

THUNDERBIRD LOFTS

Those driving down J-6 Ranch Road in the evening are frequently met with a stunning site as homing pigeons from Thunderbird Lofts sweep in formation across the roadway multiple times before returning to their home.

Chris Drummonds, his wife Cindy, and daughters are serious birders who are generous with their time, knowledge, and resources to encourage those just starting in the field. Chris not only takes two weeks off each year to supply the county fair with many of his family's show birds but also provides 4H'ers with their first projects. Having such expertise, Chris entertained the writer and photographer for several hours patiently answering questions as we toured the world in his back yard.



ancient art of pigeon flying and owners had to hide their birds from the regime or risk prosecution.

Worldwide, pigeon fanciers remain enthralled with the beauty, speed, courage, endurance and intelligence of the racing pigeon - forming a fraternity that has existed since the great empires of Egypt and Rome.

Historically, pigeons were used to keep emperors in touch with the most remote areas of their lands, while some breeds provided entertainment in the courtyards. This breed shown by Chris was kept exclusively by Russian Czars to hover in the courtyard for their royal guests.

Hundreds of thousands of lives were saved during World Wars by pigeons delivering messages across enemy lines. The average pigeon weighing in between 16-20 ounces could carry a message written on light weight paper strapped to its leg or carry a small canister for film, etc.

Homing pigeons are still used in commercial ventures such as sending

film back to home base so river rafters have pictures waiting for purchase at their journey's end.

Chris and family have approximately 30 breeds, and about 400 birds. Tumblers, Pouters, High Flyers, Rollers, all have unique attributes and a special story!

Belgium, France, Italy, Turkeyaround the world over 700 breeds have been identified. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russian breeds came out of hiding. The skies over Kabul, Afghanistan are now filled with pigeons after the Taliban were removed from power, as the Taliban had outlawed the



Pairs mate for life. Males sit on the nest during the day when the chance for predators is greater while the hen provides the warmth at night. The hen usually lays two eggs at a time that hatch 20 days after being laid.



Both adults produce milk. For each of the first 20 days, the baby doubles its weight. The young begin eating solid food after 6 to 7 days.

Birds are banded before 6 days old while the legs are still small enough for the two bands: one an ID that includes a combination of letters and numbers indicating date of birth -creating a one of a kind number, while the second chip activates an electronic reading module when the bird re-enters the loft after a race. When the young start ranging, or banding together in flight, they are ready to start training for racing.

The average life of a pigeon is 12-13 years, although they can live 20-30 years in captivity with good care. Years. The average racing career is 6 years. The average speed for normal flying is approximately 30 mph; however with a tail wind, his older daughter Taylor had hers clock in from a 500 mile race at 72mph.

Racing events are scheduled for only a few months out of the year. Youngsters are entered in events approximately 300 miles in length while the older birds will go up to 600 miles.

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Chris and Cindy are developing a small business interest for after retirement. They currently do white dove releases (3, 12 birds) for weddings and funerals. When the professionally trained doves are released, they circle



several times before heading to their home base, creating an extraordinary and memorable experience.

Since white birds can be easily and safely colored with food coloring, birds can match special event themes for birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, award ceremonies, grand openings, etc.



Above: Oriental Frill, Berlinger Lange Russian Rostov

Bottom Left: Ancient Tumbler

Budapest Tumbler



Pigeon flying is a great hobby for the entire family.

This hobby has great appeal to those who enjoy working with animals, to those who appreciate athleticism, to those who like friendly, wholesome competition. Chris is quick to add, "It's the most fun you can have racing in your back yard!" Daughter Kursten, the youngest flyer in the club, wholeheartedly agrees and plans for the day she can beat veteran flyer, Tom Stapleton.

Chris invites anyone interested in getting started to drop by. "We are always willing to help a new flyer get acquainted with this fun, hands-on hobby."

Chris and Tom, also a local resident, belong to the Southern Arizona Pigeon Racing Combine. We captured the preparations the night before a 300 mile race beginning near Kingman.



Cindy places the bird's banded leg into the monitoring slot so that the band ID is read and recorded.

Club members share the work as all participating birds are brought to a designated place to begin the process of identifying, separating, and crating. The Club Rac-



Tom, who began his 50 year hobby in Germany, shares his experience with Cindy as the birds are placed into crates separating the hens from the cocks. For this particular race, Tom was sending 24 birds from his loft located on Robin Lane.



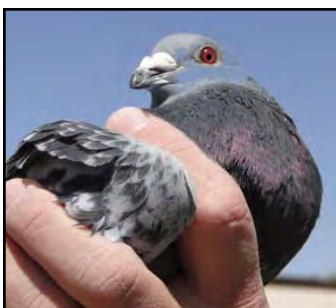
Mark Rhyner, Club Racing Secretary from Sierra Vista, seals the crates at which time he becomes the only authorized individual who may handle the birds.

Mark then delivers the birds to Tucson where multiple clubs combine crates on a trailer to be driven to an area near I-40

and Highway 93 to be released at 7:00 A.M. The birds were expected to travel with a tail wind and to start arriving at the loft around 1:00.



Reader under loft entry electronically records when the bird enters the loft. The Module provides the official race records.



The first four of Chris's nine clocked in at approximately 11:38. The first one back in the loft was one of his youngest at eight months. #160 was the Combine race winner, flying 290 miles in 6 hours 56 minutes at an average speed of 41.82 mph. He captured the win against 251 birds from 15 different lofts in SE Arizona.