuaries all these rescues, except nobody was helping these domestic pigeons and doves.

Think about speciesism I think that's a huge part of it. I think if this had been a different kind of animal, they wouldn't have been in that predicament. I think pigeons are really mistreated. They're treated as less than. So it felt like not only were we having to find homes for animals who needed them, but we had to do it uphill, sort of going against this incredible prejudice. People don't appreciate pigeons, they don't know pigeons, they fear them. They think they're dirty. They think they'll get diseases. And so pigeon diplomacy. We had to be out there in the world being ambassadors and diplomats for these amazing creatures who were so misunderstood. It feels really good. We wanted not to just have a name for the rescue. We wanted a name for a movement. So people can do polomacy everywhere. It's not just our little group. Wherever you are, whenever you are helping to share how amazing pigeons are and how they shouldn't be treated as so badly, that's polomacy.

Hope

Pigeon diplomacy, huh?

Elizabeth

Yes.

Hope

That's wonderful. I love that. So I am wondering how you got into the rescue work? I know a little bit that you were at the animal care control shelter. But can you tell us more about how it evolved, the rescue work that you do?

Elizabeth

When I was a kid I loved all animals, I've always been drawn to all animals. That's my first and biggest passion. And when I was little, six, or seven, and people would say, Oh, you're going to be a vet when you grow up? And I always knew, I said, No, I could never be a vet. Because I knew I couldn't handle being in the animal business. How do you manage those conflicting objectives, to stay in business and pay your bills, and also to help animals in need, like it's very tricky. And so I knew I had no interest in that, I never wanted to work with animals in a business kind of sense. And I never wanted to be in rescue. Because, you know, as I got older, I never felt like my heart could take it. And any rescue I did was just personal. Like when I adopted a dog, I went to the animal shelter to adopt my dog. And when I adopted

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cats, same thing, and when I adopted a parrot, you know, the same thing, I would never buy an animal. But I never wanted to get attached to a rescue or be a part of a rescue community because I isolated myself in that I way, I couldn't deal with it. And in my mid 40s, I had a great job that I liked, but I didn't love. And I thought maybe I was wrong all those years ago when I was a kid, and I just said no, maybe I had made the wrong choice and blocked myself off. Because I still had this passion. I mean, I still read about animals and talked to the animals. And if I went to a party, I'm the one who was talking to the cat. And so on my mid 40s, I said, I think you know what, I am going to volunteer at the animal shelter, one or two shifts a week, right? That was it, I was full up, I had my rescue dog and my adopted dog, my two cats and my two parrots, so I was full, I didn't have any room for any more animals. But I wanted to help. So I thought I'll go volunteer. And that's very reasonable and pragmatic. And, thought, you know, maybe just test this theory a little bit. And so the last thing I ever wanted to do was to start a rescue. And when I started volunteering, I first signed up to walk the dogs, but they actually have volunteers, like lined up to walk the dogs, like there was no need for that. So the need was in what's called the smalls or the exotics. So that kind of catch-all phrase was where they had the rabbits and the guinea pigs and the parrots and the chickens and the quail. And the pigeons. And so I started volunteering in service to those animals. And I was really inspired by the rescues, because if it hadn't been for all the rescues who were helping all those animals to get placed, I would have just run screaming away, it's overwhelming, like how many people are still bringing in puppies and kittens and rabbits and oh, "My kids, you know, they got ducklings for Easter and ..." It's just heartbreaking. But they're all these rescues doing such great work. So I was really inspired and that kept me from running away. But within like the first weeks that I was there, I'd come into my shift and there would be these big white chickens just standing in a cage in the smallest room. And their body language just like leave me alone, I'm afraid. And the shelter staff really didn't have an idea. They weren't a part of the training or anything and nobody named them. They teach you how to give enrichment to the rabbits and how to handle the guinea pigs and all that kind of stuff. The pigeons were just like there. And then the next week you'd come in and they wouldn't be there. And most of the king

