

PIGEON KEEPING ISSUES IN SUBURBIA

By Leo Turley

The myriad Local Laws governing the keeping of thoroughbred racing pigeons (or their Show Bench counterparts) since 1964, throughout the now 137 (was 142) autonomous Local Governments, in Western Australia, make it nigh on impossible, with limited resources, to stay abreast of, often, unique pigeon keeping regulations.

There are current issues surrounding a number of Local Laws, not many, whereby an applicant seeking to keep pigeons on his/her property, amongst all other provisions, **has to solicit the opinion**, no doubt a positive opinion, of his/her immediate, contiguous, neighbours, before being granted a permit to keep pigeons. There are even whole suburbs where pigeon keeping is arbitrarily prohibited on alleged health grounds. Attempts, at times, to invoke “Grandfathered” provisions, in most instances, is met with the response **“You can’t grandfather health!”** It seems only fair, in the circumstance, that neighbours, and Council representatives, be given some background information, before developing an opinion, or making a judgement, which can otherwise be based, predominantly, on hearsay, misinformation and generally a lack of knowledge on the subject at all. It is reasonable to speculate, in the absence of proper information, a negative, play-safe, response may well be forthcoming and yet, much of the information in the public arena, on pigeon keeping, today, and particularly for those engaged in pigeon racing, is quite false and misleading. Just as important, the opportunity is taken here to allay any latent fears which may exist about professionally maintained racing and show bench pigeons in suburbia.

It is pertinent to say, at this point, some municipalities, within the greater Perth metropolitan area, while maintaining Local Laws governing pigeon keeping, do not require racing pigeon fanciers to do anything, at all. No fees, no declaring of a position, no name address or otherwise, other than to abide by the Local Law in place and equally The Pigeon Racing Federation of WA (Inc) (PRF) comprehensive Animal Welfare and Local Government oriented **Code of Practice**, which is incorporated into many of the State’s Local Laws on how a pigeon keeper should act in suburbia. It is appropriate to say, at this juncture, these “unpoliced” areas represent high population locales for pigeon racing fanciers and gratifyingly, there has been no Local Government issues with these members in more than twenty years. The PRF **Code of Practice** can be readily viewed on-line under the Western Australian 2002 Animal Welfare Act. Ref: [Animal welfare codes of practice | Agriculture and Food](#) In terms of Biosecurity and Agricultural Management (stock movement) our pigeons are registered with the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

By way of introduction, the writer has been a pigeon fancier (fancier - Oxford Languages definition of fancier – a pigeon fancier) since 1951 and a racing pigeon fancier since 1954. He is past president, life member and trustee of the PRF of WA and the WA Perth metropolitan area representative on the Australian National Racing Pigeon Board (ANRPB) which in turn is affiliated with the world body, the F.C.I. (Federation Colombophile International) along with seventy-two other member countries. He is the author of the animal welfare and subsequent Department of Local Government and Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development plus

Local Councils' adopted **Code of Practice** (1994) for pigeon keeping and racing in suburbia. He has been the combined federation's local government advocate on pigeon related issues impacting members, across all bodies, for the past thirty years and has participated in the formulation of council local laws governing pigeons, at Health Department WA (HDWA) level and various municipalities throughout the State. He is a widely acknowledged authority and author of the substantial book entitled *Pigeon Racing – A Scientific Approach*. He has given pigeon related presentations to various organisations, such as Probus, Rotary, Lions and scouting clubs as well as ABC television and has represented pigeon keeping organisations, on pigeon-related bodies, for example, member, Health Department task force on recommended draft pigeon keeping Local Laws for all municipalities; past member of AgWest Avian Biosecurity Committee; past member, Perth Feral Pigeon Control Committee, amongst other groups over years. It needs to be said, with more than thirty years' experience interacting with councils, almost without exception, this author has found councils consistently look for evidence to support us, not damn us, but it has been hard to break through longstanding urban myths and of course non-professional, unaligned, unsupervised, amateur pigeon keepers, without proper pigeon-keeping discipline, has, unfortunately, bundled us together in the public perception.

