



RACING PIGEONS and birds of prey

This leaflet is supported by 18 voluntary bodies and addresses concerns about the impact of predation by birds of prey (raptors) on racing pigeons. It summarises the range of causes which contribute to the high losses of racing pigeons in the UK; details why illegal killing of birds of prey is not acceptable; explains why killing birds of prey under licence would be illegal; and describes practical measures that may reduce losses of racing pigeons.

For the purposes of this leaflet the term 'racing pigeon' includes tippers, rollers and tumblers, which are specialised breeds of pigeon used in endurance and performance sports.

- **There is strong evidence that peregrines are routinely poisoned or their nests destroyed at some traditional eyries.**
- **86% of pigeons lost each year fail to return to their lofts for reasons other than predation by birds of prey.**
- **Priority should be given to understanding why straying accounts for 36% of lost pigeons.**
- **Changes in the management of races and training could significantly reduce the number of pigeons lost to birds of prey.**
- **Research is required into the effectiveness of deterrents around lofts.**
- **Killing birds of prey would have little impact on the numbers of pigeons lost overall but could threaten the populations of peregrines and sparrowhawks.**

The concerns

Some pigeon fanciers are concerned about losses of racing pigeons to birds of prey. Peregrines will attack pigeons mainly during racing or training flights, whereas sparrowhawks largely confine their attacks to the home loft area. These attacks can result in death, injury or the disruption of flocks. In some areas of the UK, fanciers consider that losses are so high they are no longer able to pursue their hobby. This issue can be more acute where there are many fanciers and high numbers of peregrines or sparrowhawks, and where the territories of birds of prey coincide with lofts, race routes or areas where tippers, rollers or tumblers are flown.

Conservation groups and the Government are concerned because illegal killing of some birds of prey limits their population and distribution. In some parts of the UK, there is strong evidence that peregrines are routinely poisoned or their nests destroyed at traditional eyries.^{1,2,3}

The causes of racing pigeon losses

Racing pigeons are exposed to many hazards during training and particularly during races. During the 22-week racing season, approximately 13 million racing pigeon prey opportunities are presented to about 5,600 adult peregrines.

Three studies have been undertaken to understand why racing pigeons fail to return to their lofts and to assess the impact of birds of prey. These studies indicate the proportion of racing pigeons taken by raptors varies according to region, but that numbers are small compared to the other reasons pigeons fail to return home.



Sparrowhawk

UK study (1997–98)

The only UK-wide study was commissioned by the Government's UK Raptor Working Group, which included representatives of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association, the RSPB and the Scottish Raptor Study Groups.^{4,5} Of all racing pigeons destined for the sport each year, 3.7% are taken by sparrowhawks (usually at or near lofts) while goshawks, whose populations are much more localised, account for less than 0.5% of pigeons. The research found that 3.5% of pigeons were lost to peregrines (usually away from lofts when pigeons are actively racing or training), but only 30% of these were on their racing line when taken. The other 70% had strayed, typically 100–200 miles from their racing lines, or were eaten a year or more after their liberation, when they had already assumed a feral existence. A few pigeons that had overshot their lofts were also found dead in peregrine eyries.

The impact of birds of prey varies according to region. For example, there are few peregrines in the eastern half of England, so the number of pigeons lost to them is too small to measure. Lofts in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, on the other hand, experience annual losses of between 10 and 21% to peregrines – although a significant proportion of these were killed after they had strayed or become feral.⁴

To put this in context, it is important to remember that racing pigeons are exposed to many hazards, most more significant than birds of prey. Indeed, 86% of pigeon losses were unrelated to birds of prey.

Pigeons fail to return to their lofts for the following reasons:

- straying and exhaustion – 36% of losses
- collisions with solid objects, mainly buildings, windows and vehicles – 19% of losses
- collisions with overhead wires – 15% of losses
- predation by birds of prey – 14% of losses
- shooting, entanglement in netting, poisoning and oiling – 8% of losses
- predation by mammals, including domestic cats – 8% of losses.

