

Hal Hickton

# Racing Pigeon Basics



obooko.com

# Racing Pigeon Basics

Hal Hickton

© Copyright Hal Hickton 2013

This is a legally distributed free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)  
The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law.  
You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only:  
it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.

## Preface.

This book is basically for beginners. It is based on many years of experience. It is a short and to the point. There are many roads to Rome and every fancier has their own way of doing things. I have flown pigeons in a few different countries with varying success. At the present time I race them in Canada. Hot summers and very cold winters. Warmer climates I would probably do it differently. So, I will start at the beginning.

## Chapter 1.

My first 'loft' was the top part of a 4 foot wide coal shed in the UK. In it I kept two pairs of pigeons. Humble loft but the birds did not care. Home is home. But at 12 years of age I was thrilled to see them fly out and return. Since that time I have had a variety of lofts. Some large, some small. It all depends on the amount of birds one wants to keep. If you live in a town or city it is always wise to check the by laws. In some locations keeping pigeons is not allowed. Fortunately for us, pigeons are extremely hardy. They can and do adapt to any climate. There is a loft that houses 8,000 birds in South Africa. Young birds are shipped there from all over the world. The total prize money is a million dollars US. However, it is expensive to send birds there. Anyway, back to housing the birds. I have had to move often so in a new location I usually build a loft 8 feet long, 6 or 7 feet wide and 7 foot high at the front, 6 high at the back. Plywood works much better than Aspenite or chipboard. Try and keep the loft off the ground to allow for air flow. Also wise to cover around the bottom with mesh to stop critters hiding under there. A weasel can get through a 1 inch opening and kill many birds in one go. Always pays to be careful. I know from bitter experience! This year alone I have lost 20 some birds to rodents. Rats to start, gnawing through the wood. Weasel came in and killed the rats underneath the loft. As the rats were poisoned I assume the weasel also died by eating them. But what a loss! I had coon problems earlier but eliminated them by using Coke and fly bait mixed together. They like it and drink it but do not go very many feet away after drinking it. They just drop dead. Warning! Also will kill other animals etc.,. Cats were a problem also but eliminated them by feeding them milk with 4 Tylenol crushed tablets in the milk. Takes about 12 to 18 hours but it does kill them. But be very careful if you have cats coming around from your neighbors! You can protect from ground based predators but in the air flying you have to take your chances.

On the back wall I put up 12 nest boxes. 4 rows of 3. 16 inch deep x 30 inches long 16 inches high. Nest fronts are a good way to mate pairs up. Plastic or home made. I never use them as my birds are all of equal breeding merit. I put vents in the bottom front of the loft. Fresh air is very important! Mostly a wire front for thr top 3 feet. I like to put a small aviary on the front also. Remember, these are breeders so will not be raced. Another loft the same size would be ideal to separate the cocks and hens. However let's assume you only have the one loft to start. So I forgo the traps. I am not a clean freak so use wood pellets or straw or shavings on the floor. I do know many folks who scrape out their lofts daily and even vacuum them. Also lofts with slats or wire

floors with a dropping tray underneath. Also many people disinfect them often. It has never worked for me. I need natural health and immunity in my pigeons. They cannot pick up the good bacteria in a sterile loft. If the ground is not frozen I dig up a piece of turf and put that in. they enjoy it. Natural antibiotics? I do not know, but assume so. My thoughts anyway. Many will differ. It is winter almost here in Canada as I write this. My birds are separated as to sexes. With one loft it is not possible. (I have 3 compartments, 8 x 6.) I have found that birds will breed year round if left together. The only way to curtail this is to feed them lightly on Barley, plus a few other grains for variety. It keeps their ardor down. So, birds are in the loft and settled for the winter. Grit should be available at all times and of course water. Water freezes rapidly here so have the water fountains sitting on a biscuit tin with a hole cut in the top. A small light bulb will stop the water freezing if put inside the biscuit tin. Electricity to the loft is a blessing in the dark of winter. Some birds will lay eggs no matter what one does. If they do I take out the eggs and put them in the micro wave for 15 seconds or less. It kills the embryo and the birds sit happily on them for 20 days or so. Saves wear and tear on the cocks chasing the hens if one only dumped the eggs. Winter is a slow time. I do breed in the Winter though. Gives me older young for the races. Nest bowls should be in the loft as spring approaches. So we have a dry, well ventilated loft. About the beginning of February the days are getting a little longer so any eggs in the nests are dumped. Lights are on for 16 hours. The next ones they lay they can hatch out.