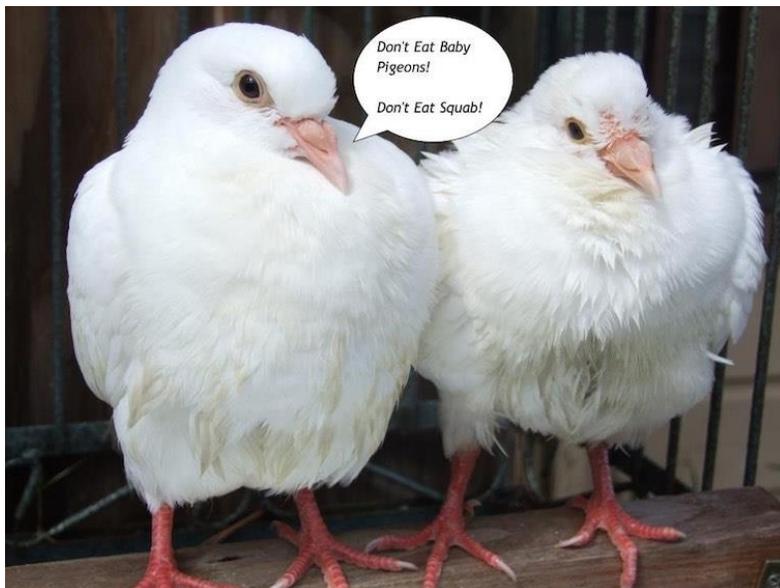


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pigeons who are bred for meat... For example, in California, there are a million King pigeons killed annually for squab. And the vast majority of those are raised and then processed in a plant and shrink wrapped and they go to fancy restaurants, and nobody sees them until they're on the plate. But there are some King pigeons who are routed to live poultry markets, and farmers markets and flea markets and backyard breeders. And when people are exposed to these, especially at the live poultry markets, people make the mistake of buying them and thinking I'm going to save this animal's life, I'm going to take this pigeon or these 10 pigeons to the park and set them free.

And they don't realize that these birds are completely domesticated and completely helpless in the wild. They're super smart. And they kind of know they're in trouble. They definitely know they're in trouble. But they have no survival skills. And so most of those pigeons get killed by coyotes and the cats and the hawks and the ravens and the gulls and mean people, they even get run over like they're pretty much on stun because they've never been outside of a cubby hole basically. And now they're out in the big world, the few of those who were lucky enough, so think about how that is. So they were bred to be meat and butchered at four weeks of age. And instead of going to the processing plant, they went on a truck to the live poultry market, so they dodged death there. Then they're at the live poultry market and instead of being purchased for home butchering, for freshness, many cultures prize freshness overall with meat. They were bought to be released, either in an altruistic way or for ceremony or so now they've dodged death again. Now they're out in the world. And they're again facing death because they're completely vulnerable. And they're a very tasty meal to every kind of predator. And yet, they get lucky enough that some person finds them, goes to the effort of cornering them and picking them up and taking them to the shelter. So now they've defied certain death four times, and they're at the shelter. And they're there for a week. And then they're euthanized just like that, and that was just like the saddest, most terrible story ever.

Hope

Yeah.

Elizabeth

And I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't like when I started there. I didn't have anything particular for pigeons. Me, I love pigeons. I didn't have anything against them. But I didn't have any particular special passion for them. I mean, I just loved all animals. And so the first couple weeks I was there, I got a sense, like, these birds, they were here last week, they're gone this week. And they act, you know, they're afraid they're not socialized. They're poultry. You don't know what to do. You don't want to let them out of the cage and have them bang around. And then staff will get mad at you, so you don't know what to do. And then one time, this is like, within the first month I was there, I came in, and there was this big white King pigeon. She was bigger even than some of the others. And she was in one of those stainless steel kennels. And she was just like hopping from one foot to the next. And she was at the front. She was like, let me out, let me out. You know, I mean, you could see she was she wanted attention. And that was completely different. You know, none of the others had been like that. They just stand there, like, try to be invisible. They're terrified. And so at the end of my shift, I was like, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what this bird wanted. But she wanted something and so I opened the door and I put my hand out and she just stepped up on my hand like such a little, well, such a big lady. I was surprised at her weight. So that's what she wanted. So her name was Guedamina and Guedamina had been somebody's

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pet, she wasn't just out of a crate from the poultry market. She was a mature King pigeon who had somebody who had her as a pet for a couple of years. So she was socialized. She was bicultural, you know, human-avian.

And so when she wound up at the shelter, she knew what to do. She knew how to communicate with people, and that's what she wanted to do. So I just walked around, I introduced her to all the rabbits and you know, showed her the budgies and she was just the most elegant and sweet pigeon and it was kind of like a fairy tale. And when I put her back in the kennel, I realized, oh, okay, so this is what a pigeon can be like, this is an amazing pet. This is an incredible pet. So when she was up against being timed out, I couldn't adopt her because I was full up, but I was like, how can I find a home for this bird? Like, I can't! I was familiar with Mickaboo Parrot Rescue, Mickaboo Companion Bird Rescue. They're a fantastic rescue here in the Bay Area that helps birds of all kinds, you know, from the budgies to the macaws.

