

A Racing Pigeon Experience by Julia Connell – Published in the Miramichi Leader Wednesday February 2nd, 2011

This summer I had an unusual visitor to my yard. Around the middle of July, my usual small flock of pigeons was hanging around the birdfeeder. As they took off flying I saw the most astounding sight; two of them had an incredible neon pink under one wing.

Now if you know something about birds, you would realize that this was a very unrealistic color for a bird to have, let alone a pigeon.

Awhile later they all came back & I was able to get a good look with my binoculars. I could see that these two pigeons had bands on their legs. I knew then that these birds must belong to someone.

The next day only one of the pink winged pigeons showed up. Not only was he different in his pink color but there were other difference from the ordinary pigeons. He was slightly bigger, no tail and his head, beak and eyes were certainly different.

Over the next several weeks I watched him come and go, always wondering why he wouldn't fly off home. They would often just hang around the feeder eating up the seeds that the Goldfinches dropped. I was able to obtain some good photos of him. Finally around the second week of August he was gone.

Near the end of August, he showed up again, except this time he seemed a little different. Out comes the camera again. When I zoomed in on the pictures I could see that they were the one and same bird. His band number was "586". But now he had a tail??

After Googling on the internet, I came across a site, "Canadian Racing Pigeon Union". There was a lot of information on how the homing pigeon was used during the war to carry messages. With many clubs throughout central & western Canada, I found one club in Nova Scotia. I took a chance and e-mailed the contact person. I gave him all the info I could obtain off of the pigeon's 3 bands. At the end I told him about the unique feature of the neon pink wing. As it was, Jeff from Shubenacadie actually owned this bird. He has an aviary of about 80 birds that he races regularly.

The race was on July 1st from Quebec. Apparently the weather turned nasty & a few of his birds were late and two were missing. Homing pigeon races usually start at 100 miles and can be worked up to over 1000 miles. Their cruising speed is about 90 to 100 km/hr. Top recorded speed can reach 148 km/hr. They can out fly anything in level flight.

Jeff filled me in on the meaning of the bands. The white band was his life band. White for the birds born in 2009, his serial number was 586. The pink band was like a merit band, awarded for flying over 450 km. in one day. His blue band was his electronic band that is scanned at the door of his loft when he returns home after a race. The pink on his wing is agriculture spray paint. Not a genetic color as I was thinking. In Nova Scotia the Peregrine Falcons are making a comeback. Pigeons happen to be their favorite food. The pink appears as a distasteful prey and the Falcons leave them alone.

When I emailed the pictures to Jeff of the bird, he noticed that he had no tail & in the second picture his tail had grown back. This was probably why this pigeon wouldn't fly off home as it would be difficult for him to fly without his tail. Jeff figures that a Goshawk might have grabbed hold of him by his tail, ripping out the whole bunch in the process. It takes an enormous amount of protein to grow a new tail. When pigeons molt they never lose every feather. They'll molt evenly, two outside feathers, then two more and so on.



In the first picture, one can see the difference between a wild pigeon and a homing pigeon. The second picture shows how his tail grew in and there's a hint of the pink color along the wing's edge.

As Jeff would be coming to the Miramichi over the long weekend in Sept., he asked me if I would try to catch this wayward pigeon for him. Pigeons will mate for life and their mates will mourn them for a long time. So, a challenge presents! How does one catch a pigeon? Pigeons love unpopped popping corn and sunflower hearts. Both of which I had. With a little patience, sitting very still and dropping some corn, he soon came very close to me. But as I was eying him, he was eying me. I realized he would be too fast and I would be too slow if I tried to grab him.

Well, a little thought and a lot of thinking, I came up with a plan to use my large dog crate. It was so easy, putting some corn in the dog crate, and then dropping some corn in front of it, Mr. Pinky jumped right in after the corn and I closed the door.

In all, a very interesting and educational experience. I hope Mrs. Pinky was happy to see him return home.