

Photography Leila Jeffreys

FANCY THAT

By Tim Low

**THEY USHERED IN THE WORLD'S FIRST COMMUNICATIONS
REVOLUTION. THEY'VE BEEN HONOURED AS WAR HEROES. THEY'RE
SMART AND BEAUTIFUL. WHO SAYS PIGEONS ARE VERMIN?**

W

hen medals were handed out in Britain after World War II, two recipients were Australian pigeons, lauded for "conspicuous gallantry". Each had saved soldiers in New Guinea by carrying pleas for aid. One, known as Q, survived heavy fire to carry a message that saved 200 Americans on Manus Island. The other relayed an SOS message from an army boat stranded in Huon Gulf during a savage storm, saving craft, crew and cargo.

They were part of the Australian Corps of Signals Pigeon Service, which operated along the Kokoda Trail and elsewhere in New Guinea. Australia's pigeon fanciers donated more than 13,000 birds to the war effort. Australia honoured them decades later when they appeared on \$1 coins put out by the Royal Australian Mint in its Unlikely Heroes Series.

Homing pigeons have a long history of service, reportedly carrying messages for the Mughals,

Crusaders, Romans, Saracens, Egyptian pharaohs and ancient Persians, among others. The Reuters news agency started out as pigeons carrying stock market prices to and from Brussels. Santa Catalina Island off the Californian coast had a pigeon service taking mail to Los Angeles in the 1890s, and police in India's Odisha state still keep carrier pigeons for emergencies, although the birds' regular courier duties ended in 2004. All of this was possible because homing pigeons, when taken somewhere new, even inside a dark box, can reliably find their way home.

These birds deserve our admiration, but their status suffers when we see pigeons in cities soiling building ledges and jostling for chips and crumbs. Pigeons were awarded war medals by several nations, but we don't think of heroes when we see pigeons in parks.

Psychologists take pigeons seriously for their own reasons, respecting them as birds that excel at visual categorisation. Domestic pigeons in experiments have distinguished letters of the alphabet, different emotions on human faces, paintings by Picasso and Monet, even breast cancer tumours on scans. In one test, categorising coloured rectangles on a screen, pigeons left university students far behind. Brains that evolved to detect specks of food on gritty ground do well with another kind of flat surface – the screens used in experiments.

Biologists testing the birds' homing abilities have found they're able to navigate by evaluating landscape smells, the position of the sun, the Earth's magnetic field, the pattern of highways, and probably infrasound. In one experiment, pigeons found their way home after being transported somewhere new while anaesthetised and sealed inside a metal container on a rotating turntable.

The words "pigeon" and "dove" overlap in meaning, which explains how the domestic pigeon can have as its forebear a species called the rock dove (*Columba livia*), found on rough slopes in Europe, Asia and North Africa. Many of the world's 340 or so species of pigeon are serious about migration, but rock doves seldom travel more than 30km between seasons and most are sedentary, leaving us to wonder why homing pigeons have what it takes to reach home across 600km or more of unknown country. Homers are bred to excel,



Peaceful Dove, above;
Rose-Crowned Fruit
Dove, below





Common Bronzewing,
left: Bleeding Heart Dove,
above: Topknot Pigeon



but no one has been able to breed a parrot or canary or duck that returns, so pigeons' basic skill set can't be put down to breeding. Nor can an eye for cancer scans and art styles.

Charles Darwin was enthusiastic about pigeons because the profusion of breeds concocted by fanciers lent support to his theory of evolution. His colleague Alfred Russel Wallace had a different kind of interest, aroused by his years in the Indo-Malayan archipelago. Wallace had noticed that pigeons "achieved their maximum development, as regards beauty, variety, and number of species", in the region around New Guinea.

That imposing island and the lands around it, especially Australia, give the word "pigeon" its full meaning. While most street pigeons are as drab as businessmen in suits, the fruit-doves of our rainforests come dressed as if for a mardi gras, in purples, yellows and other fearless colours. The vivid rainforest fruits they favour have given them an appreciation for colours on each other. Papua New Guinea boasts the world's largest pigeon, the Victoria crowned pigeon, which is nearly the size of a turkey and has lacy head plumes standing in for loud colours. Only in PNG and Australia do pigeons indulge in head ornaments, recorded in names such as "crested pigeon", "topknot pigeon" and "plumed pigeon".

Wallace surmised that New Guinea was the cradle from which the world's pigeons emerged. Today's thinking is that pigeons emerged somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere, although there is no certainty about where. The oldest fossils have been found in Australia.

We should not take pigeons for granted. To pigeonhole them as urban scroungers does them an injustice. Australian bird photographer Leila Jeffreys has taken it on herself to show them as they truly are, as beings with the power to surprise. Everything alive is essentially a mystery, and pigeons, with their extraordinary mental and physical powers, are more mysterious than most. They were domesticated thousands of years ago, long before chickens or ducks, which makes them the bird on Earth to which we have the longest close relationship. Pigeons matter. ●

Leila Jeffreys is an exhibiting artist with Sydney's Olsen Gallery. Tim Low is a biologist and writer