

Things That Have Not Worked For Me

When I got back into raising pigeons in 1996 after a 17-year absence, I found that certain things about raising the birds had changed. I also found that I had forgotten a lot more than I expected. Finally, I discovered that raising show quality fancy pigeons is much different than raising the commons and culls I had bred as a kid.

The main thing that had changed was the presence of PMV and paratyphoid in nearly every flock of birds. I never worried about these things as a teenager but now if you don't treat for them you will lose a lot of birds. I tried to keep up with the fancy while I was out of the hobby by reading the American Pigeon Journal. I always knew I wanted to get birds again and I thought I remembered all I needed to be successful raising them. But it's funny, if you aren't in the loft every day taking care of the birds, you forget a lot of the little things about their habits and care. I raised several breeds as a kid but none of the birds were highly inbred, delicate show birds. They were the product of survival of the fittest. When breeding show birds, you want vigorous birds but from time to time you end up keeping an outstanding specimen even though it's not as robust as some of the other birds. That is almost always a mistake and it brings me to the point of this article.

This is a list of things that I have tried which have not worked for me. You and your loft may be different and I'm not saying these things will not work for you or will never work; they just didn't work for me when I tried them. I'll try to be brief with my explanations because it is quite a long list. Hey, I've tried a lot of things that didn't work! What can I say? Many of the things on the list are things that have been written about before but I just had to try them for myself and see what I could get away with. Call me lazy, stubborn, stupid, or whatever. If any of this keeps you from making the same mistakes, well.... you're welcome. Remember, these are things I have tried that did not work for me.

1. The first one is real basic, not changing the water every day. I thought if they had plenty of water the second day then that was less for me to do. And lo, Winghaven Loft was struck by a terrible plague.
2. Not vaccinating for PMV if the guy you got the birds from tells you he already did that. I used to believe guys who told me they had vaccinated the birds I got from them for PMV. Maybe they did but some of the birds got it anyway. I now vaccinate any birds I get as soon as I get them home.
3. Not vaccinating for paratyphoid. I thought it was too expensive for the benefit gained. And lo, Winghaven Loft was visited by a second terrible plague. Paratyphoid is one disease you do not want to fight. It is relentless and takes a year or more to eradicate.

4. Not putting the birds on antibiotics during paratyphoid vaccinations. I thought, 'they won't get the disease; that's what the vaccine is for isn't it?' If you have paratyphoid in your loft when you give the vaccine, you will kill some of the birds because the combination of the germs they already have and the vaccine will be too much for their immune system to handle. Put them on antibiotics for a few days before and a few days after the shots.
5. Treating only once a year for canker. If you live in a warm, wet climate like I do, you are better off to treat two or three times during the breeding season. During the dry years you will not see the disease much but during a normal wet year it can cause all kinds of problems.
6. Trying to cure every sick bird. I have had a couple of successes treating badly ill pigeons but the overwhelming majority of the time they die no matter what you do. All you accomplish is to expose other birds in your loft to the disease and spend a lot of money and time on a lost cause. You don't want birds like that in your breeding program anyway. Better to just cull the bird and move on. It does help to have sick or dead birds looked at by a veterinarian so you know what you are fighting.
7. Thinking baths alone will control lice and mites on the birds. I have yet to find the bath supplement that will completely control these bugs where I live. You need to put something on the birds and/or on their perches. I use "Bronco Spray", a product made to spray on horses for bugs. It's effective and has a citronella smell that repels the bugs for days.
8. Not treating birds for disease after they come home from a show. I used to lose two or three birds every year after shows. They get stressed from the trip and then get sick. Treating with an antibiotic for a week after they get home has stopped that. I also don't put them in a quarantine pen any more. I put them right back in their regular pen to reduce the stress on them. If they are in a familiar setting they will be more relaxed and less likely to get sick.
9. Thinking I could squeeze a few more birds into the loft (overcrowding). This will only spread disease and usually your best birds will die because of it. I find with an open loft like I have, 1.25 square feet per bird is about the minimum space to keep the birds happy and healthy.
10. Not changing litter often enough in my brooder box. I have a brooder box for the babies I am handfeeding. It has a wooden floor with 2 to 3 inches of cedar shavings for litter. You need to change this litter every few days or lo, thou shalt be smitten with a terrible plague. The warmth from the lights and the birds, and the moisture from the droppings are a good combination for growing germs.
11. Using a closed-up loft in a warm, humid climate. I tried this because I was afraid the neighbors would complain about the birds. It did not work for me or for the birds. Good ventilation is a must for your health and for your bird's health.
12. Using powder supplements in the drinking water. Owls have a lot of problems with mucous in their mouth and throat. Putting powder supplements in the water, especially those with good gut bacteria in them,

can really do more harm than good sometimes for African Owls. The good benefits gained from the powder are overshadowed by the difficulty the birds have breathing when their throats are full of mucous. I try to only use liquid supplements now if I use anything and the mucous problems have cleared up.

