

Dove & Pigeon – Roller Pigeon

An introduction to roller pigeon

By Robert Alison, PH.D.

Roller Pigeon (*Columbia livia*)
Courtesy Robert Alison PH.D.

The roller pigeon (*Columbia livia*) is one of the most extraordinary and outstanding of the nearly 500 breeds of domestic pigeon. Its most prominent feature is its aerobatic skill – the capacity to fly to great heights and suddenly summersault backwards in tight rotations, spinning downward like a feathered ball, often dropping more than 150 feet. Rollers are energetic athletes that are exceedingly popular due to their deep, precise, rolling performances and their striking colors. A pigeon's roll display quality is measured by the duration, height, form and style of its roll.

Pigeon fanciers all around the world keep tens of thousands of rollers. The history of the roller is not clear. The birds were apparently the result of selective Old World breeding that focused on a genetic mid-air spinning trait used naturally by pigeons to thwart aerial attacks by birds of prey. The original rollers were bred for exaggerated natural aerobatic escape skills and to perfect the tightness and duration of aerial rotations. Selective breeding has vastly improved the quality of rolling, and the ability of individual rollers to fly as a team or kit. Kits are usually comprised of eight to 20 rollers that fly in compact formation and roll simultaneously. These capabilities have been genetically cultivated for centuries.

The Roller's Rise In The U.S.

Ancestral roller stock was imported from the United Kingdom to Canada in the early 1800s. By the 1870s, breeders in the United States began to take stock. By 1890, rollers had become vastly popular in much of North America. In the 1890s, Birmingham rollers predominated, but by 1900, Whittingham rollers had been developed and, by 1932, a new "Fireball" strain of high-fliers emerged.

Selective breeding to generate "long rolls" intensified early in the 20th century in North America. Deep rolls in unbroken 25- to 100-foot sequences were the objective. Individuals and kits varied enormously in their skill levels. Some rollers had characteristic mediocre performances. Others performed with great precision and prowess. Those were the basis for the modern stock. Efforts continue to focus on generating stock excellence. The main aim is to improve the three phases of rolling: entrance to the spin, the spin itself and recovery from the spin. Ideal rolls involve a mid-air folding of the body followed by a compact spin. Lopsidedness or sloppy spins with flailing wings are not desirable.

Roller Types

Not all roller strains excel at deep rolling. Parlor rollers cannot fly well, and they roll on the ground. Oriental rollers are not as proficient fliers as Birmingham rollers. Show rollers are chunkier and are bred for visual attractiveness and not rolling skills. Rollers come in a great variety of colors and patterns. Some breeders focus on perfecting color traits. The most common colors are: yellow, red, blue-bar, silver-bar, white-wing, white-face, blue- or red-check and mottle. New color morphs are regularly generated, including stunning bronze variants.

Roller Care

Roller pigeons are quite hardy, and they can thrive in most climates with minimum maintenance. They are ideal for novice aviculturists, and they are easy to acquire. Rollers live to be about 10 to 12 years old. Rolling capability tends to improve with age, and regular exercising is vital to maintain performance energy and vigor. Rollers usually stay in lofts that typically consist of several breeding compartments and outdoor flight pens. I formerly kept rollers in a suburb of a very large city, with few complications.

Rollers thrive on a basic diet of mixed grains supplemented by peas. They vary enormously in their affinity to humans. Some are quite tame, others are flighty.

For best breeding results, it is wise to separate the sexes outside the nesting season (late winter to early summer). Flying kits are usually kept in a separate pen and exercised as a unit.

Roller fanciers should be aware that raptors, such as hawks, often attack the birds in flight and, to a lesser degree, on the ground. Young rollers are especially vulnerable to raptor attack. Some individuals seem to be especially adept at avoiding raptor attack by initiating complex aerobatics.

Avicultural Hints

1. To achieve best rolling skills, adults that are paired together are capable of rolling at least 20 feet.
2. Use individual breeding compartments that are at least 18 inches in height, with about 2 square feet of floor area per pair.
3. Confine a male and a female in a compartment until they are paired. Dowel-rod separators can be used to seal off compartments for the duration of this process.
4. Provide fresh grit often.
5. Keep flights clean and dry. Lay newspaper in nest areas for easy cleaning.
6. Provide oyster shell and calcium in the drinking water to assist in egg formation.
7. Change drinking water daily.