And I was like, this is an amazing bird, she needs a home. And so I reached out to Mickaboo and I took Guedamina into my foster care, so that she was home with me for a month while I worked on finding a good home for her. And Mickaboo was so kind, they let me connect through their listserv, and, you know, publicize her, along with their other birds. And the woman who adopted Guedamina actually attended one of my Caboose Free Bird care training classes. So it was wonderful. And then the next two King pigeons came in, and they were more typical. They were scared. They were youngsters, they butcher them at four weeks old. They're weren't fledged (raised). And so they're immature. They're scared anyway. They're usually dirty. Most of them are sick, they have respiratory infections, they have GI troubles. And so there were these two little scrawny, funky-looking King pigeons huddled in their cage, and one died, which wasn't uncommon, they're frail and, and then so the other one was left there alone. And I named it Rocky because pigeons are really defenseless. But if they feel really up against it, we call it wing fu. They'll punch you with their wing, they'll slap you with a wing. And she always did when I tried to reach out to her, she would always punch me with her left wing. So I named her Rocky, like she was a southpaw.

That was my turning point, Hope, right there was you know, was it a one off? Was I going to help? Guedamina got a great home. And now I was going to run and close myself back into my bubble or was I going to help Rocky? Because I knew if there was going to be a number two, there would be a number three and a four and a five. And that was my worst fear. And I did this work the first four or five years with the brakes on feeling like a crazy person feeling like, how can I possibly be doing this? Polar bears are going extinct. Elephants are tortured, how can I be spending my time rescuing pigeons? And after a few years, I got past myself and now I'm extremely proud of the work that we do. I ended up adopting Rocky, I fell in love with her. And she was our second bird and you know we've directly rescued and placed over a thousand pigeons since then, and we help lots more.

Hope

What a beautiful story. It's interesting what you said there about, should I dedicate myself to this work when there are so many other bigger seeming things in the world? But most people don't realize, and I know you do now and I certainly do, that these animals, these birds, chickens and pigeons and all the animals who need rescue are such amazing individuals with distinct personalities and emotional complexities and each one absolutely deserves to live their lives free of human-imposed suffering and death. We know that as rescuers and as advocates, and it's so important to tell that to the world and share that with the world.

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Elizabeth

What you're saying is absolutely true. I mean, I can testify to that I, it's a little overwhelming, like every pigeon I've met, and I've met a lot, is a total individual. They are as much themselves as I am myself. And you are yourself.

Hope

Yes.

Elizabeth

And it's overwhelming. I have a hard time being out in the world now more than ever, because there are lots of pigeons living in the city. And you see them limping around because of the string on a foot that they've got entangled with, or just looking pretty hungry. And it's overwhelming to think that every one of those is a little bird person. They all are, out to the billions of chickens. And it's just that we live surrounded by so many lives that we don't even recognize.

Hope

Yeah, absolutely. Tell us about pigeons and doves. Who are they? What's their history? What's the difference between the two? I'm curious. And why do they need rescuing?

Elizabeth

Yes, it's a huge topic. Because the family of pigeons and doves is huge. There are hundreds of wild species of pigeons and doves, like the dodo, which is now extinct, right? That big giant flightless bird, that was a pigeon, that's in the pigeon family.

Hope

Wow. Oh wow.

Elizabeth

There were the passenger pigeons, which were native to North America, and lived in the billions. They were the type of animal that masked in greater numbers than anything else, outside of the oceans. And they were the ones that when they would fly over your town, they would block out the sun for hours or days, because their flocks were so huge. So these were passenger pigeons. And in like a 40-year period of time, as humans, we exterminated them, they're extinct. Now, they're absolutely extinct, which didn't seem possible, their numbers were so tremendously huge that no one thought they could ever be wiped out. But it was basically a convergence of the railroad and the telegraph. So people could call forward in advance and say, Hey, Kansas City, the passenger pigeons are on the way towards you. And people would all rush there and just blast them out of the sky with their shotguns. And the passenger pigeons are actually now used as an example for what's happening in the oceans. Like overfishing is now being talked about a lot. Oh, these systems are so huge, the numbers are so great. It could never collapse. And actually, yes, they can. They hit a critical... they lose a critical mass.

