

pigeon POWER

Some time ago a journalist phoned me, sounding a little breathless. He had written an article about Sun City's million-dollar pigeon race and was looking for a good photograph of a pigeon. Not having one immediately to hand, I suggested he contact the relevant pigeon association to source one. The article duly came out, and there, on the front page of the magazine above the caption 'Million-dollar baby', was quite possibly the ugliest pigeon ever photographed. Missing feathers on its neck, it was carbon-monoxide grey and looked dangerously anaemic. I laughed, but I doubt many of the million-dollar pigeon-keepers did.

It later emerged that the journalist had sent his photographer into the streets of Rosebank with the instruction to 'get a pigeon pic'. The photographer had found a pigeon prepared to stand deathly still while he had adjusted his aperture and gone to work. The result was this perfect picture of a totally imperfect pigeon. Compared to a pedigreed racing cock with colourful leg rings and broad chest, they could almost have been different species, but they are not. They are *Columba livia*, the Rock Dove or Feral Pigeon.

Early literature reveals that man's relationship with pigeons began as early as 43 BC when Brutus, besieged by Mark Antony, used carrier pigeons to get messages to his allies from his sanctuary in Modena. Later, during the Middle Ages, there were few wealthy landowners who did not have a pigeon loft stocked with a hundred-odd birds to supplement the winter larder. The penalty for killing a landlord's pigeon was severe. In time, avian escapees from unattended lofts began to contribute to burgeoning pigeon populations in towns and cities.

The earliest reference to pigeons being a problem is an Italian proverb that dates back to 1530: '*Chi vuol tener la casa*

monad; Non tenga main e prete ne columba.' Roughly translated this means, 'Pigeons and priests make foul houses...'

Attempts to control pigeon numbers are diverse and sometimes, frankly, a little off the wall. There is a plethora of techniques, all optimistically guaranteed by their manufacturers, but a little digging reveals the truth: the only real guarantee is that nothing seems to work.

Control techniques range from exclusion, with netting, wire mesh and spikes to prevent roosting, to falconers (predominantly in the UK) who hunt pigeons dawn and dusk.

There is pigeon trapping and removal, and in Japan and some major cities in China one may even find large silicone faces with revolving eyes attached to rooftops in a bid to 'scare' the birds.

In an attempt to quantify the real extent of pigeon-related 'damage', it appears that in America a percentage of corporate absenteeism is apportioned to Feral Pigeons. It is believed 'sick building syndrome' may result from pigeon infestation and that feathers and faeces entering through air-conditioning and ventilation ducts cause colds, flu and other respiratory ailments. There they adopt the 'humane' approach of providing contraception to the (albeit unwilling) pigeons. The ins and outs of this are vague and there is little information about how birds like Peregrine Falcons, which prey on pigeons, will be affected in their own breeding attempts.

Perhaps the Germans came up with the most successful pigeon-control



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programme, one generally referred to as World War II. Poverty in post-war Berlin was so severe that those pigeons that had not already starved were promptly eaten. As a pigeon-control method this may seem heartless, but even these desperate measures provided only brief respite. When food relief reached the city, the pigeons returned *en masse*. Jamie Oliver, bless him, is encouraging a revival in this culinary culling, advocating pukka crispy pigeon with a handful of coriander leaves and roughly chopped chillies. The end result looks... well, less than pheasant.

The solution, it seems, may be hard to come by, but next time you curse a Feral Pigeon or find yourself cradling your fish and chips out of their reach, take comfort in the knowledge that you share a feeling that many others have had over the past 500 years.

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