An average loft in the UK houses 73 racing pigeons – the research indicates that a typical owner will lose 38 pigeons each year. Of these, just over five would be killed by sparrowhawks and peregrines (2.7 and 2.5 respectively), although almost two of these would be pigeons that had already strayed or become feral. By contrast, 14 will have strayed, gone feral or died of starvation or exhaustion; seven will have died or been seriously injured in a collision; six will have hit wires; three will have been shot, entangled, poisoned or oiled; and three will have been eaten by a mammal. Even in Scotland, where raptor predation is often considered to be a problem, more than half of lofts reported no losses of pigeons to sparrowhawks, and less than 1% of all substantiated, probable and possible pigeon losses were attributed annually to sparrowhawks.⁶

Wales study (1999–2001)

A study by Lancaster University, commissioned by the pigeon racing unions, found that domestic pigeons were the most frequently-taken prey of peregrines in the south Wales valleys.⁷ The authors suggested that peregrines accounted for 10–20% of pigeon losses, although this was not quantified in the same way as the UK-wide and Scottish studies. The lead author estimated that even if all peregrines were removed each year from *every* territory in south Wales, it would reduce losses by just 10%, the equivalent of each loft having three more racing pigeons than it otherwise would.⁸

Scotland study (2002–03)

A study by the Central Science Laboratory, for the Scottish Homing Union and Scottish Natural Heritage, found similar results to the Scottish part of the UK study⁶. From a racing pigeon population of 340,000 birds released during the year, 56% failed to return during the racing season. Sparrowhawks accounted for less than 1% of the losses, and losses to peregrines were not estimated with certainty, but were probably over 2%. Half of these, however, had already strayed before being taken by a peregrine.

Analysis

These three studies, carried out independently, concluded that birds of prey are responsible for only a small proportion of racing pigeon losses relative to

Mike Read (rspb-images.com)



Peregrine

other factors, though losses can be greater for owners flying birds in areas with a higher density of peregrines. Authors of these studies recommended that efforts should be made to understand the causes of straying and, in particular, address the way that racing is organised, in order to reduce the risks of flocks clashing.

Even if legislation were not in place to protect birds of prey, killing or removing even a small number would not be an appropriate or effective solution. To achieve any noticeable reduction in the number of pigeons lost to birds of prey would require such a large number of peregrines and sparrowhawks to be removed that it would cause serious declines in their UK populations. It is unlikely that even killing of raptors on this scale would make a significant difference to the number of pigeons that return to lofts each year.

Conservation groups agree with the UK Raptor Working Group's rejection of any changes to the legal protection of birds of prey. The working group concluded that there is no legal provision for the licensed control of birds of prey to prevent losses of domestic pigeons.⁹

The way forward

We recognise the genuine concern that some pigeon fanciers have about birds of prey and we are keen to see efforts made to build on the knowledge gained from the recent research. Racing pigeons that are released into the wild face many hazards, natural and unnatural, which are accepted by fanciers as risks of the sport. Attempting to overcome these through breeding, selection, training and race technique has been a skilled part of pigeon racing since it started in the late 1800s.

The UK Raptor Working Group recommended that greater effort should go into seeking ways to reduce straying and to reduce the vulnerability of pigeons to predators. In particular, it recommended:

- **Priority should be given to reducing straying during races**

Specific research was recommended to establish why large numbers of pigeons appear to stray. Once this is better understood and addressed, a large proportion of pigeon losses could be avoided.

Pigeon fanciers use two different systems of husbandry (a natural system and a widowhood system) to promote a stimulus to return. Research has indicated that pigeons racing on a natural system are more prone to straying and being taken by peregrines than those on the widowhood system. The group recommended that pigeon racing unions should seriously consider investigating racing systems in more detail since they have the potential to reduce pigeon losses significantly.

- **Race routes should be optimised to avoid pigeon flocks clashing**

It was recommended that the Homing Unions should work together to optimise and, where necessary, establish new flight corridors to reduce the complex network of routes currently flown in the UK. These can cause clashing and have the potential to divert pigeons from their race routes. Pigeon fanciers could reduce the chance of contact with peregrines by establishing more liberation sites in eastern Britain to maximise the routes flown in areas with naturally fewer peregrines. Race routes in Scotland have already been altered to reduce contact with peregrines.

- **Consideration should be given to changing the start of the racing season**

The Group suggested postponing the old bird racing season by five weeks to the end of May to avoid the start of the peregrines' breeding season. This suggestion was agreeable to some of the fanciers who were asked about its feasibility during the research, and was supported by an article in *British Homing World*.¹⁰ If there are fewer pigeons available to peregrines at the start of the peregrines' breeding season, they may rear fewer young, so reducing the demand for pigeons throughout the rest of the year.

