

SUNDAY

SUNDAY, AUGUST 2, 2009

FASCINATING WORLD
OF PIGEON RACING
BRINGS FAMILY,
OUTDOORS TOGETHER

Fly away home

STORY BY JODI HAUSEN
PHOTOS BY ERIK PETERSEN
OF THE CHRONICLE

Dušan Smetana watches as one of his pigeons takes flight from its coop at Smetana's home near Four Corners.

On a sunny afternoon last week, Dušan Smetana opened the door to a garage-size birdhouse adjacent to his River Road home and said hello to about 200 pigeons:

Smetana snatched up a gray pigeon and stretched out its wings.

He pointed to its iridescent neck and chest — the green and pink shimmers indicate the bird is healthy, he said.

Unlike the flocks of pigeons many city dwellers resent, Smetana's birds are athletes — racers — to be exact.

He began breeding and racing homing pigeons as a child in Slovakia, he said, and brought the hobby to Montana in 2004.

Racing homing pigeons is popular in Europe, Smetana said. Homing pigeons, used to send messages between troops during wartime, were used throughout Europe during both world wars.

Today, in his village of about 300 people, 50 regularly train and race birds.

Smetana credits World War II veteran Dan Corcoran, an honorary member of the Bridger Mountain Racing Pigeon Club, with bringing the sport to the Gallatin Valley.

Dominique Savoie, a member of the Bridger Mountain club who has been racing pigeons for three years, said she remains intrigued by the birds' homing instincts.

"How the heck do they know how to get home?" Savoie said. "I'm fascinated with it."

Smetana said nobody knows how the pigeons do it. What he does know is that once the birds are about 30 days old, he lets them out of their large loft, "they look at the sun," and begin to fly, he said.

At that point, they are "imprinting" on the spot, learning where exactly the loft is located.

And they come back, most of them, again and again.

RACING

The Bridger Mountain club takes its birds as far away as Las Vegas for races, approximately 500 miles. It takes the birds about two days to fly home.

The pigeons are able to fly long distances fast due to extremely efficient respiratory systems.

"A good bird is not only physically strong and healthy, but has to have the innate ability to get home," Savoie said. "Sometimes you have a fast and strong bird, but they're too stupid to come home."

And the Bridger Mountain club's courses are difficult due to the mountain passes and variable weather, Savoie said.

"It's a little world of infinite variables and you can never train for all the variables because it'd drive you crazy," the Canadian, who was born in France, said.

As a girl, she loved stories of knights and princesses. The dovecotes mentioned in fairy tales were holes in the castle roofs where messenger pigeons



A group of Smetana's racing pigeons rest in their coop.

were lured to roost. In medieval times, the birds were not only used as messengers, they were eaten, too, she said.

Now that she's started racing, she's discovered the sport requires great perseverance.

"It takes a long time to get good at it," Savoie said. She won her first race last year by only eight seconds.

"It is an excellent test of patience and fortitude," the Canadian, who was born in France, said. "It is a sport that, if you read a lot of books about (it), you'll get 10 opposing opinions."

"The best way to learn is to hook up with someone who knows more than you do. It takes a lot of on-the-job training," she said. "That's why the guys that are best at it have been doing it for 30, 40 years."

START 'EM YOUNG

Smetana said racing pigeons is a great activity for kids.

He pulls his kids into the loop from the start. When training his birds, Smetana often takes them to his brother-in-law's house in Livingston. The uncle then attaches messages to the birds' legs for Smetana's children to read in Gallatin County.

Racing the birds "teaches children responsibility," Smetana said. "You have to have your stuff together to race pigeons. It builds confidence because you have to make decisions."

The adults do it for different reasons.

"For some, they have to win," Savoie said. "For others it's just about seeing the birds come home." Count Smetana in the latter category.

"The coolest thing is seeing the pigeons come home because they're your buddies," he said.

And some bring important messages.

When Smetana and his wife, Lorca, could not decide on their first son's name, they attached their top choices to four of their birds. The first bird that arrived home after that year's last race carried the baby's name — Hale Miša Montana Smetana.

"The hospital had been calling for two weeks" wanting a name for the birth certificate, Smetana recalled.

He said he told them, "What do you mean? The pigeons haven't flown yet."

CONNECTION TO NATURE

Both Smetana and Savoie appreciate how working with the birds takes them outside themselves and slows them down.

"It connects me to the earth," Savoie said. "And it connects me to having to take care of something. Having chores connects me to my rural roots."

For Smetana, a photographer, there's a relaxing aspect to pigeon racing.

"You walk into the loft, you forget about your everyday problems," he said.

"Everything's going faster these days," he added, using the example of the switch from film to digital commercial photography, which has clients clamoring for images within hours rather than days.

"But with pigeons, you can't do that," he said. "You have to take your time and pay attention."

Jodi Hausen can be reached at jhausen@daily-chronicle.com or 582-2630.



To learn more about the Bridger Mountain Racing Pigeon Club visit: bmtpigeon.com