

Pigeons live in nearly every country on earth: in the cities, suburbs or countryside. They are often considered pests and nuisances because of their excellent way of adapting to a variety of environments and the mess they make. However, if you ever get a chance to observe them closely, you'll see how unique and intelligent they really are with their distinctive iridescent chest colourings, inquisitive nature and phenomenal ability to 'home'.

Did you know?

- The scientific name for a barred homing pigeon like Pippa is *Columbus livia* - descended from the Rock Dove.
- *Pigeon* is a French word that derives from the Latin pipio, for a "peeping" chick.
- Pigeon breeds come in more colours and colour combinations than any other domestic bird, budgerigars, canaries, ducks and chickens included.
- Some of their feather variations include caps, crests, nose crests, frills, frill backs, fantails, extra tail feathers, muffed feet, maned or hooded. That's a lot of different outfits!
- Pigeons don't just coo. They can laugh or trumpet and moan, too.
- Once a male and female pigeon pair up, they stay together for life.
- They always lay two eggs - *a pigeon pair* - that take about 20 days to hatch. The male (cock) and female (hen) take turns incubating or keeping the eggs warm. The hen always gets the longer night shift whilst the cock takes the day shift.
- Pigeons are the only birds to *create* their own *milk* - a thick creamy yellow substance that they feed their young for the first four or five days after they hatch. Both the mother and father produce this milk.
- After this, youngsters are fed regurgitated grains, water and grit.
- Pigeons need *grit* - shells and small rocks - like all seed-eating birds to grind up the seeds in their crop, a bit like us using our teeth to chew our food.
- Corn is a favourite food of pigeons although they love peas, wheat, milo grain and greens too.

- Baby pigeons are called *squeakers* because they squeak noisily for food from their parents.
- Squeakers grow quickly and begin to fly around 6 weeks of age.
- Bath time is one of their favourite past times followed by a nice sunbake to dry.
- A *pigeon fancier* is someone who keeps pigeons.
- People breed pigeons for fun, to fly, to race, to show or even to eat.
- Some breeds can tumble (*tumblers*) - a kind of forward somersault whilst others are bred to roll - backwards in mid-flight! They are known as *rollers*.
- Top *racing homer pigeons* can fly up to 140 kms per hour. That's faster than a cheetah but not as fast as a peregrine falcon (320 km/hour)!
- Pigeons have a strong *homing instinct* - they can find their way home from great distances better than any other domestic animal. Although we know how a bat catches insects with echolocation or how a spider spins its web, we still haven't figured out the exact secret of how a pigeon knows its way home. Some think they use magnetic fields, sight, *infrasound* (low frequency sounds humans can't hear) or even smell to navigate.
- To train a racing homer pigeon, young birds are *tossed* at increasingly greater and greater distances from their home loft. This means taking them to a place and then setting them free to fly home.