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So, then there are pigeons and doves, the regular city pigeons, right, that we're familiar with. Those are rock pigeons. And they are native to the Mediterranean and Southern European areas. And they have some traits that people really exploit, which is their predictability of raising chicks. So you've got fresh meat by eating their babies and their homing instincts. If you take one away from their home, it will amazingly find its way home most of the time. They have an incredible homing ability that's been studied a lot. It's still being studied. So these two things made these birds very useful to people. And so now they're all over the world. I think they live everywhere except Antarctica, on all the continents, and they're nonnatives, right? They're aren't considered an invasive species because they really don't take up any resources or displace anybody, but they are considered nonnative. And so that means there are a lot of discrimination against them. A lot of wildlife rescues won't help them because they're nonnative. A lot of places treat them as if they're nuisance birds or pests. In Las Vegas, the animal care and control recently told a rescuer who was trying to get help for some tortured pigeons that there wasn't anything they could do because it'd be like stepping on a cockroach.



Photo by Andrew Finkel

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Hope

Oh

Elizabeth

Yeah. That's not an uncommon feeling. So there are many hundreds of different species of pigeons and doves, mourning doves, probably the doves you might have in your backyard. They're these little soft brown birds, they kind of have blue eyeshadow, big brown eyes, and they do their little cooing and you can hear their wings whistle when they fly away. So that's a morning dove, that's a wild native bird. We have fantailed pigeons here in the Bay Area, and they're native. There are the wild pigeons who live in the scrubland and in the forests and they have yellow feet and beaks, which is how you can tell that they're not a rock pigeon. And from the rock pigeon, there have been created all these breeds, the same way we've done to dogs. So the rock pigeon has been selectively bred, they choose them for certain traits or mutations or defects and inbreed over and over and over to get all these different varieties. So there's fantail pigeons. And there are these big giant white King pigeons and Persian high flyers and Birmingham rollers. And Norwich croppers and there are literally hundreds of breeds.

Hope

And what's the purpose of that? Do they show them? What's I? What would be the reason?

Elizabeth

Yeah, so it's a great question. So yeah, exactly. There's three major groups. There are the sport, the utility, they call it and the show, or fancy. And so like King pigeons, these big white birds, they're about almost twice the size of a regular pigeon. They're mostly snow white. And they're bred specifically for meat. It's squab, considered a delicacy, it's an expensive meat. It's served in high-end restaurants. But those birds are bred in the utility classification. So they're bred to be meat. That's why they were bred the way they are. The reason they're white is not because they care about the feathers color, but they want pink skin.

Hope

Oh.

Elizabeth

Consumers prefer pink skin meat, which is why the white broiler chickens, and why Tyson's turkeys are white, and even meat rabbits and ducks are white. And that's all a factor of the goal of having pink skin. And yes, they do show them, they breed them. If you Google "pigeon breeds" it's like a freak show, you will see these birds that have these huge tails and their head, their spine is in such a severe S curve deliberately bred to be that way so they can't even see over their own chest. They can't even feed their own babies. And their bred to meet this crazy show standard. And so when they lay eggs, the breeders take their eggs away from them and give them to pigeons who have a normal conformation, so that they can hatch and raise these little... It's just heartbreaking what they do they breeding pigeons with these giant crops, you've seen on the street, right? The male pigeons are kind of puffing up and strutting around and talking up the ladies.

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Hope

Yes.

Elizabeth

And that's their crop where they hold seeds and food but that's also what they inflate to kind of have bass in their voices. There are pigeons who have been bred, they're called different types like powders and croppers where that crop is so huge that it hangs like a deflated grapefruit from their chest. And when they get excited, it inflates until it can be a bit smaller than a soccer ball. And it's really troubling for them. I mean, it's no favor. Creating these insanely exaggerated traits just because you can. They do the same thing to get short-faced dog breeds. They do the same thing with pigeons. There are fancy breeds of pigeons. They're called owls, confusingly enough, but their beaks are so short or absent that they can't feed their babies either. They've been deliberately bred that way. It's a goal like whose bloodlines can get the least amount of beak, or the biggest crop or whatever crazy thing the breeders come up with.