Pigeon keeping and racing is one of the many minority occupations catering for participants from all professions and all walks of life, including, historically, a Western Australian Premier, as well as a long-serving mayor of a Perth inner city municipality. On a global scale, many famous identities (at least 50) also race pigeons including the UK royal family with their lofts at the Norfolk Sandringham estate dating back to Queen Victoria of 1886 and continues to present day. It is only recently the Sandringham Lofts were upgraded, at a cost of forty-thousand pounds. The Dickin Medal (1943-49) by Maria Dickin, PDSA, to honour the work of animals in World War II, said to be the animal's Victoria Cross, was awarded to thirty-two homing pigeons from fifty-four recipients. China and several other countries still retain pigeons as part of their military operations and with current communication vulnerabilities, pigeons are on the comeback and where it is often said, one simply cannot jam a pigeon. Since early last century, article two of the PRF of WA's constitutional objectives cite "*The breeding and training of racing pigeons for the purpose of national defence*" and this aim remains current today. Returning to present day, the vast majority of pigeon racing participants are acutely aware of their obligations in suburbia and quietly manage their occupation, metaphorically, under the radar. The professional management of pigeon keeping and racing is a highly developed skill and the last thing anyone wants is to be the cause of neighbour conflict and the PRF continually adopt a range of strategies to always ensure positive outcomes.

To everyone's credit, the overwhelming number of neighbours, of racing pigeon fanciers, are very accepting of the occupation and pleasingly, many enjoy seeing our pigeons out flying on their daily exercise. Some are also aware of the discipline which accompanies these workouts. Essentially, the birds are seen in the air working and this exercise can take them many kilometres from home, often for an hour or more, but they will only alight at the entrance to their 'loft' and on occasion, while under supervision, enjoy a fossick in the yard, in front of the 'loft, or perhaps take their bi-weekly bath, but will always enter the 'loft' immediately on command, as failure to do so renders them unsuitable for racing. Constant control, on the home front, is a key element of pigeon racing. Conversely, the only seasonal exception, predominantly

from September to January, is youngsters learning to fly and they can crash-land anywhere on their maiden flight, but it is only a temporary aberration. Incidentally, the term 'loft' is an historic and universal term where originally pigeons were kept in the European-style house space, directly under the roof, called the loft, or similarly barn loft, while today, they are invariably housed in a garden loft and built to a broad range of specifications consistent with the PRF **Code of Practice**. The American term often refers to the word "Coop" instead of "Loft" and means breeding pens inside housing.

Pigeon keeping and racing is an all-year-round cyclic activity. Typical seasonal pigeon-related activities, in Western Australia, can be identified as April to October, racing, with September to January, the breeding season and where January to April involves the development of aerial fitness, leading up to the racing season. In essence, the defining factor of a pigeon racing, or show bench, fancier is they belong to a governing organisation and can produce appropriate credentials when required.

Historically, in the years leading up to the 1960's, it was common for young people, mostly boys, to keep a collection of pigeons in the back garden (a few of these do go on to a lifetime involvement) just as they would also keep silk worms, budgerigars, canaries, guinea pigs, rats, mice, rabbits and so on and typically, in no time, tire of them and let them run to neglect. In the case of pigeons, which are extremely resourceful, in the face of abandonment, will gravitate to anywhere offering food, water and shelter (and nesting sites) predictably, to shopping centres and quickly become feral. This is very much the historical source for the town feral pigeon, the "Townies" or "Road Peckers", as they are often called. On the flip side, the large feral pigeon populations seen moving up and down the Perth coastline, in search of feed (e.g. soil stabilisation areas containing seeds - Hydroseeding) have been in existence, in one size or another, according to feed availability, since the late 1800's and attributed to the Acclimatisation Society of colonial times, just as society continues to endure other introduced pests along the way. Incidentally, similar to the difference between thoroughbred race horses and brumbies, there is a distinct step between thoroughbred racing pigeons and feral pigeons. Globally, less than two-percent of thoroughbred racing pigeons can successfully assimilate directly into a feral situation. On being lost, racing pigeons will seek out human succour, as a first priority, mostly other pigeon fanciers, but members of the public too and the Federation maintains a reporting system to manage this occasion and the following phone number is on all pigeons' PRF life bands - (08) 94873768. It is worth making the point, too, feral pigeon numbers reflect the overall level of municipal housekeeping and feral pigeon numbers rise and fall according to feed availability across a wide range of occupations dealing with edible spillage, be it from al fresco dining, bulk handling commodities and the like.