13. Feeding millet or small grains to Owls. Owls have this unique feature that we breed for; a very, very short beak. To eat, they must stick their whole face down in the grain to pick up a piece. When they do this, if you have small grains like millet in your feed, they can get one of these grains lodged up in their nostrils. This can even happen with wheat or milo although not as frequently. This can cause all sorts of problems. The solution is to make sure there is no millet in the feed. I try not to have too large of a pea or corn in the mix either because the birds can choke on this. Why they have more problems with choking than other breeds do is beyond me.
14. Trying to incubate eggs in an incubator. Some may know how to do it but I could not get the hang of it and never could hatch out many eggs. I had this great idea that I would eliminate all problems of eggs being broken or abandoned by the feeders. I'll have to take my chances with the feeders. The solution is to get better feeders. This is a classic case of thinking too much!
15. Cleaning the eggs with an antibacterial solution. You've heard of Nolvasan right? It's used to kill bacteria and sanitize things. I got the bright idea that it would be a good thing to use to wash the eggs in so bacteria would not go through the shell and kill the growing embryo. I think it did that. I also think it killed the embryos themselves because none of those eggs hatched.
16. Using iodine in the drinking water to improve hatching. First of all, I don't think the birds like the taste of iodine in their water. Mine never seemed to enjoy it and they seemed to drink less water when it was in there. Secondly, I never saw any difference in the hatching rate with or without the iodine. The biggest things I have seen that affect hatching rate are whether or not there is paratyphoid present in the loft and whether you are helping your short-beaked babies hatch. If your loft is pretty free from paratyphoid the eggs usually hatch well. I still help many of the babies out just to be safe, but the ones I help out seem very healthy. If you have paratyphoid in your loft the babies will die whether you help them hatch out or not. If you don't help them they will die in the shell and if you do help them they will die in the nest two or three days later.
17. Letting all babies hatch by themselves. I thought for a long time that natural was best. After losing enough babies to not fully hatching out I changed my mind. With their short, stubby beaks, African Owls have a tough time breaking through the shell. A baby African's beak is very blunt on the end, not sharp like a Roller or Homer. This makes it difficult for the good youngsters to pierce the shell and break it open. Helping the youngsters hatch is not hard to do and you don't have to worry about them not making it out of the egg. Natural is not best with Owls in my opinion because Owls are too far removed from a purely natural state.

18. Letting feeders do all the feeding. I used to think it was less work this way and it probably is. But the stress on me worrying about whether the young were being fed well and were being covered by the parents on a cool night got to be too much. I now put them in a brooder box at 10 to 12 days of age. The feeders will cover and feed them well up to this point. I then handfeed them for about another 7 to 10 days and then move them into a weaning pen. This serves several purposes. It gets them through the critical pin feather stage without getting them chilled, it keeps them well-fed, it makes the babies very tame for showing, and finally, it gets the feeders back on eggs quickly so they can take on some more Owl eggs. This cuts down on the number of feeders you need to use. The downside is you are tied to the birds and if you go on a trip you must either take the birds with you to handfeed or have someone there who can handfeed for you. I usually take them with me.
19. Trying to handfeed babies from the very first day they are born. This can be done, but in my opinion, it's not worth the trouble. It's a tempting thought that you could get rid of all your feeders not have to take up loft space with them or feed them all year long. Feeding a baby from Day 1 is no picnic though. It is a tedious job that you have to be very careful about doing. Feeding one is hard enough. I can't imagine trying to feed 8 or 10 like that. The other problem is the babies don't grow as fast with the handfeeding formula I use as they do with pigeon milk. I have heard there are other formulas you can use that would be better for this but I have not tried them. The formula I use works well on older babies but not so good on the real little ones.
20. Using open-fronted nest boxes. I have never had any luck with this. The dominant cocks always claim two or three boxes while other birds get none. I use nest fronts with a small perch and door. If the owners of the box are on the perch, no other birds will challenge them. Birds that are so aggressive they will go into other birds' boxes need to be culled or put into individual pens.
21. Letting birds build their own nests. Let me qualify that. I put some type of padding such as a nest pad, sand or wood chips in the nest first and then let them build on top of that. If you don't do that you run the risk of having eggs cracked on the bottom of the nest bowl either when the egg is laid or as the birds are sitting on them. I've had each of these happen. This is especially important if your nest bowls are clay or some other hard material.
22. Using flat-bottomed nest bowls. My birds always have trouble making good nests in this type of bowl. Using a bowl that slopes down to a low point in the middle seems to work much better.
23. Doing a lot of show pen training. I have found with doing a lot of handfeeding I don't have to show pen train as much. You want the bird to not be flighty in front of the judge but if they are too tame they may not show well either. They tend to relax too much and not stand up straight even if the judge tries to prod them. A bird that is a little nervous will stand up straight and alert. I have found the more I train now, the worse they