The difference between doves and pigeons... So they're the same family, but they're different species. The word dove is thrown around very loosely, very unscientifically and is often used for any bird in that family that is perceived positively. For example, if you go to a ceremony, a wedding or a funeral, and there is a release, quote end quote, a release of doves, those aren't doves, those are white homing pigeons and they've been bred to be white and to have a good homing instinct and when they're released, at the ceremony, they try and head back home. And most of them will make it. Sometimes there can be a catastrophe. It's not a good thing, we absolutely oppose it. But in that instance, nobody wants wedding pigeons. So they call them doves. But those aren't doves, doves don't have a homing instinct. In our work, the doves who we help here in the Bay Area and around the country are domestic ringneck doves which have been bred to be these cute little pets. They're descended from I think the African Collar Dove. Then we have another breed, we have the morning doves who are wild around here and those birds are served by wildlife rescues. So our specialty are the domestic and unreleasable pigeons and doves. The birds who aren't served by the wildlife rescues.

Hope

We're both in the Bay Area. And you often bring a few birds to events here like Veg Fest and conferences and I love to see the birds. I love to see people reacting to them and holding them and taking pictures with them. And I think it's really wonderful that people get to experience the birds as individuals. So what is that like when you bring pigeons to events?

Elizabeth

It's really, really essential. Because pigeons are ubiquitous. Right? So everybody, the general public thinks they know pigeons. And for the most part, they don't like them. They think of them as dirty, which pigeons are not. Pigeons are meticulously committed to cleanliness and feather perfection. And if you ever see a dirty pigeon, that's because they are trapped in a dirty environment. They would never be dirty by choice. And people are scared of them, like they'll get sick, they'll get a disease. "Oh there are so many diseases, they'll get sick, don't touch it!" And actually that couldn't be further from the truth. On a spectrum of how you can get sick, pigeons are way, way, way.... I mean, you are much more likely to get struck by lightning. Really, truly! than you are likely to be made sick by a pigeon. You are way more likely to be made sick by your own dog, or your own cat, or your own friend, than you are likely to get

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sick from pigeons. They are actually not a health risk to humans. That's just an excuse. They poop, so people don't like them. And so you have to kind of justify it, like, "Oh well, let's get rid of them." And it's big business actually. Pest, pigeon removal is a multi-million-dollar business. And you would be hard pressed to do that with sparrows or ravens or herons. Because people would be like, "That's terrible! You can't. Those animals deserve kindness and humane treatment." Whereas pigeons, everyone's like "Well, good, get rid of them." And that's so grounded in myths.

And the other thing is people think they're dumb. Like, "They wouldn't get out of the street when you're walking, they're so stupid." And that's not true. Pigeons are highly intelligent. They're scary intelligent. So I learned early on, like from the beginning that it was my gut instinct and I was spot on, that I can't talk to anybody about pigeons. You don't have any clue of who they are until you meet one. And so I knew I couldn't go anywhere and talk about pigeons because people's eyes just glazed over. And it's just they know what they know. So yes, I bring pigeons. And basically these birds are treated as if they were unadoptable. That's why at the shelters they weren't named, or put on the website, or promoted, or included in events, or anything, because they were considered unadoptable. And they were obviously very adoptable. They make amazing pets.

And these birds can't be released. They can't go free. That's the first thing I would want to do. If they could be, any bird that can be free, should be free. I am not a fan of captive birds, at all, and I would gladly see the end of bird captivity in every way. But these birds are here, they're domesticated, they can't survive on their own, they have to have a home, and so we help them find homes. And to do that, we have to introduce them to people. And they are, you know, they're our secret charm weapon, because pigeons are just very very charming. They're very personable, they're very emotional. But they're chill and relaxed. And we call them masters of the leisure arts because they like to hang out on the couch and they like to lay in the sun, and they like to soak in a tub and they're just, I mean, they're wonderful. And so, yeah, we take them everywhere. And I have seen a shift. I've been doing this for 12 years now and the needle has shifted. We have a long way to go to move the needle. But I have absolutely seen it shift. People are getting the message. And these birds are no longer considered unadoptable just, you know, automatically. So when you go to adoption events, you expect there's going to be animals. There are hundreds of dogs and cats and rabbits and all the people and we bring our birds. And we are showstoppers. People are amazed because we have pigeons in pants. And they're like, what? But so that's pretty, you know, so that's cool. But sometimes...

Hope

You mean, I just got to clarify. You have a little, kind of a diaper thing, you put around their back to catch any droppings. So that's what you mean by pigeons in pants. Just to clarify.