## Chapter 2.

You can pay thousands of dollars for good stock birds. Think the highest recent price was over \$250,000. This year, 2012. The price of the bird does not denote it's quality that it will transfer to it's offspring. I have bought expensive pigeons and some are excellent and others dud's as breeders. If you know some one who is successful racing in your area, contact them as to stock. Usually you can get some good birds at a reasonable price. Many fanciers have too many pigeons and it is hard to get rid of some of them. But one must keep down to numbers. A successful racing pigeon fancier usually does not lose to many and usually has surplus birds at years end. Many are

excellent. Also he or she is a good source of advice as to what cock to mate to what hen. Obviously he knows his pigeons, family traits etc, or he would not be successful. Take his advice. If you cannot mate up the pairs the way suggested do not worry. Quality birds will, most of the time, breed quality young ones. Most winners are a cross of two or more strains so don't be fooled by "pure this or pure that" advertising. Spring is a coming, your birds are mated and down on eggs. Nest bowls are ideal but so are two bricks as long as the young have enough straw/hay or whatever to stop their legs splaying. 18 days after the second egg is laid the eggs should hatch. 3 weeks prior to laying increase the protein in the feed. If you buy ready mixed feed make sure it has approximately 17% protein in it. I use 50% layers crumbles with the grain. That way I am sure most of their vitamin/mineral needs are met. Also a small portion of puppy kibble. High in protein. Keep the grit clean. Small mineral block as used for rabbits can be hung up also. They learn to lick it. Oyster shell and pullet grit work fine and a teaspoon of table salt is beneficial on the grit. Lettuce leaves, carrots mashed up are all beneficial. Dandelions and other wild green plants will do no harm. Avoid antibiotics. They do more harm than good for healthy birds. When the young are approximately 4 to 6 days of age the rings must be put on them. I assume by now you have joined a pigeon club or organization. To band a young pigeon hold it in one hand and extend one leg. Keep the first three toes straight. Slide the band over them and back over the hind toe. Make sure the hind toe comes back down. When done correctly the band is on for life. Check for the next few days to make sure the band is still on. Record the parents numbers and the young birds numbers. 25 days of age they can be weaned. Just make sure you put a little feed in their nest boxes prior to weaning. Once they are pecking it up, or some of it, they should be fine. Also it is wise to check under their wings to make sure the feathers are developed. People who fly the widowhood system remove the hens and one young from the pair to another loft at 15 days of age or so. The cock feeds the remaining youngster until time for it to be weaned. Anyway, young birds are now weaned in to their own loft. If necessary you may have to dip a birds beak in water bowl to make sure it knows the location. Not often needed to be done but it happens sometimes that young birds do not drink. Usually if one drinks others will follow. Monkey see, monkey do. The young bird loft should be big enough to house all the inmates. 12 pairs will give you 24 young. If the birds are allowed to hatch the second set of eggs you will have about 48. More is not always better. Dry and airy loft is essential. After a few days restrict the ration of feed. Then when you enter to feed them they will become quite tame. Try and get them to eat out of your hand. It will pay dividends later

in their career. Besides, no one wants crazy pigeons that fly in your face. Peanuts as a treat will work wonders. OK. The young bird loft should contain perches only. 2 x 2 or 2 x 4 inch wood. Or plastic Vee perches available at any pigeon supply store. The front of the loft should have a trap for them to enter and exit. Bob wires are cheap and popular. The idea is when the birds come back in to the loft, from a race or exercising, they cannot get back out. Initially I have them open so they can get in and out then after a day or so drop the bob wires. It gets them used to coming through the wires without hesitation, especially if hungry. I usually use a portable wire aviary on the landing board for a week first so they can visualize their surroundings. Also they get to see the surrounding terrain, birds etc,. A week or so after they have been out on the landing board I remove the aviary. They will stretch their wings go to the roof of the loft and down again to the landing board. A few days later they will experiment with short flights around the loft. As the days pass and they get stronger on the wing, they will range quite far. Eventually they will kit together and go flying for an hour or more. This time is dangerous for them regarding raptors. The Peregrine Falcon is a killer, as is a Cooper hawk and some others. They have young to feed also! These are 'ambush' hawks. The Peregrine from high in the sky, the Coopers from trees or high up. They have amazing speed in a dive. Other hawks not so much a threat. They cannot out maneuver a pigeon. Have had many attacks on my young pigeons and many escape the hawks by diving in to the loft or in to cover of trees etc,. Older pigeons, usually when attacked, try to get above the raptor if no other option is available. More often than not they can out fly a hawk or falcon. Raptors are built for sudden speed whereas a pigeon has the stamina to fly for long periods of time. But having said that, be prepared to lose some to raptors, especially young ones. Also wires are a problem when the young birds are not strong on the wing. I have many wind turbines around me. They are not a threat to pigeons. Anyway, your young birds are now flying well. Training time begins when the young birds have dropped the first 3 wing flights, or are flying strongly. There are other methods, such as the 'Darkening System' and the 'Lighting System' and many variations. The idea is to stop the young birds moulting to far out before the end of the young bird season. Many advocate starting them at 1 mile or less. Being out in the open country and my youngsters are flying for an hour or so I start them at 12 miles from the direction they will come from a race. If young are flying well they will know the area anyway. As I put them in the training basket I mark down the band numbers. The next time I train I put a tick mark beside the number. I do lose some. Some eventually return a few days later and some never do. After the first 12 mile toss I do it again, same spot next day.

