THE MOBILE PHONE NETWORK - IS THIS THE CAUSE OF HEAVY LOSSES ACROSS AUSTRALIA?

BY JOHN HOFMAN

For quite a few years now many fanciers have tended to blame numerous modern communication systems for interfering with our pigeons ability to home.I can remember when I first came into the sport back in 1961 of the old flyers in those days complaining that the returns weren't as nearly as good as they used to be. I remember it being repeatedly said, "we used to send 20 to Oodnaatta (540 miles) and get them all back. Now if we send 20 we're lucky to get 10." In those days the Radar got the blame, later on it was the television, then the satellite communications systems. Maybe each one of the above played some part in losses but back in those days the losses weren't really all that bad. Of course there was the isolated smash, there always will be, but other factors such as bad weather, more often than not, was the major contributor to bad races. However, since the mid eighties, losses in all parts of Australia have increased significantly. No, in fact, alarmingly! And they seem to be getting a little worse each year.

Hear in Adelaide we are one of the few places in the pigeon world where we fly two lines of flight in the same season. One of them is the North line and the other is the East route. The North line has always produced the best returns regardless of the weather conditions and the East line has always produced heavier losses due mainly to prevailing headwinds, but generally the results proved satisfactory. There is no doubt that losses all round on both lines of flight are heavier nowadays than they used to be but overall returns on the North line are many, many times better than the East. On the East line many fanciers are struggling to get 50% of their entries home on the day from the 200 and 300 mile mark with clear skies and a tail wind which sees the winners averaging 1500 metres per minute or above.

The mobile phone network is being blamed by many fanciers for these losses. Mobile phones have been around for quite some time now. The ugly relay towers can be seen all over the metropolitan area of all main cities and also through-out the countryside. But something kept occurring to me. If this system was to blame for our racing losses, why weren't we loosing enormous numbers of birds off the loft breaking them in and training them around the loft. After all, many lofts are within a few hundred meters of these towers and it has had no effect on the birds in this regard. If anything, there doesn't seem to be as many lost off the loft than there used to be.

Finally I decided to go to the local Telstra shop and i asked where I could get a map of Australia which showed the extent of coverage of the mobile phone network. The young lady behind the counter told me they had no single map of Australia but

led me to an area where maps for every State and Territory were on display. She quickly plucked seven maps out of the display racks and sent me happily on my way to study them.

What I found was quite surprising. Naturally every capital city and all surrounding metropolitan areas were completely covered. But do you know what country area in Australia was covered to the greatest extent? Most would probably say the north or south coast of New South Wales or certain rural areas in provincial Victoria. But not so. The area that has the most comprehensive or saturated coverage in Australia is the Northern Plains of Adelaide right up to and beyond Port Augusta. The thin strip of plains that are bounded by the gulf to the West and the Ranges to the East. The very line that produces our very best racing and returns. I looked at Sydney and they had good coverage along the North Coast to just beyond

Newcastle, West to Orange, South to Ulladulla, although a little patchy in parts, and along the Hume Highway to Melbourne. All the rest of the state, as it is with all other states, is very patchy with vast areas not covered, and much of it probably many, many years before it will be. Victoria being the smallest state in area is the best covered by overall but still a lot of area not covered, particularly in the Wimmera, the Sunraysia and the Eastern mountain areas.

Well what are we to conclude from all this? Most of our racing throughout Australia is conducted from areas where there is either limited or no mobile network coverage. All of our birds are bred, raised and trained in areas where there is saturation mobile network coverage. Could it be that they have adapted to this but are finding it difficult to orientate when released in an area that is not covered or has only a limited area coverage? Could it be that once they fly out of a covered area into an area without coverage they become disoriented or lost? Or could it be that once they fly into an uncovered area they begin searching for the next closest area with coverage and they fly to that, and then the next, and so on? If this is the case and if the next covered area they head for is a little off line to home and the following covered area is a little further off line then those pigeons are well on the way to being lost.

For example, take the racing that took place on Saturday 15th August 1998. It was a beautiful day with cloudless skies and a moderate to fresh SE wind in Victoria and South Australia. The VHA were flying from Mildura and the SAHPA from Booroorban. The VHA released at 7.00am CST and the SAHPA at 8.00am CST.

The VHA suffered heavy losses flying into a stiff South Easterly and were averaging in the low 900's and had only a few birds home on the day. The Adelaide birds had the wind nearly behind them and averaged nearly 1500mpm, yet most owners were battling to have 50% home by nightfall. We had Melbourne birds in Adelaide that afternoon, and Adelaide birds were reported at various towns en route back to Melbourne and in Melbourne, Geelong, Keith, and wait for it, Port Augusta.

There is little probability they clashed as both convoys would be flying at greatly differing heights, one lot with a headwind down low to the ground and the other lot up high taking full advantage of the tail wind. Yet it is obvious that many of both convoys mixed, those that were disorientated and lost for some reason or other, and

quite early in the race. Why would birds on a perfectly clear day with a tail wind back to Adelaide want to head back in the wrong direction towards Melbourne, into a head wind?

Eighty five minutes after release a batch of about 200 Adelaide birds were seen over Swan Hill, 75 miles W-SW of Booroorban. Already those birds were 15% off course and well South of the Booroorban to Adelaide line. If anything those birds should have been a little North of the line considering the fresh South Easterly wind. If they had continued this course they would have flown over Keith and ended up on the Coorong. Booroorban is not in an area covered by the mobile network. Swan Hill has a small radius local coverage. Were they heading for the Swan Hill transmitter and then the ones beyond that, Birchip, Warracknabeal, Nhill,etc.,etc? Some may have taken a Southerly route via Deniliquin, Echuca, Bendigo etc., etc., to have ended up in Melbourne and Geelong. And what about the one that ended up at Port Augusta. Was it with a group which sought out the transmitters at Balranald, Robinvale, Mildura etc., etc., and just kept locked on that line all the way to Port Augusta? We will never know. But another interesting fact. That same day the Iron Triangle (Kadina, Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Whyalla clubs) released at Tintinara and by all accounts had a near perfect race with the majority of birds arriving in two batches only ten or so minutes apart. The interesting fact is that there is virtually unbroken mobile net coverage along the entire line of flight from Tintinara to Port Augusta and Whyalla. Are our birds "transmitter hopping?" If so, if the transmitters are on the line of flight then there isn't a problem, but when there are transmitters that are close by but off the line of flight that's when they get into trouble and could explain the losses.

This is just a theory I have, a sort of gut feeling, and will probably never be proven or disproved. But it is an attempt to try and explain heavy modern day losses. What do you think? Should Federations choose routes upon which there is a constant line of mobile net coverage all the way home. For most states this is probably not possible because the areas without coverage are too vast or the terrain is unsuitable ie., very mountainous areas. But for Adelaide it would be interesting because there is virtually unbroken coverage all the way along the Dukes/Western Highway to Melbourne and beyond. If this route was chosen in the future, along with the proven Northerly route, it may go to some extent to either prove or disprove this theory.

John Hofman was kind enough to supply maps, but due to the size, we were unable to reduce them to put them in the magazine.

If you require these maps, they are available from your local Telstra Shop.