

AviCulture - Working Birds

For years birds have played a role in working for mankind

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Birds have been working for mankind for many, many years in many different ways. Even decoy birds, which aren't even real, have aided hunters for centuries. And two birds in particular have aided man in ways only birds could do — the fish-diving cormorant — and the message-carrying pigeon.

Julius Caesar used pigeons as couriers during the Roman conquest of Gaul.

Cormorants

Cormorants are diving birds that seem to “fly” as they chase fish underwater. Their feathers do not contain oil like those of ducks and other water birds, so they are not as buoyant. This greatly aids in their diving ability, as it makes it much easier to dive deep rapidly.

Fishing with cormorants began in China and Japan more than 1,300 years ago. It was widespread in the Old World and was even practiced by members of Britain's royal court in the 17th century.

Cormorant fishing is practiced in Japan today, where it's known as ukai, but it is more a tourist attraction than anything else. The method used is just as it was in ancient times, when it was a favorite of the feudal lords.

The fishing is done at dusk from a long flat-bottomed boat, called an ubune, which has a metal basket of flaming wood attached to the prow. The light from this torch attracts the sweet fish called ayu that live in the shallow rivers.

The crew consists of three men and up to a dozen birds. The leader, called the usho, is the cormorant handler. There is also the nakanori or middleman, and the tomonari, the companion rider. While the leader manages the fishing birds, the others pick up the captured fish and paddle and steer the ubune. How the usho keeps the leashes from becoming tangled is a mystery to me.

The birds perch on the rails and prow of the boat, and are held with a leash to a metal or leather ring around their neck. They are tossed or jump into the river in search of the ayu. When they capture a fish, they are pulled back to the boat, where one of the crew forces it to disgorge its prey. The ring around the throat prevents the birds from swallowing any but the smaller fish.

The species used are the Japanese cormorant and the great cormorant. These birds are quite tame. In the wild, the average life span of a cormorant is 4 to 5 years, captive birds usually exceed 20 years.

The tamest birds have neither a leash nor a ring, but return voluntarily to the boat. They, of course, are rewarded with a larger fish of their own.

Pigeons

Another group of working birds, which also began practicing their “trade” in ancient times, are the messenger pigeons, or more correctly, messenger doves, as they are really rock doves (*Columbia livia*).

Pigeons are known to be one of the strongest avian fliers. Racing pigeons travel hundreds of miles from the release point to their home lofts or aviaries, sometimes earning thousands of dollars for their owners.

The ancestors of these fast flyers worked for the ancient Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians and Phoenicians during their military operations. The earliest documentation of using pigeons in military matters was reported by Prontinus, when Julius Caesar used them as couriers during the Roman conquest of Gaul.

The emperors of Egypt, Carthage and Rome used pigeons as a means of keeping in touch with their armies and caravans. Ancient China even had a postal system in place based on messenger pigeons.

The Rothschild banking dynasty added greatly to their fortunes in 1815 with the help of a messenger pigeon. When

Napoleon met his match at Waterloo, Count Rothschild knew of the defeat long before anyone else in England, when a pigeon delivered the message. This advance knowledge allowed him to make critical decisions that made an enormous fortune possible. Likewise, Reuter's Newservice, founded 150 years ago by Julius Reuter, was based on a line of pigeon posts between Brussels and Aachen that ran until the telegraph arrived.

We've all heard the stories of the use of messenger pigeons by the Signal Corps during World War I and II. Probably the most famous is Cher Ami, a pigeon attached to the New York battalion of the 77th division of the U.S. army. In October 1918 the battalion was surrounded by enemy troops, cut off from all support and running short of rations. Several messenger pigeons were released only to be shot down by shrapnel.

Cheri Ami flew through the barrage and — though wounded badly by bullets or shrapnel, a leg nearly severed and a wound through the breast — he made it the 27 miles to his home in 25 minutes to deliver his messages and save the lives of the "lost battalion." There are many similar stories about these fast flyers.

The racing pigeons flying for their owner's lofts today are descendants from this group of warriors. There's a report that one such racer was recently sold to an Asian syndicate for U.S. \$350,000!

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