As a matter of interest, there is a current Western Australian initiative being trialled, through Geraldton Council, CBH and Midwest Ports Authority, using artificial intelligence as a means of birth control, distributed through AI controlled feeder stations to curb egg laying, which in time is expected to see a long-term reduction in feral pigeon numbers and is welcomed.



Typical well-bred racing pigeon owned by the author – a Jos Soontjen sprinter class strain sourced from Wommelgem, Belgium

Coming back to the history of the Local Law - in the face of numerous areas of both unsupervised domestic and feral pigeons and the predominantly soiling nuisance they created in a field of, then, widely reliant on rooftop-generated rainwater collection tanks, historically, circa 1963-64, the HDWA quite rightly promulgated a model By-law (since 1995 entitled a Local Law) for adoption by Local Governments comprising 27 cities, 102 shires and 8 towns. Unfortunately, for the pigeon fraternity, some autonomous municipalities modified it over time influenced by a 1966 turning point to satisfy their own view of the situation and thereby created multiple issues which exist today. The overall situation, for pigeon keepers, deteriorated, substantially, in 1966, when the Commissioner of Parks (Thomas Hoving) in New York City, USA, first coined the term “A rat with wings” leading to the negative reputation that pigeons were explicitly linked to disorder and disease, and assessments of them as nuisances, “nasty, ugly, and germ-infested” with a series of health threats all emphasised. Immediately the public image of pigeons was transformed. It became even worse by the early 1990’s when a well-known local Australian Journalist/ Commentator allegedly picked up the “Rats with Wings” and “Flying Rats” terminologies and rolled them off his tongue on multiple occasions over the airways and the public and Councils began to pick up on it and develop the thought – dirty, filthy creatures and yet, for professionally maintained pigeons, the truth is completely opposite. It cast a pall over a legitimate occupation and over years, precipitated the loss of many members.

There is a distinct difference between feral pigeons and thoroughbred racing pigeons (or as applicable, Show Bench pigeons) with pedigrees just as detailed as horses and dogs in the Turf, Pacing and Greyhound industries. One needs to look to the legs first. No band means they are feral. Thoroughbred racing pigeons are registered with their governing organisation and are permanently banded in their very first week of life and carry details of year of birth (1st August in WA, each year, same as for race horses) their organisation of origin, their unique registered number and the telephone number

of the organisation for reporting purposes. At racing age, they are also electronically banded for monitoring purposes, each time they enter the loft and for racing. Each individual pigeon can be identified by the owner on the ground and many still recognisable in the air. In terms of value, in Australia, most youngsters purchased direct from the nest will bring roundly AU\$100.00. As adults, and based on many factors, generally any value up to AU\$15,000 per bird is common. A world record price was paid in November 2022, by a Chinese merchant, for the female Blue Bar Hen named “New Kim” for Euro1.6M (AU\$2.48M) and a further fourteen, in the same sale, averaged Euro251,000 (AU\$407,000) each, with the total sale bringing Euro9.551M (AU\$16M). The breeder sale recipient was Mr Gaston Van De Wouwer of Berlaar, Antwerp, Belgium. These values are relatively common, for the right pigeons, within the wealthier hierarchy of European and Asian-based pigeon racing.