Elizabeth

Yeah. They would rather be naked. But the pigeon pants, and I'm not a dress up my pet kind of person, but the pigeon pants have been a real game changer for these guys. Because, first of all, you can't meet a bird in a cage. Like, there's just nothing, it's just so alienating. All you can do is kind of pity them. So when we put these pants on the pigeons. And pigeons are so, like parrots, anybody who has a parrot, who's ever tried to put on a harness or a bird diaper, you know, is like, good luck with that because they will kill you first. But pigeons are so easygoing, I mean, they're good sports. They would rather be naked too, they don't want to wear pants. They know it's ridiculous, but they put up with it. You put this

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diaper on and it's also a harness and you have a little leash and that leash is on your arm so that you can have them out and hold them in your arm and introduce them to people safely. So they're not going to get spooked and fly loose and then be at risk. Because these birds can't be free. And so that's nice too, it keeps the poop off of you and me. But our main appreciation for them is the harness. And then I can put these birds in your arms. And you should see people's faces just change. I'd love to have one of those little blood pressure finger thingees or what not, because the effect that they have is transformative. We call pigeons gateways to compassion. Now sometimes we're invited to events that we're interested in and we want to be at but they're not animal events. And one of these was your event that you host with the UPC, the Conscious Eating Conference.



Falling in love with Pigeons, UPC Conference

And you were kind enough to offer us a pro bono table to have at the conference and to share literature and meet people and everything. And I looked it up and I was thrilled to be invited. And I looked it up and looked at all the details. And I knew it wasn't an animal event, this was not an adoption event. This was a conference with a lot of expert speakers and in a nonanimal setting. But I took a chance. And I brought one king pigeon. King pigeons are bred for meat. Nobody knows that. Even animal rescuers and the animal welfare community are pretty much oblivious to this. It's like this hidden thing. And I came fully prepared to be turned away at the door. I didn't ask because I didn't want to ask. No this is not an animal event and you had every right and it only made sense. So I came to the event and I was fully prepared go home, just turn back and not have my feelings hurt because I knew what I was doing was sort of breaking a rule. But at the same time, I knew that if I did bring a pigeon, people would be amazed, we would be no trouble, there would be no fuss, there would be no poop, there would be no disruption, I mean, they're just so good. And so I took the chance. And I'll never get over how grateful I am to you, Hope, because you just looked at me and you smiled and you were like, I don't know what you were thinking. And...

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Hope

Well, I kind of have the same attitude of "Well let's try," I'd rather have to apologize later than ask for permission, you know?

Elizabeth

That's exactly it. I thought I'm gonna give it a try. And I'm so touched by, not only did you allow me and that was Valiant, if I remember correctly, King Pigeon, Valiant, who was there as my ambassador. We were in the auditorium for the presentations, we met hundreds of people, we had pictures taken with Karen Davis. Here we were, like we're in a conference full of animal lovers and animal rights activists and vegans and I had the only animal in the building.

Hope

Yeah.

Elizabeth

We were very popular. And it was a great day. It was an amazing day. And I totally would have understood if you had never invited us again. Or if when you did you said ok, that was fine last year, but, you know, don't try that stunt again. But somehow...

Hope

Oh no, we loved it! We loved it! And we always absolutely love every year having you and the birds come to all of our events. Yeah.

Elizabeth

We feel very very grateful. The pigeons need that extra, you know? That extra level of support and recognition. And yeah, it's been really, so yeah, taking the birds is, people have to meet them and when they do, they go away forever different. And that's, you know, most people will never meet a domestic pigeon. They're going to meet the rock pigeons, the feral pigeons that live in our cities. And a lot of times people will come up to us and they'll say, you know, if we have, you know, one of our rescue pigeons, we keep them in a clean environment, they're well fed, their water is clean so they're beautiful. You know, after they've been with us for a couple of weeks, they clean up real nice. And they're gorgeous. Or these big white king pigeons, you know, they're snow white and they look so gorgeous. And people will come up to us and they'll say, oh, this is a beautiful bird, not like those dirty, you know, flying rats. And, I say right there, time out! And that's where I talk about feral pigeons because those are the birds that we all meet. And there's nothing wrong with rats, first of all. But pigeons are smart, they're loyal, they have amazing devotion to their mate, they mate for life, and they both take care of their eggs, they both build, both male and female build the nest, both sit on the eggs, both feed the chicks. I mean, they're really admirable creatures. I want to transfer that appreciation that they suddenly have for this domestic, or rescued pigeon and have them take that out into the world and forever see all the pigeons differently as they should.