show so I hardly train at all anymore. If you don't handfeed much then you will need to show pen train more.

24. Trying to file beaks into shape right before the show. This is a waste of time and very hard on the birds. You do need to file the beaks a little but I am talking about neglecting the beak all year and then trying to get it in shape in the week before the show. If you take a fingernail clipper and clip the beaks as they grow a little long all through the year, you will only need to round the beak off a little with a file before the show. If you wait, one mandible will grow longer than the other and you will never get it back even with the other without causing severe pain to your bird. It will never look right either. I had this happen to the first Owl I ever showed.
25. Clipping toenails to make the birds stand better. I don't really know where this theory got started but I have read it before and even repeated it without really thinking about it. Honestly, I have never seen a difference in the stance whether the toenails are clipped or not. I like to clip them just so they won't scratch you or look unsightly on the bird. As far as standing well, that is a characteristic that is bred into your stock.
26. Pulling the skin on the throat to enhance the gullet. I have heard and read that by pulling on the skin of the throat, a bird with a poor gullet will develop a decent gullet. I have tried it and it did not work for me. I feel it is like the stance, if they don't have it you will have to breed it in.
27. Using Diatomaceous Earth for the control of bugs. This is a natural product (very fine powder) that is supposed to kill bugs. As I understand it, this stuff is made up of particles, which if looked at under a microscope, have jagged edges all over them. The bugs walk through this stuff, the particles stick to the bugs and the jagged edges cut the bugs to pieces as they try to get the stuff off. Nice theory, didn't work for me. Give me some good old-fashioned chemicals and let me use my miniature weapons of mass destruction on those bugs.
28. Use of yellow colored vitamins in drinking water or red grit when you have White Owls. Guess what I learned? Red grit and yellow vitamins in the water stain white feathers. This is bad news if you are getting ready for a show. Two ways to solve this problem are to get rid of the red grit and the yellow vitamins or get rid of the White Owls. I did both!
29. Trying to band my Futurity birds based on how they look in the nest. If there is an African Owl fancier around who can tell which babies are going to be the best just by looking at them in the nest, then they are a better fancier than I am and they ought to be writing these articles. Every time I have tried to do that I have ended up picking the absolute worst babies of all I raised that year. I have since gone to only banding babies out of proven pairs and my success has been much better, including winning 1st and 2nd in the Futurity in 2003.
30. Trying to use more than two hens with one cock at the same time. I like using the 'bull system' where two or more hens are mated to each cock. I just use two hens for each cock though. When one lays her eggs, I take her out of the cock's pen and put in the other hen. This works very well. What

doesn't work well for me is putting a third or fourth hen into this rotation. The reason is the hens get on a cycle. They lay on the ninth or tenth day they are with the cock, then lay again two days later. Then they are off for about twelve days. If you keep them in the hen pen for longer than that, say 24 or 36 days before you put them in with the cock again, they will lay infertile eggs in the hen pen and then you will have wasted their eggs. Your plan to let them rest for awhile just went out the window also. I know you can breed a cock to multiple hens in multiple pens if you do it right, but I don't have enough feeders to handle all the eggs that would create all at one time. Swapping two hens with one cock gives the hen the proper rest between laying without getting her out of her cycle.

Well, I hope you enjoyed my list. These are all things I have tried that did not work out well for me. I'm sure there are a few others that I haven't mentioned here but I think I might get depressed thinking about all the things I have tried that failed if I go much farther with this. If you don't try new things you will continue to get the same results you have always gotten but there is such a thing as over thinking something and making it more complicated than it needs to be. Get some good birds, find yourself a good, uncomplicated system you can live with and then breed a lot of babies. If you do this, you will be successful. Best of luck to you!