Understandably, those unfamiliar with the pigeon-racing industry, often cannot tell the difference between feral and thoroughbred pigeons, or even the difference between pigeons and the hundreds of thousands of introduced doves (escapees from Perth Zoo – 1895 -1901) which now frequent all municipalities throughout the state. The industry is also, occasionally, on the receipt end of paint and motoring advertisements alluding to pigeon defecation on cars and buildings and thereby reinforces the perception described earlier. As a result, our pigeons, any pigeons, tend to rouse a public perception of indiscriminate defecation and damage to structures and car paint! A more specific example can be cited of Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki AM, a well-known Australian science communicator and populariser, known as an author and science commentator on Australian radio and television, wrote a book (1996) entitled ***Pigeon Poo, the Universe and Car Paint***. He claims, whilst introducing the reader to the “Flying Rats” terminology in his opening sentence, that pigeon droppings are more acidic today than in the past, because of acid rain and alluding here to the indiscriminate soiling of car paint and bridge girders by pigeons in general. Not feral pigeons, but describes them, amongst other identifiers, as the fastest racing animal. There is a major mitigating factor surrounding aerial soiling and explained further on, but, technically, domestic pigeons, our racing pigeons, as opposed to feral pigeons, draw down on public scheme waters and where more than half Australian capital cities constantly wrestle with alkaline catchment waters (classified as pH8 to 9) to bring it back to neutral, or better, to a slightly acidic pH6.5 to 7.0. Acid rain is generally referred to as a value below pH5.0 and where pigeon droppings are already at a natural, long-standing, lower pH4.5 in any case.

Aerial soiling, frequently attributable to pigeons, and by association, thoroughbred racing pigeons, is almost invariably the work of introduced *Chinensis* species of doves and other miscellaneous indigenous birds. Apart from the fact racing pigeons are released before being fed (the main control strategy) by up to twelve hours from their last feed, which goes towards achieving an empty system (conversely, food is stored for long hours in the crop, before passing to the gizzard, uniquely, due to the absence of a gall bladder) thoroughbred racing pigeons belong to the substantially lesser group classified as *non-passerine* (*grebes, pelicans, herons, ducks, raptors, quail, gulls, pigeons, cockatoos/parrots, cuckoos, owls, swifts, kingfishers and emus*) where this group, with exception of emus, typically fly with their legs held straight back, fundamentally, under the tail, which substantially inhibits the practice of aerial soiling, as to attempt to defecate in flight, for pigeons, necessitates bringing the legs forward and downwards thereby breaking formation in the flock they are flying in concert with.

It is extremely rare for a flock of racing pigeons to defecate in this position, as it invites an inherent predatory signalling opportunity for ever present birds of prey. Our pigeons habitually and defensively defecate on landing at the loft. Aerial soiling is an exception, not the rule – local, itinerant, feral pigeons, non-indigenous doves and all other wild, free-flying, indigenous and non-indigenous passerine type birds are the general source for indiscriminate aerial and non-aerial based soiling in a neighbourhood.



Illustration of normal legs posture for pigeons in flight

Returning again to the history of the HDWA 1963-64 Model Bylaw and the quarter acre block; the still-in-existence outhouse, with its phenol-laced, often fly blown, open-pan toilet system; the ubiquitous fowl yard and bird cage and in some instances a horse stable at the rear and occasionally a tethered cow or goat out front. All these, in the original Model Bylaw, were defined by a determined setback distance of 30 feet, or today 9 metres from dwellings, or where food is stored or prepared. Pigeon lofts also fall within this envelope. The background for the setback measurement is lost in antiquity, but is generally believed, in the HDWA, to be linked to how far a house fly, or blow fly, could fly in the one hop from an unsanitary situation to the entrance to a dwelling. It is all very notional and while on the HDWA Task Force it was also related to this author that, in the day, general stores, particularly stores selling foodstuffs, had their bottom shelf regulated to some 60 centimetres (two-feet) above floor level and was based on the idea of how high a large dog could cock his leg! Today, dogs are not allowed in most stores and shelving now extends to floor level. Times have changed, substantially, leaving only a few fowl, cagebirds, including pigeons, besides cats and dogs in urban back yards, plus local septic and deep sewer toilet systems.

