

## The Forgotten History of the Rock Pigeon

Article by: Taylor Snyder

Of all the species of birds in the world, it is unlikely that any could parallel the amount of hatred received by the humble Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*). These chunky birds, which are often nicknamed “rats with wings,” usually have a blueish-gray head, a gray back, gray wings with two black bands, and a flashy iridescent throat. But every now and then, when a huge flock flies by, you might just catch a glimpse of a pigeon that doesn’t quite look like the rest. It might be surprising to learn that these funky colors, usually shades of black, brown, gray, or white, originate from the Rock Pigeon’s forgotten past—a past that was very intimately entwined with that of humankind.

You see, the pigeons that roam city streets, nest in parking garages, and hassle you for food scraps if you ever make the mistake of dining outside at a restaurant, are not actually wild birds; they’re feral. These birds were domesticated as early as 10,000 years ago and were originally introduced to North America by settlers in the 1600s—primarily as a food source. However, this was never their sole purpose. In fact, humans have been selectively breeding pigeons for other purposes almost as long as they have been domesticated. As a result, humans have created nearly 1,000 different breeds of Rock Pigeon, including some specializing in speed, homing, acrobatics, and even beauty. The lasting influence of humankind’s former love of brown or white pigeons can be found in their random appearance amongst flocks of “normal-looking”, or wild-type, Rock Pigeons.

These birds are intelligent, oftentimes monogamous, fierce protectors of their nests, and exceptional navigators. Even when blindfolded, taken a significant distance away, and left in unfamiliar territory, they’re able to use their innate navigational skills to find their way back home. This talent of theirs has been capitalized upon by humans for thousands of years, including during WWI and WWII when homing pigeons were used to transmit vital information that helped save American lives. Many examples can be pointed out of exceptionally heroic pigeons that completed their duty despite the dangers that faced them, one of whom was G.I. Joe. This particular Rock Pigeon was awarded the Dickin Medal, the highest honor that can be awarded to an animal serving in the military, in August of 1946 for delivering a message during WWII that prevented Allied planes from accidentally bombing their own soldiers.

Although Rock Pigeons may not be viewed as useful to humankind anymore, their presence in our cities is a not-so-subtle reminder of the love that we used to hold for these birds. Whether they sent crucial intelligence during times of peril, entertained crowds with feats of speed, agility, and acrobatics, or awed us with their fantastically variable plumage, over generations these birds were bred to enjoy the presence of humans and the jobs we tasked them with. So, next time you see a Rock Pigeon try to remember that we wouldn’t be where we are now without them, and they certainly wouldn’t be where they are now without us.

Photo:



Caption: G.I. Joe, a homing pigeon that served in WWII, photographed with his PDSA Dickin Medal in 1946. Photo sourced from The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) (<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/what-we-do/animal-awards-programme/pdsa-dickin-medal/gi-joe>).