- **Loft aspect, exercising and training places should be optimised**

The vulnerability of pigeons at the home loft should be investigated by examining the differences in loft aspect and surrounding habitat in relation to the frequency of attack by sparrowhawks. Some lofts experience many fewer attacks than others, which can appear unrelated to sparrowhawk density. Training tosses should take place in open countryside and away from wooded areas to reduce surprise attack by sparrowhawks, which can cause pigeons to scatter when travel baskets are opened. Varying the times and starting points of exercise flights also makes pigeons a less predictable food source for sparrowhawks and peregrines.

- **Attempts should be made to reduce raptor attacks at the loft and during training and racing**

A full and thorough investigation of the value of deterrents was recommended by the group. Subsequent trials indicate that wing-transfers and sequins attached to pigeons have little effect, but there has been little evaluation of deterrents around lofts or of conditioned taste aversion, which showed some promise in the 1990s.¹¹ Fanciers have little guidance to know which deterrents may be effective, and the most recent study in Scotland⁶ found that most loft owners had done little to try them. Surprisingly, the techniques perceived by fanciers as the most effective are deployed by fewer people than techniques regarded as less effective. There remains a real need to evaluate the effectiveness of a range of deterrents, particularly mirrors and reflectors.

Conclusion

It is understandable that some pigeon fanciers perceive that the recovery in the number of birds of prey is a threat to their interests – many started to race pigeons between the 1950s and 1970s, when peregrines and sparrowhawks were rare, mainly because of organochlorine pesticides and persecution. However, there is no justification for the illegal killing of birds of prey and we welcome the pigeon racing unions' formal rejection of such action.⁹

We believe that significant benefits could be gained if pigeon fanciers considered some moderate changes to the timing of the pigeon racing season and the times that they train their birds. Devoting time to reducing the number of straying birds could avoid a high proportion of racing pigeon losses in the UK. In addition, if collisions with overhead wires could be reduced (by scrutinising liberation points and race routes to avoid places where overhead wires were present and by marking wires to make them more obvious), losses could be reduced still further.

Unlike raptor conflicts with game managers, little effort has so far gone into assessing techniques to reduce the vulnerability of racing pigeons. We welcome efforts made by the Royal Pigeon Racing Association to trial possible solutions for pigeon fanciers and call upon all the Homing Unions to support research into the development of new techniques and measures.

Further reading

- 1 Scottish Raptor Study Groups 1998 *Counting the Cost: the continuing persecution of birds of prey in Scotland*. The Scottish Office.
- 2 Holmes, J, Walker, D, Davies, P, and Carter, I 2000 *The illegal persecution of raptors in England*. English Nature Research Report 343.
- 3 Court, I R, Irving, P V, and Carter, I 2004 Status and productivity of peregrine falcons in the Yorkshire Dales between 1978 and 2002, *British Birds* 97; 456-463
- 4 Shawyer, C R, Clarke, R, and Dixon, N 2000 *A Study into the Raptor Predation of Domestic Pigeons*. DETR, London.
- 5 Shawyer, C R, Clarke, R, and Dixon, N 2003. Causes of racing pigeon (*Columba livia*) losses, including predation by raptors, in the United Kingdom. In: *Birds of Prey in a Changing Environment* (Thompson *et al*). Scottish Natural Heritage, Edinburgh.
- 6 Henderson, I, Parrott, D, and Moore, N 2004. *Racing pigeons – impact of raptor predation*. Report to Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Homing Union. www.snh.gov.uk
- 7 Dixon, A, Richards, C, Lawrence, A, and Thomas, M 2003. Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) predation on racing pigeons (*Columba livia*) in Wales. In: *Birds of Prey in a Changing Environment* (Thompson *et al*). Scottish Natural Heritage, Edinburgh.
- 8 *British Homing World*, 22 February 2002.
- 9 JNCC 2000 *The Report of the UK Raptor Working Group*. ISBN 1 85397 0786
- 10 Dixon, A 2000 Peregrines and racing pigeons in South Wales. *British Homing World*, 17 November 2000.
- 11 Musgrove, A 1994 *Peregrines and Pigeons: investigations into a raptor-human conflict*. PhD thesis, University of Bristol.

Supporting organisations



British Trust for Ornithology

Humphrey Crick, The Nunnery, Thetford Norfolk IP24 2PU

The BTO, as an impartial scientific research trust, has provided critical review of the scientific evidence-base underpinning this document.



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THE NATIONAL TRUST

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Scottish Raptor Study Groups

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Welsh Kite Trust

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Manx BirdLife

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The Wildlife Trusts

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Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

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Countryside Council for Wales

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BTCV

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Kennel Club

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Fell Runners Association

Chris Knox, www.fellrunner.org.uk/committee.htm



RSPCA

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The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

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