It would come as a surprise, to most, houseflies do not fare very well at all in pigeon lofts. The pigeon's powdered bloom on their feathers, their feather maintenance and cross-feather lubrication, is derived from an oil wax preening gland at the base of their pygostyle "Parson's Nose" and repel house flies in an otherwise mysterious way, but it does and houseflies are not common in pigeon lofts. Again, as mentioned above, pigeon droppings, already known to be acidic, mature in a few days to a pH of 4.5 and at this level fly larvae cannot survive. So, houseflies and pigeon lofts are not

compatible. The believed basis for the setback laws from lofts to dwellings is therefore not scientifically based, or largely inferable to pigeon keeping.

It is also not surprising, with some Local Laws, to note setback distances are not standard and where pigeon lofts can be located five (5) metres from neighbours' dwellings and be fully negotiable between the owner and the Local Government Health Manager, to locate the loft significantly less than nine metres to the owner's dwelling. Such are the vagaries across the 137 autonomous municipalities, throughout Western Australia, while there are no issues with some, we find the complete opposite with others and allegedly, evidently, driven by the preconceived, "Rats with Wings" and "Flying Rats" mind-set developed over years.

There are a range of issues which are better described by simple dot points as under:

- Apart from pigeons returning from training and racing, others are freed for exercise up to twice a day in the morning and afternoon (or by approval at other times) and they will fly up to some ninety minutes and range away from the loft and accrue up to 50 kilometres at each outing, but they will alight nowhere else other than at their loft and will go inside immediately on command, or they will be deemed unsuitable for racing. The PRF of WA registered **Code of Practice**, Clause 10, requires planned flight times to be conducted under close supervision by the owner. It is worth noting too, thoroughbred racing pigeons are confined to their loft for some ninety-five percent of their lives and can still race home from up to one-thousand kilometres, in little more than a day, as part of this regime.
- With exception of youngsters, in the brief period learning to fly, registered racing pigeons do not alight on any house roof, outbuildings, trees or whatever, as to habitually do so render them unsuitable for racing.
- There are no pigeon-specific odour/s in Code compliant lofts. Clause 8.8.2. **Code of Practice**, 'Loft' floors are to be cleaned on a minimum basis of once per week.
- The link between flies and pigeon lofts is a misnomer. There are no resident flies in pigeon lofts. The pigeon's feather lubricating and barely visible bloom, acts as a repellent and the pH level of droppings (4.5) is not conducive to fly larvae.
- Pigeons are not considered noisy, within the Noise Abatement Act interpretation and confirmed by extensive instrumentation tests carried out by an accredited WA Principal Environmental Health Officer on an industry-representative pigeon loft, including its immediate contiguous surrounds, in 1996.
- Aerial soiling is extremely rare. Apart from the time delay, more than 12 hours from their last feed, which impacts on their digestive system, together with the absence of a gall bladder, pigeons belong to the rarer non-passerine group of birds which fly with their legs held straight back, fundamentally, under the tail and where defecation in flight is uncommon as to do so involves placing their legs downwards breaking forward motion, with consequential loss of flock flight formation and inviting an inherent predatory opportunity. Being well down the food chain, it is inborn, innate, to habitually and defensively, land at their loft first, before defecating.