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Hope

Wonderful. Such important work. I love it. So, I want to ask if there is perhaps another bird story, and it was great to hear about your two first rescues. Was it Guadamina? Was that her name?

Elizabeth

Guadamina, yeah. Guadamina.

Hope

Guadamina and Rocky. That was wonderful. Are there other stories that you can share? A bird that maybe had an unusual story or that really touched you in some way? Is there anybody else that you'd like to talk about?

Elizabeth

Yeah, we've got a lot of them. And it's really fun. We've got a great website and a great blog. It's pigeon rescue.org and you can really just lose yourself in a lot of amazing stories. I think, the one I want to share is Francis. The shelter was full up. We're always full up, everybody's always full up, anybody who rescues animals is full up. And they were going to euthanize for space and they gave us a warning and so we went and we managed to negotiate, the Marin Humane Society was going to help us with some pigeons, and so I went to pick up the overflow of domestic pigeons from the shelter and take them to Marin. And there was one who just wasn't in good enough condition to just be in general population. He was skinny, and he had neurological issues, and I just knew he needed one-on-one care basically.

And so we transported the others and kept him back, which I hadn't planned on because I was already full, but that's what you have to do. So I brought him home. He was a king pigeon. He was a mature bird. He wasn't a squab, he was maybe 4 or 5 years old. So he had been used as a breeder. He was in the midst of a virus called Perilmixal Virus that attacks the nervous system. And it gives them palsy, like they can't control their head. It gives them Tortacolis where their neck twists. So it's called stargazing, where the head is actually upside down. They can't feed themselves. They're just a mess. But if you can support them through this crisis, they can recover. The virus itself isn't fatal. It's just the not being able to take care of themselves that kills them. He's this grown man pigeon who's miserable, he's hungry, he's starved and his neurological system is all out of whack. And oh my goodness, he hated me. So I had to feed him. I had to force feed him several times a day. And every time I'm reaching in to do this, he's just going crazy. And rebellion, like, "No don't touch me." He's basically having a panic attack. And that worsens his symptoms. It's awful! It's just torture for both of us. And I'm miserable and he's miserable. And so I'm trying different ways, "How can I help this guy in a way that's more comfortable him?" And anyway, that day, finally I decided, you know what? Instead of tube feeding him formula, where you put the tube straight down the throat into the crop and it's formula. You're getting the nutrition in but it's not really like eating. I thought, you know what, I'm going to try to hand feed him these grains. Pigeons eat, they're granivores. They're vegan. And so they eat corn and wheat and oats and all kinds of different, peas, lots of different foods. Anyway, so I bundled them up. I had him in my arms and instead of tube feeding him, I put a seed in his mouth, which wasn't easy cause he's thrashing around and going crazy and I'm trying to. And I swear it was like the first or the second seed that he got in his mouth and then he swallowed. And he was like, oh, that's food. I want that. And I swear he fell in love with me. Like, it was such a profound shift. He was like, "Oh yes. Okay, now, yes". And it was, oh my god, I mean, I still get

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chills just thinking about it. So now we're on the same side. Right? So now, I mean, he's still sick as hell. But I'm hand feeding him. He's loving it. He's falling in love with me. When I open his crate, I call it my kitchen counter hospital, I open his crate and he's in his spazzy little way, greeting me. He's happy to see me. And he had a long recovery. It was like, I don't know, it took maybe six or eight months. And he got to where he was living in the house. And his little pitter patter as he would march down the hallway. Just the cutest thing in the world. He eventually got well enough. I would put him out in the aviary during the day but bring him in because it was just too exhausting for him to be out 24/7. And he was really lonesome. I was his bird wife, but not a very good one. And he finally wooed the widow, Country, and they got married and he was so happy. And so I adopted Francis. I don't adopt all of them. I swear, I find homes for most of them. But Francis, I mean, that example, and I could tell you many stories like that. That's how... Pigeons are so smart and so adaptable that they can change on a dime. And that's an extraordinary ability. To be that resilient, that flexible, that responsive.

Hope

What a great story. Little Francis.

Elizabeth

Oh my god. You can see a video of him. He's on our website.