Never in bad weather. Many say it makes them tougher. I doubt it. Just takes a lot out of them at a young age. I keep them at that spot until they are arriving home same time as I. Then I go 20 miles. Same thing again, home when I am I go further. Usually 30 miles. Then 40. For many years I trained to 80 miles but I believe it was unnecessary. Losses were no different than 40 miles. Losses in the races the same. So now 40 miles is maximum, especially with the price of gas. After 20 miles they go every other day or twice a week. As long as they are flying good around here I do not worry about them.

Darkening system. About the end of April the loft is darkened via curtains or some other method. Common practice is start the darkening system from 5 pm until 9 am. Just enough light for the birds to see the water fountain. What it does is make the birds drop their small feathers and not their flight feathers. Full daylight can be restored first or second week in June when the moult starts normally. This way when the races begin the birds are in full feather. Normal birds, not darkened, will be in various states of the moult at this time. A full set of feathers is always best. Another method is the Light System. Birds are kept in normal hours of light. However, first week of June the lights are left on until an hour after sunset. Then after June 15<sup>th</sup> an extra 30 minutes of light added. Then approximately 15 mins extra light a week. Result is the same. The birds hold their flights and are comparable to the ones in the dark system. Better, I find. As the races finish lights are put back to normal daylight and the birds will moult fast before Winter.

### Chapter 3

The first race. Usually for me it is 100 miles distance. Anyway, the young birds are fed on the morning of race day and not let out. I give them a light feed in the afternoon. Basically so they will drink before they go to the race. Anyway, night of shipping the birds are taken to the club house. There they are banded with a rubber counter mark. Number of band and the rubber are recorded. Then the birds are put in the race baskets along with the other members. Note. This is the old fashioned way of doing it. When the birds return the rubber band is removed and put in the manual clock and the clock turned to record the arrival time. Obviously this means catching the bird as it enters the loft. The most recent method of clocking is to use an electronic clock. A



special band is put on the birds leg. As the bird enters the traps the band is read electronically like a bar code in the store. Time noted etc.,. No handling of the bird occurs. One does not even have to be there. Excellent system. The recording module is taken to the club house and printed out via a docking station. These birds with the e bands are scanned on entry to the baskets and saves a lot of work. So birds are shipped to the race stations. All one can do now is wish them luck. The day of the race comes around and one anxiously awaits the arrival of the birds. For me, in good weather, little over two hours from 100 miles. Birds arrive and get clocked. Clocks are taken to the club house at a predetermined time and struck off. The tapes are read. The fastest velocity wins. Some members are 50 miles short of me but still, if I get a bird clocked 50 minutes after them I may still win. As noted, fastest velocity. The young bird races get progressively longer each week. Longest race may be 300 some miles. How far to fly them? Depends. If one has many birds one can fly all the races. If one does not have too many birds, or some have had a tough race because of bad weather then I would err on the side of caution. If you have some birds that are always at the front then I would keep them back after the 200 mile station, if not before. There is always next year! Good young birds usually make good old birds, 80% of the time, I have found. On return from a race there are many theories as to what to feed them, what to put in the water etc.,. I have the regular mix ready for them plus a few peanuts to restore some of the protein lost flying. In the water, nothing. Just plain water. During the week it is a good idea to add a small amount of lemon juice in the water. Or apple cider vinegar, anything that acidifies the gut. Keeps the bad bacteria down while enhancing the good bacteria. Young Bird sickness occurs most years. However, as it is basically caused by stress and a weakened immune system so your birds should be fine. My birds go down in the fields a lot and pick up all sorts of stuff. Keeps them healthy. They can handle the stress of being mixed with other birds, some of which may be sick, also the stress of racing. Many medicate the birds for various ailments. I seldom do. There are a zillion supplements on the market for variety of ailments. Liver boosters etc, etc.,. Nothing can beat good natural health though. If you decide to use supplements then by all means do so. As stated previous, many roads to Rome. As the year progress and your birds go through the moult they should be shining. Eyes bright, droppings firm and feathers glossy. Check your birds over. Eliminate any that are not healthy or have done poorly in the races. Same goes for stock birds. If a pair has not bred you good racers then either switch the mates or eliminate them. Better to have quality than quantity. Remember it is

