

A New Home for a "Homer"

Domestic Pigeons: The Hidden Avian Welfare Issue

Reprinted Courtesy of "The Official NEEWSLetter of Foster Parrots & The New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary"
By Michele Nash



Kahuna

Sometimes animals enter our lives in quite unplanned ways, and often they have already endured their own inauspicious and circuitous paths before coming into our care. If someone had told me I'd spend three solid days and \$200 renovating a shed to build a large aviary for a pigeon, I'd have said they were crazy. But when Kahuna arrived at the New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary, he, as they say, had me at "coo."

Still quite young, he had been found on a street in Providence, RI. Under the care of NEEWS, he was examined by a veterinarian and de-loused. Within just a few weeks he had increased impressively in size and was utterly handsome. But with no other pigeons of his variety at the sanctuary, he was without community. After months of making excuses for not taking in this lone bird with no friends and a feisty attitude, I finally brought him home from the sanctuary.

Kahuna is a homing pigeon, or a "homer" in pigeon-racing parlance. His band could be traced to a pigeon club in Massachusetts, but we have found that breeders generally do not welcome the return of pigeons who fail to fly home. Not willing to invest resources or support the genetics of pigeons regarded as "damaged goods," some pigeon breeders will euthanize these "undesirable" birds.

Homing pigeons bond strongly and mate for life. So strong are their reproductive drive and desire to get back to their mates that they are widely seen as symbols of fidelity, love and home. This propensity for bonding has been exploited to the point of creating a sport that is global in scope and can be extremely lucrative for breeders of some of the world's most acclaimed racing birds.

One very successful method for training homing pigeons as racers is referred to as "widowhood." Once a homing pigeon has been mated and produced offspring, these birds are allowed access to their mates and their babies only upon returning from their race. This creates the sense of urgency needed to cultivate a winner. Some racing pigeons are simply shown their mates in the presence of another bird within their nest box before being taken away to race, and that lasting image drives them to fly faster to deal with the interloper when they get back home.

While methods like these do create "money-makers" for hobbyists, it's yet another example of human use of animals for utilitarian purposes without consideration for the impact on the animal. Pigeons bond for life, and sometimes even form lifelong bonds with same-sex partners. This suggests that their bonding is rooted in emotional attachment, not just reproduction instincts. And of course, we cannot ignore the risks to the lives and safety of the birds. Predation is a constant threat, and factors like weather systems, accidents, hunger, dehydration and exhaustion result in the untold numbers of injured and lost pigeons that fill humane shelters from coast to coast every year.

Pigeons are not widely regarded as companion animals, but the fact is that these birds can make wonderful pets. They are intelligent, affectionate and interactive. Their soft coos are infinitely more pleasant to listen to than the calls of the average parrot! Most of all, the need for homes for these birds is enormous. Pigeons bred for racing, or for dramatic releases at events like weddings, do not have the ability to survive in the wild without assistance from people to provide food, shelter and protection from predators. They are not wild animals.

Kahuna happily came home with me and — with maybe a teeny bit of help from my husband — we converted our shed into a very impressive pigeon coop. Kahuna was instantly at home, but he was still lonely. This led me to the MSPCA in Boston where “Pudge” had been waiting almost three months for adoption. Upon first seeing her in her cage at the shelter, I was dumbstruck. The picture online did not properly convey her size at all. She was enormous, at least twice the size of Kahuna. And she was beautiful. Pure white and sleek as a sea otter, with a cranium shaped like a beluga whale, she sat there placidly and royally, as if waiting for her prince to arrive.

Pudge is a king pigeon, I soon learned. According to veteran pigeon rescuer Elizabeth Young of Palomacy Pigeon & Dove Rescue in San Francisco, CA, these impressive birds are “masters of the leisure arts.” King pigeons are a large, docile breed, known for producing the young “squab” seen on many restaurant menus. Like Kahuna, Pudge had no ability to survive in the wild. Had she not been found and brought to the MSPCA, she would have perished.

It was approaching dusk when I arrived home with Pudge, so I thought I would allow just a brief introduction to Kahuna through the bars of her carrier and then take her inside with me for the night.

This was not to be.



Pudge & Kahuna

At first sight of Pudge, Kahuna stopped his perpetual figure-eight pacing and constant cooing. He just stared, and stared, with what looked like awe. I let Pudge out of her carrier and she lifted off, albeit like a Flying Fortress heavy bomber, then alighted immediately on a roost in the outdoor aviary, Kahuna following fast like a nimble F-18 in comparison.

A few chortles from Kahuna later, they were enjoying seed on the ground together.

Within just a couple of days they were inseparable, happily lazing about, engaging in friendly beak wrestling and canoodling in the basket that Kahuna had claimed as their nest. The rescue of one lucky pigeon had resulted in the rescue of a second.

This was the beginning of my advocacy work for these remarkably intelligent and social birds.



Happy new pigeon home

I Have Found a Lost Pigeon! Now What?

All fancy pigeon breeds are descendent from the wild rock pigeon - but these domesticated birds are not wild and do not have the ability to survive without human support. With some 15,000 breeders across the country and a hobby that has been around for centuries, by some estimates, less than 5 percent of birds do not return home, but this still represents a loss of thousands of birds in any given year. Here's how you can help:

Take that pigeon in off the street!

Lost homing pigeons may be hungry and dehydrated. Commercial seed mixes for parakeets and/or chicken crumbles can be offered in a pinch. Pigeons are "suction drinkers", so offer water in a cup or small bowl.

Palomacy Pigeon & Dove Rescue offers a wealth of pigeon care information and also references to pigeon rescue organizations across the country. Palomacy can be found at www.pigeonrescue.org

Adopt a pigeon! These beautiful birds are intelligent, social, interactive and affectionate - and much easier on the ears than parrots!

Create a sanctuary! Your local SPCA or humane shelter will be grateful for the help. Converting an existing shed or other structure to a pigeon coop with indoor/outdoor access can be done inexpensively. Due to their highly social nature, several pigeons can share a single aviary. Pigeon coops should be predator safe, offer sheltered roosting, and outdoor space for foraging, strutting and some level of flight.