

ANIMALS

Where do doves released at weddings go? They can live happily ever after.

By Jason Bittel

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Youth release white doves — pigeons, really — after the Bastille Day parade in Paris in 2014. (AP/Francois Mori)

It was a windy spring day when a small cluster of relatives gathered at the All Saints Cemetery outside Pittsburgh to lay their aunt to rest. The affair was simple — no hulking tombstone, no choir singing “Amazing Grace,” no long sermon. Then came Ken Haselrig’s turn.

Haselrig is tall and built like a retired linebacker, and all eyes were on him as he reached into a dainty wicker basket and retrieved a single white dove. Using his thumb and forefinger to hold the bird, he asked the bereaved if they would like to pet it. Some gave only a cursory stroke, but several lingered on the dove, looking into its eyes and even whispering to it.

When they finished, Haselrig raised the bird and tossed it into the wind. The dove banked left, cleared a row of pines, and with a few flaps of its snow-white wings, disappeared.

But not for good. White doves used in such releases are actually homing pigeons, and this one was on its way home — to Haselrig’s house about a dozen miles away.

From the ancient Greeks to the 5th-century Egyptians, people have for centuries released birds in remembrance, mourning and celebration. Haselrig has been doing it for just eight years.

After 23 years as a science teacher, Haselrig started his bird business, called Dovecote. Rain or shine, winter or summer, weddings and bar mitzvahs and funerals — Haselrig’s birds fly them all. Last year, Haselrig flew his birds at around 70 different events, and 2018 is already looking to outpace that number.

Although such bird-release operations are on the rise, Haselrig said many wedding officiants and funeral directors have never seen a white dove in person. And even more often, he said, the people who watch his releases don't understand how they work.

“Sometimes I'll do a release, and after the birds have flown away, the people just stare at me,” Haselrig said. “They're waiting for me to go collect them.”

But this is the beauty of homing pigeons — they do not need to be collected. They're already winging their way back to their base.

“They usually beat me home,” Haselrig said.

Two birds of the same feather

Most of the birds we call pigeons and doves are the same species. Some are white; some are mottled gray, black, and green. But they're all domestic pigeons, or *Columba livia domestica*, a subspecies of the rock dove or rock pigeon, *Columba livia*.

“They're so interchangeable that the American Ornithologists Union committee on nomenclature has actually flip-flopped back and forth in terms of calling our city feral pigeons ‘rock doves’ or ‘rock pigeons’,” said Robert Mulvihill, an ornithologist at the National Aviary in Pittsburgh.

The bird family known as Columbidae includes more than 300 species of pigeons and doves — creatures found all over the world and given evocative names like mourning dove and ruddy quail-dove, white-crowned pigeon and red-billed pigeon.

But the only meaningful difference between the graceful birds released to mark a new marriage and the animals that mark your car with liquid dung is a little bit of breeding.



Dovecote owner Ken Haselrig released his doves at about 70 events in 2017. (Jason Bittel)

Not every pigeon is a homing pigeon, however. “Some pigeons can’t find their way across a street,” Haselrig said.

For that, the birds must be trained. Or as Haselrig calls it, “programmed.”

It’s not the kind of regimen that would make a good movie montage set to “Eye of the Tiger.” First, Haselrig waits for a bird to learn to fly, then he takes it a short distance from its loft and lets it try to return home.

Once it's mastered that, he might release it from a half-mile away, then a mile, and on and on until the bird can find its way home from halfway across Pennsylvania.

The trick is to let the birds get a little hungry before flying, he said. This gives them an incentive to go back to the only reliable food source they've ever known.

Pigeon GPS

But how do they know where to go?

Scientists are only just starting to understand how this works. It used to be thought that iron cells in the birds' beaks helped the animals navigate, sort of like a compass pointing to true north. However, newer studies are investigating the role of proteins in the animals' retinas, which may allow pigeons to see the earth's magnetic field.

“When I think about orientation and navigation, I think about how we humans fly,” said Atticus Pinzón-Rodríguez, a sensory biologist who studies zebra finches at Lund University in Sweden. “We rely on complex mechanisms and myriad different, and many times redundant, sources of information. If one source fails or is not reliable, the pilot will check others to correct course and take us to our destination. “

Birds, he suspects, do the same thing. They use landmarks or the position of the sun when they can.

“But when the animal doesn’t have access to those sources, the magnetic field is there. And it has been there since the Earth started spinning, so it is unlikely that evolution and biological systems have simply ignored such a rich source of spatial information,” he said.

But even if birds see things we cannot, it doesn’t mean they are infallible. Take the bird Haselrig calls “Big Yellow,” a male dove that one day showed up at his suburban backyard coops out of the blue. Haselrig recognized the yellow tag on the bird’s leg, so he called the animal’s owner and asked him if he wanted his bird back.

The man, Haselrig recalled, said heck no. After all, what good is a homing pigeon that cannot find its way home?



Big Yellow, a dove that joined Haselrig’s crew by accident, may have been injured by a hawk while flying home. (Jason Bittel)

Haselrig eventually reprogrammed Big Yellow to fly for him, which the bird did successfully for a while. He even trusted the convert enough to release him along with several other doves at a wedding near Penn State, a couple of hours' drive from Haselrig's suburban Pittsburgh house. But when the flock returned, Big Yellow wasn't with it.

Then, 30 days later, Big Yellow came spiraling down into the yard. Only now the bird carried a large scar and a few feathers growing weirdly straight out of his chest. Haselrig suspected it was a wound that had been inflicted by a hawk. (For doves, run-ins with raptors can be a hazard of the job.)

Big Yellow's trials were not over, however. Upon return, this avian Odysseus discovered his mate had taken a new beau. Big Yellow ran the suitor off and the couple was restored.

"He has been officially retired ever since and lives happily with his mate. He flies free around the loft," Haselrig said. "But I do not take him to release events anymore."

Home base

Big Yellow and about 70 colleagues reside in backyard lofts, which are sort of crosses between garden sheds and children's playhouses. Pigeons have an undeserved reputation as filthy-disease spreaders, but Haselrig's lofts smell better than many a pet-friendly home.

Haselrig admits that helping people see past pigeon-related stigmas is a hard part of his vocation, but he's also sometimes surprised by how much people seem to care about the birds' welfare.

“Before I release the dove, I explain that the bird is meant to symbolize your loved one,” he said.

These words are meant to soothe the mourners, but sometimes, particularly in winter or on windy days, it can also produce anxiety. People worry the birds won't be able to make it on their own in the cold, or that they'll starve.

So Haselrig elaborates.

“It won't get lost,” he tells the families. “It won't be wandering. It's going home.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2018/07/16/where-do-doves-released-at-weddings-go-they-usually-live-happily-ever-after/?noredirect=on>