

# Raptors and racing pigeons



## Background

Some raptors are expert bird hunters, and rely solely on avian prey for survival. These bird specialists are often drawn to built-up areas, where high-rise buildings and trees provide vantage points for hunting and places to nest, and city centres and suburban gardens support high densities of bird prey. This scenario potentially brings raptors into conflict with human activities like aviculture and the keeping of racing pigeons. The species in our region most frequently implicated in these conflict situations are the larger falcons - Peregrines and Lanners, and the bigger hawks – in particular Black Sparrow hawk, all of which are regular and very efficient predators of our indigenous pigeons and doves, and of both domesticated and feral pigeons (and Rock Doves). While problems with these raptors are most frequently encountered in cities and towns, racing pigeons are also under threat in rural areas, for example at the point of release for training or racing flights, or when they are en route to their lofts. Raptor attacks on pigeons can cause significant financial losses to pigeon fanciers, and the offending birds are often ruthlessly persecuted as a result.

## Extent of the problem

Most losses to raptors are suffered around the loft, especially during the training of inexperienced pigeons and, in such situations, even smaller or less specialized birds of prey, such as African Goshawk, Booted Eagle, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Yellow-billed Kite and others may prove problematic. Young pigeons go through a homing period when they are either too young to fly, or they are not encouraged to fly. It is at this time, when they are walking about or sunning on the roof of the loft, that they are particularly susceptible to raptor predation.

Also, immediately on release from the loft for training, even experienced pigeons may be temporarily disorientated and are more easily caught. Pigeons are sometimes attacked when they are bathing outside the loft – birds with wet feathers are often too slow off the mark. Losses around the loft are probably more pronounced in generally mountainous or forested areas, where falcons and hawks occur most commonly. Plumage colour and patterning may also be a factor, for example, raptors may target 'pied' pigeons, or predominantly white birds.

Pigeon fanciers lose many birds during the racing season. Although such losses are often attributed to raptors, this is usually unjustified. Most raptors are too slow to catch a racing pigeon in level flight. Away from the loft, pigeons are vulnerable to attack by diurnal raptors when they go down to drink at farm dams, and may also be taken by owls while roosting overnight. However, racing birds are generally lost for other reasons: many succumb to illness, many go astray because of poor weather or a lack of proper training and fitness, and many collide with overhead telephone and electricity lines, or even with fences on windy days when flocks typically fly just above ground level to save energy.

## Solutions to protect pigeons against raptor predation

There are no reliable ways to entirely prevent raptor predation on racing pigeons, but there are a number of non-destructive options for reducing the problem to tolerable levels. Here are a few pointers:

- Before setting up a loft, ask local bird/raptor experts about the local raptor populations and likelihood of predation. If high, reconsider putting up a loft.
- Remember that raptors attack your pigeons because they present the softest, most lucrative targets around. However painful it may be, take the time to watch the predators at work, this will give you a better idea of why they are attracted to your loft, and

when and how they are operating, and should enable you to manage the situation more easily to your advantage.

- Birds of prey tend to be creatures of habit. If possible, try varying your exercising and training routine to prevent your loft from becoming a dependable target at regular times. This should encourage your local falcons or sparrow hawks to look elsewhere.
- As a rule, bird-hunting raptors are most active early in the morning (after a night without feeding) or late in the evening (before they go to roost). If you must let your pigeons out on a schedule, try to do it well after first light, or long before last, in the hope that your problem raptor will already have hunted and fed, or not yet be in hunting mode, when your birds are on the wing.
- Do not let inexperienced pigeons out of a loft without supervision, especially in the early homing phase.
- Minimise the time pigeons spend around the outside of the loft.
- Before release for training or racing flights check the sky for raptors and only release your pigeons when the coast appears to be clear.
- If you do suffer losses, assess whether or not pigeons of a particular colour or plumage pattern are more prone to attack. If there is an obvious favourite, try to limit the number of birds of the preferred type in your loft.
- Under NO circumstances should you resort to shooting, poisoning or trapping. These are all illegal options without the required permits - ALL raptors are protected by national and provincial legislation. Also, the removal of the offending bird often simply results in it being replaced by another, and is not a long-term solution to the problem.
- If none of the suggested options prove effective, and you are continuing to experience persistent and damaging raptor attacks at your loft, contact the closest representative of your local conservation authority and/or the Birds of Prey Programme (BoPP), and ask them for further advice. Ideally, someone should visit your facility to assess the best way forward.

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