

STREET PIGEONS: WAR HEROES, DEVOTED PARENTS, CLEVER LEARNERS

Pigeons were brought to the United States by the first settlers. It is thought that they originated in Southern Asia. They have a typical lifespan of about 15 years, and the oldest known pigeon lived to be 33 years old.

Like most humans, pigeons have a strong sense of family and devotion to their children. They mate for life, and both parents care for their young. They flock in large numbers in order to protect themselves against cats, hawks, owls, and rats. During breeding season, when there are many baby birds, both male and female pigeons produce milk in their crops, and all parents will feed all babies, whether or not they are their own.

Pigeons are known to be very intelligent. They quickly commit new images to memory and organize information in the same way that humans do. They can even distinguish between paintings of different styles and by different artists.

Pigeons also have excellent vision. They can see not just color, but also ultraviolet light. They can see far better than humans can and also are able to concentrate on a visual task for many more hours than we can—a discovery that led to a joint Coast Guard and Navy venture called Project Sea Hunt, in which pigeons were used to spot orange life vests at sea.

By sensing the Earth's magnetic field through the use of a magnetic "map" inside their beaks, pigeons are able to return to their home roosts even when released in a new location several thousand miles away. The ancient Egyptians and Romans used pigeons as reliable

messengers, Reuters News Service was originally created with a network of message-carrying pigeons, and pigeons have been used to carry messages in times of war.

In World War I, a pigeon named Cher Ami delivered a vital message to the famous "Lost Battalion." Cher Ami saved nearly 200 human lives but was shot on his way and was blinded and lost a leg on his final flight.

In World War II, a pigeon named GI Joe saved at least 1,000 allied soldiers' lives by making it back to camp in the nick of time carrying a message that allied troops had just occupied a city about to be bombed. He was awarded the Dickin Medal for gallantry by the Lord Mayor of London.

Pigeons are beloved in books and film and have been featured in many movies, including the Michael Landon film *Where Pigeons Go to Die* and the Charlton Heston film *The Pigeon That Took Rome*. The 2005 Valiant tells the story of a pigeon hero in the Royal Air Force.

Humans have long recognized the likable qualities of pigeons and have made pigeons a large part of their lives. Such "pigeon fanciers" include Queen Elizabeth II, George Foreman, Mike Tyson, Yul Brynner, Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, Elvis Presley, Charles Darwin, Walt Disney, Claude Monet, and Pablo Picasso.