only one bird that wins the races. If you have raced them and selected them you should have a team of birds capable of winning anytime as yearlings.

The most important meal after a workout is the first meal. This applies to athletes and animals. When your pigeons return home from a tough race they need rich feed with plenty of oil seeds in front of them free choice. They will eat what is needed to recover. By feeding rich feed your pigeons will recover very fast. We usually place all the regular mix along with safflower, pellets, hemp, flax etc.

In the water apple cider vinegar is beneficial. It can be given year round. Also avoid the use of pop corn. It is hard for a pigeon to digest. Flax seed oil to moisten the feed is very good for them. Also it makes brewers Yeast stick to the feed which is excellent for them.

## Chapter 4

Year two, you have a team of yearlings ready to burn up the skies. You must add another compartment for young birds or divide the present young bird loft if you only have a few birds. Nest boxes need to be added. Mate them in March or early April. This will ensure the birds do not moult too bad before the long races start near the middle of the season. Although I have never found it a problem with birds mated earlier. You can either raise young off your racers or just off your stock birds. If just off the stock birds then synchronize the matings so they lay together, racers and stock birds. Take an egg from a stock pair and put it under a race pair and ditch the racers eggs. Now they will only have a single bird to raise. It keeps the numbers down. There are many ways to race older pigeons. The one most used is widowhood. It basically works this way. After the young are weaned and the pairs down on the second set of eggs, the hens are removed from the loft. You can keep them in rabbit hutches or a small building. They must be out of sight of the cocks. Best feed for them is barley and very little other grains. The cocks are let out to exercise once in the morning and once later in the day. They fly with spirit, clapping their wings as the zoom across the sky. After an hour call them down and feed them in. They do not need many training tosses before the first race. However, when they are trained the hens must be in the loft waiting for them on their return. Then the

hens are removed again. This motivates the cocks to get home as fast as possible. Motivation is the most important ingredient when racing older pigeons, whatever method is used. I have never used this system for the simple reason my hens will often out fly my cocks especially from the longer distances. So I fly both sexes to the nest. It is a little more work. Nest position is important. Hens sitting 10 days or eggs just hatching. Cocks driving hens etc.,. Each bird is different. The hens and cocks, with hatching eggs or a day or so old young bird in the nest will fly until they drop to get home. Here is one example from years ago. I raced a cock bird to the nest from 100 miles then 150 miler. He was an also ran. Late getting back. So I did not race him for a few a month. The day of shipping he was on hatching eggs. I had not let him hatch any previous to that. He beat at my hand with his wing from his nest bowl. So I decided he was motivated enough. The race was almost 600 miles. No one got a bird on the Saturday. Sunday morning he was home. He was first in the club by two hours. I have had similar instances. Also had a young birds be first from the distance races due to them sitting eggs in the young bird loft on more than one occasion.

Now, if you are a widowhood flier and wish you could fly hens but do not have the room or time then here is a system that will change the way you race pigeons. (This method from a top notch flier.) Before the widowhood season begins train the hens out 60 to 70 miles. Once the birds are separated feed the hens 100% high quality barley every day but Thursday evening the day before shipping. On Thursday evening feed all the small seeds like safflower, hemp along with all the European mix they want. After about 30 minutes remove the feed and place barley in the feeder for the day on Friday. Ship the hens every week to each race and upon return let them eat all the rich feeds and small seeds they want. Place them back into their holding section or flight pen a couple hours after they home until the process starts over each week. They are never trained or let out of the loft. They only fly one day a week in the race. Leave one or two hens home for the first two arriving cocks or use some un mated stock hens. More often than not the hens will beat the cocks and will even be better when the distance races come along. The hens only eat barley except for Thursday evening and Saturday after the race. If you are sending the hens to a long distance race, you can feed the hens the rich seeds the day of shipping also. Keep every possible mineral in front of the hens free choice at all times. If the hens fly eight or more hours in a race you can skip a week and go two weeks between races. This system works so well and allows you to race more pigeons without any extra time or effort. You will start to re-think how to train pigeons when you fly this system. That is one mans method and he does well with it.