- In terms of health, there is ample evidence from avian veterinarians to show the domestic pigeon is no more a health hazard than any other domestic animal. There are further veterinary opinion that thoroughbred homing pigeons are substantially less a health hazard than the resident populations of parrots, cockatoos, budgerigars, canaries and finches. It is a key, fundamental element, racing pigeons have to be healthy, at all times, and pigeon fanciers go to considerable expense, including specialist veterinary involvement, to ensure this condition is fully maintained and includes regular parasite/insecticide and worm treatments; up to four inoculations and booster injections, annually, with several vaccinations mandated by the governing organisations.
- There are the occasional concern pigeons may be a vector for Avian Influenza (Bird Flu – e.g., the highly pathogenic Avian Influenza, HPAI A H5 virus and subtypes H5N1, H5N2, H5N8). Extensive tests and studies have shown pigeons are not a factor in this disease; they do not become infective with Avian influenza and do not spread it (other than by chance direct physical contact on feet etc., similar in occurrence to all other animal/human-like contact).
- There is a model Local Law for the keeping of pigeons, as defined by the HDWA's 1995/96 Task Force, and was created to place the universal issue on a firm footing, across all municipalities and includes the **Code of Practice**. Within the model, the HDWA approved the number of birds to be kept as a maximum of 150 of which only 60 shall be freed for exercise at any one time. The formula embodies 120 birds maximum for racing and 30 birds for breeding from which the latter are regularly confined to their quarters and only half the team to be exercised at any one time. It is a cyclic issue and the ceiling number is not necessarily adopted by all fanciers, but in any case, 150 represents an occasional maximum and not a regular representation.
- The USA Association of Pigeon Veterinarians' National Avian Disease Taskforce in 1995 issued a position statement as under:
 - The Association of Pigeon Veterinarians, after careful review of the documentation of the Avian Disease Research Committee of the American Pigeon Fancier's Council and the implemented studies of the National Avian Disease Task Force for Pigeons and Doves, and consideration of the data from the United States Communicable disease Center (CDC), we do affirm and testify that to our knowledge, the raising, keeping and the exercising of pigeons and doves represents no more of a health hazard than the keeping of other communal or domestic pets.
- The PRF of WA's principal consultants, Dr. Colin Walker Avian Veterinarian (B.Sc., B.V.Sc., M.A.C.V Sc., – Avian Health) Melbourne and Dr Rob Marshall (B.V.Sc., M.A.C.V Sc., – Avian Health) Sydney, both also experienced pigeon racing fanciers, are the primary source for federation health policy.

Dr. Walker's full statements can be found on line (<https://www.auspigeonco.com.au>) (<https://www.melbournebirdvet.com/council-concerns/>) but he comments inter alia:

- “Pigeon parasites cannot and do not live on or in humans and vice versa. One reason is that pigeons have a body temperature of 41.8 degrees C. Their parasites cannot live at our cool 35.7 degrees C. Dogs and cats on the other hand have temperatures of 38.5 degrees C. This is within the range of human temperature and each can, to some degree, accommodate the vectors of the other. It is important not to confuse racing pigeons with feral pigeons. Feral pigeons have the same relationship to racing pigeons as brumbies do to thoroughbred race horses. Feral pigeons are considered a nuisance by the serious breeders of racing pigeons. It appears with all pets, including racing pigeons, that with basic hygiene and common sense, the risk of infection to humans is very low. This should perhaps be balanced against the proven psychological benefits of keeping and caring for animals.”
- Dr. Marshall wrote an open letter in 1995 for use by The Pigeon Racing Federation of WA when discussing the health aspects of thoroughbred racing pigeons and excerpts from his letter are as under:
 - “The main revelation of the..... case was that the Council did not understand the difference between the feral and the thoroughbred pigeon..... The feral pigeon is the bird which may become infected with Salmonellosis, Chlamydiosis or Cryptococcosis, all of which are potential human health hazards. The thoroughbred racing pigeon on the other hand rarely becomes ill, because it is under the care of the pigeon fancier. Salmonellosis is rare in thoroughbred racing pigeons in Australia and cryptococcosis has never been reported in the thoroughbred racing pigeon in Australia. Chlamydiosis does occur in the thoroughbred racing pigeon, but the strain of chlamydiosis, which infect the pigeon, is tame and I have heard of no cases of human chlamydiosis contracted from the pigeon strain. On the other hand, the parrot strain of chlamydiosis which infects our native population of parrots and cockatoos (e.g., galahs and parrots) as well as other pet bird populations (budgerigars, canaries and finches) is a virulent organism capable of causing severe illness and even death in humans. In Australia, humans have been infected from pet birds and from pet shops. In all cases the transmission of chlamydiosis requires close contact with an actively infected bird. The likelihood of a neighbour being infected with chlamydiosis from an infected parrot bird is very unlikely and the likelihood of being infected from the tame pigeon strain of chlamydia is negligible, when we consider that there have been no medical reports of feral pigeon transmission of chlamydiosis to tourists, school children, or pensioners, who are exposed daily to our resident feral pigeon populations.....”

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