Hope

Oh cool. So Elizabeth, I want to ask you, I know that you are vegan, and I want to ask how you went vegan, why you went vegan and how that connects to what you do.

Elizabeth

So I told you I've loved animals all my life. But I grew up in a meat and potatoes family. And I understood it. I knew that at some intellectual level, I understood that those pork chops that I thought were so delicious and the steak that I enjoyed so much, those were animals. But that was my diet. That's what I grew up on and that's what I ate and that's what I knew. And as I got older, into my teens and 20s, I always kind of planned on becoming vegetarian. That just seemed like a good aspiration. It just seemed like a good thing to do. And I had, remember, I had stayed out of the rescue community, out of the animal welfare community, I didn't expose myself to any of that because I just couldn't bear it. But when I started rescuing pigeons... When you start rescuing animals, you start learning about what happens to animals. And it was quickly clear to me, like forget about vegetarian, I need to be vegan. Like it's all terrible. Like eggs and dairy are so full of suffering. It's just unbelievable. And so, I tell you, a couple of things that really helped me. I mean, your Conscious Eating Conference has always been a huge help to me. Because I love what I learn and I love the experience. And that has been a huge help to me. And also Thistle and Vestro. Those have been huge helps to me.

Hope

Yeah. Maybe explain what those are.

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Elizabeth

So Thistle and Veestro are home delivery companies with vegan options that are delicious. I am not a good cook anyway. I'm a terrible cook. And what little I did learn to cook was not, you know, something I can eat anymore. And so having Veestro is my.... I just love my Veestro.

Hope

And it's Veestro with a V.

Elizabeth

It is. It's V-E-E-S-T-R-O. And it arrives frozen. But gosh I love having a freezer full of delicious, healthy vegan meals that are so yummy. I don't know how they make them so yummy. And I thaw them out, do it stove top or in the oven, and yeah. I mean, I don't get commission from Veestro or anything. But for me, I'm not a cook. I'm not somebody who likes to cook so that has really been a joy.

Hope

Yeah, they're very helpful. Especially for people that don't like to cook. I've heard that before from vegans who aren't really into cooking. Those are really great options because it comes just right to your door. And it is delicious. We did that once for Thanksgiving, getting their Thanksgiving feast and it was fabulous.

Elizabeth

What a great idea! I didn't know about that! That's a great idea!

Hope

Well, we do need to wrap it up. It's been such a wonderful conversation. Elizabeth Young, thank you so much for being with us. How can people get hold of you? And if they want to consider adopting a pigeon, how do they reach you?

Elizabeth

Hope, thank you. I'm really really so honored to be on your podcast. And there are a lot of different ways for people to help. So we're here in the Bay Area [California] and our website is pigeonrescue.org. But there are birds in need of help everywhere. And we have a Palomacy help group on Facebook that is extraordinary. People tell me every day, I hear that our Palomacy help group gives them hope, or gives them faith in mankind because it's a very positive, supportive, compassionate place. And people find these downed birds, these injured survivors of pigeon racing, or these abandoned unsold birds that are at shows. People find these birds and they need help. And it's not easy to find help for a pigeon. And we're making it a lot more accessible through our Palomacy help group on Facebook. And it's wonderful. And people really enjoy. We share our stories and our crazy pictures. And just the joy that we find with these guys. Pigeons and doves are wonderful, rescued pigeons and doves make wonderful pets. They're easy, they live with us easily. They fit in easily. And it's not like you're taking a wild bird and making them captive. There is no free for these birds. They have to have a home. And so whether they're pets in your house with the family, or you have an outside aviary that's predator and rodent proof.

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It's really awesome, it's great. And they're everywhere. So whoever is hearing this, you don't have to feel like, "Oh I wish I was in the Bay Area, I'd get involved." You can get involved wherever you are around the country, around the world.

Hope

Wonderful. And I'll put the website and maybe a link to the Facebook page in the show notes on our website, hope for the animals podcast.org. So we'll have that there.

Elizabeth

Thank you.

Hope

Thank you, Elizabeth. It's really been a wonderful conversation. I've learned so much about pigeons. It's been great.

Elizabeth

Thank you again, Hope. I really, I'm very grateful for this opportunity to do a little pigeon diplomacy.

Hope

Thank you.

And thank you for listening to the hope for animals. You can support this podcast by leaving a rating or review wherever you listen to your podcasts. And please have hope for a better world for animals. Consider adopting a pigeon. And live vegan.