One has to be observant. How they find their way home, what guides them as been the subject of many studies. The sun plays an important part. Iron bacteria in their brain may also help. I do not know. I and others have had birds come home late at night, through thunderstorms and howling winds. What I do know is that it takes a good healthy, well motivated pigeon to accomplish this. Many can not do it and get lost or perish by the way side. Pigeons will fly over the sea and quite often do. They are versatile little buggers. You look after them they will reward you tenfold or die trying. One year my birds won every trophy in the club. From 80 miles to 586 miles. The reason? I lived alongside a major highway that ran basically east to west. We raced from the east. I believe that was the reason but others tend to disagree. There are many ways to race pigeons. Many tips and tricks. Volumes have been written about them. Theories on how to pick the winners before the races are run. One theory is the wing theory. Whereas the shape of the flights indicate the best pigeons. The eye theory. A pigeons eye contains the pupil and various circles and graduations in different colors. By looking in to the eye with an eye glass or magnifying glass some say they can predict the winner. I do not know enough about the subject to pass judgment. Although it does have many followers. Many are successful with it. Many not. The best bird on that particular day wins. Usually the most motivated, healthy bird. Feeding pigeons is just common sense. When feeding young or moulting they need more protein in the form of legumes, peas, etc., For the longer races they need more corn as they utilize the fat reserves more. Basically it is common sense. I hope this extremely short book helps. A good source of information is to go to YouTube and look at the videos there. There are hundreds of videos on racing pigeons, methods etc., No two the same.

Personal random thoughts. Feeding. Millions are spent on feeding pigeons. The feed companies need you cash in a very competitive market. Mixes of grains are advertised as Super mix Super X mix and many other names. All are good formulated mixes with the right protein etc,. Unfortunately, the birds cannot read the label of ingredients and there fore do not know how many grains of each to eat to get the full benefit. They just eat what suits them. They do not know how many miles they have to fly next week so do not discriminate between need for energy or grains they like. Pellets Addition of pellets or layer hen crumbles will give them some cushion if they are not eating 'what is good for them'. Pigeons will eat basically anything. Feeding young and moulting more protein is needed. Feathers are about 90 plus percent protein. Racing the long distances protein needs to be much lower. High fat grains are better. Peanuts, safflower and corn used within reason can greatly effect the performance. More 'gas' in

the tank. . Never over feed your race team again. Just add about one ounce of Rabbit Pellets to the feed each day. Feed enough until the birds leave the rabbit pellets. Any very hungry birds will eat the rabbit pellets. After we feed our youngsters each day there is always a sprinkling of rabbit pellets in the feeder. By late in the day the pellets are gone. We give all the birds rabbit pellets two time per week year round. This eliminates the use of any fresh greens. Buy rabbit pellets that have the first ingredient alfalfa. The latter from another flier.

Rest is one of debate among pigeon fanciers. If you want your pigeons to have a long successful career please give one day of total rest for every two hours on the wing. Four hour flight, two days rest, 12 hour flight 6 days of total rest. You will not only dominate all season long you will win with 5 year old or older pigeons if you follow this rest recommendation throughout their career. By total rest we mean they do not even loft fly.

Motivation. Number one and health second. A bird in poor shape will try and get home regardless if motivated enough. Healthy bird will beat it every time. Never send birds hungry to a long race. I have had birds from long tough races and on trapping just get a drink of water, peanut or so and go right to their nest box. Home is were the heart is. The more your pigeons love their home the better you will race. The more you win with them the more you will love your pigeons! Hope this helps!

For excellent info go to this site. <http://www.mclaughlinlofts.com/>

If you enjoyed reading my book I would be delighted if you would leave some feedback on my obooko.com download page.

Please note: This is a free digital edition from www.obooko.com. If you paid for this book please advise the author and obooko. We also suggest you return to the retailer and demand an immediate refund.