

The Last Keepers



A pigeon is protected from the hostile elements by a coop constructed by Roger Boomhower.



Boomhower looks after his pigeons through the winter by keeping them separated by male and female and by breed in his backyard.



A Horseman Thief Pouter pigeon. Pairs can be sold for \$25 to \$30 locally around Belleville.

Pigeons have been around for a long time. The longest-lasting domesticated pet used to be predominantly used during both of the First and Second World Wars to deliver messages and get around modern-day interception techniques.

They were even used during medieval times to send messages quickly and efficiently. In today's day of computers, e-mail, text messages and phone calls, the pigeon has all but been replaced for communication. However, a community of people still exists across Canada who raise and show pigeons competitively as a hobby.

Roger Boomhower is a retiree who spends some of his spare time raising 14 pigeons in his backyard in Belleville. Born and raised here, Boomhower wrapped up a career as a heavy equipment operator for CN Rail and then became a custodian for the Prince Edward County School Board. Once Boomhower finished working, he found he had plenty of spare time to pour into hobbies he had picked up through his life.

"People ask me if I'm bored in my retirement, and right away I always tell them, 'No!' because I've got more hobbies than time, and I haven't done justice to any of them. Now it's time I do justice to some of these hobbies that I haven't had the chance to," said Boomhower.

An avid hunter and fisherman as well as a man who is passionate about vehicles and NASCAR, pigeon fancying is certainly a peculiar past time.

"I was six years old when my father first caught me a pigeon. I had always had a rooster and a few small hens around, but that was my first pigeon. I've had them ever since," said Boomhower.

Most of the people that Boomhower knows got into pigeons through their fathers. "It's funny, my father caught birds (but) my brother and sister showed no interest in it at all. But I do, ever since the first one I've been interested in birds," Boomhower reflected.

A cheery man, Boomhower has bright blue eyes that light up as he speaks passionately about the birds he has spent the majority of his

life studying and raising.

"I paid \$150 for a bird 15 to 20 years ago. Nowadays, a pair of Horseman Thief Pouter pigeons can go for about \$25 to \$30 for a pair." In terms of the people he goes up against at bird shows, it is a competitive world despite being a small and tightly knit community.

"It can turn into a money game. There are guys who make the drive all the way down to Louisville, Kentucky and pay \$500 for a single bird," he said.

If these birds do well through the show circuit, the people who invest heavily in the birds can turn a profit down the road once they breed their birds.

"If they find people who are interested in the birds, they can breed and sell them for some good money."

In terms of financial reward, you won't become a millionaire by raising and showing pigeons. Boomhower took a moment to reflect on the cost of owning birds, and the finances involved in taking care of them.

"They say you're doing well for yourself when you can pay for the feed that the birds eat. Since I sold most of my birds, I can make a bag last for three months. There are guys out there though, who can go through a bag of feed a week. Along with the cost of medication when it's needed, it can get really expensive." Shows are not the only source of income for fanciers. There are people who simply buy inexpensive birds at local fairs. They then take them to Toronto and sell them and can see profit of about \$10 a bird.

Bylaws are steadily making life a little bit harder for people who want to buy and sell birds at shows. Many smaller fairs are prohibiting the sale of livestock during events. Bylaws in Belleville also state that wild pigeons are not to be fed by anyone.

"There's a guy who lives a few streets over from me. He used to have a birdfeeder set up in his yard with a sign that said 'pigeons, please don't feed here' which gave me quite a laugh.

"Well, I guess his neighbours didn't appreciate the bird feeder or the sign too much and ended up calling the police to make this guy

take his bird feeder out."

The interest in the pigeon community is following a course of gradual decline.

"I used to go to shows and see older guys showing 50 to 60 birds. A lot of these guys are passing on and there are fewer and fewer of us to step in and fill their shoes," Boomhower said.

When Boomhower was younger, he said he was able to find at least eight people in the Hillcrest area of Belleville who bred, raised, and sold pigeons.

"Nowadays, if you're 40 years old, you're young in this hobby."

Various fanciers associations have tried to spark interest in youth by introducing categories for younger competitors to show in. But the biggest problems come from bylaws and parents who are hesitant to allow their children to keep a bird.

"I've done it before. You find a kid who is genuinely interested in the hobby and you give them a male and female bird and set them on their way. You've gotta make sure their parents are okay with it first! Otherwise the bird can end up at the humane society, and you don't want that to happen," said Boomhower.

"I've found too, once you find a kid who's genuinely interested in the birds, they tend to stay away from the goofy things in life. You don't see them walking around with mohawks and other such nonsense," said Boomhower. In terms of a community, the fanciers association is full of people who have made life-long friendships with people because they connected through birds.

"I've made great friendships in the bird community. There are plenty of people between Windsor and Montreal who I can simply call up, or stop in when I'm in the area and have coffee with. I can catch up with every detail in these people's lives, and we talk about more than just the birds. It's great."

For a multi-media look at this story, go to:

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Boomhower holds the 2014 reserve champion of the Belleville fall fair.



White tags identify pigeons born and shown in 2015. These are distributed by the Ontario Fanciers Association.



Boomhower holds up some orange wire, which he uses to identify the birds he owns.