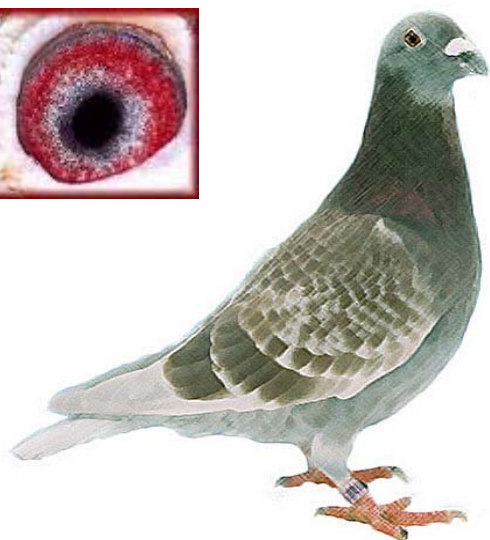


MONTH BY MONTH

with Chris



Champion "Tracey's Red" winner of the N.W.C.C. Hall of Fame and over £5,000 in his racing career, for Chris Knowles of Woodley, Stockport.

2009						
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Hi and may I open this first article of the series, by wishing everyone that is a visitor to www.prestigepigeons.com a very successful season for 2009. I was asked by Les, if I would be willing to collate a series of articles to support the launch of the new web site www.prestigepigeons.com and on a basis where each article was new and had not already appeared in any other area of the pigeon media and would be exclusive to the PP site. I was only too pleased to accept, as anyone who knows me will know, I have long been a strong believer that the role of the Internet as a means of communication and information for the pigeon sport, was the way forward into this millennium.

Before I begin to discuss January, I thought that it would be worth taking a brief look at why we have the calendar that we do and how it relates to the the most influential factors in pigeon racing in the U.K. As we all know, there are 12 months of the year from January to December. However, it has not always been that way! The original Roman year had 10 named months **Martius** "March", **Aprilis** "April", **Maius** "May", **Junius** "June", **Quintilis** "July", **Sextilis** "August", **September** "September", **October** "October", **November** "November", **December** "December", and probably two unnamed months in the dead of winter when not much happened in agriculture. The year began with **Martius** "March". Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome circa 700 BC, added the two months **Januarius** "January" and **Februarius** "February". He also moved the beginning of the year from **Marius** to **Januarius** and changed the number of days in several months to be odd, a lucky number. After **Februarius** there was occasionally an additional month of **Intercalaris** "intercalendar". This is the origin of the leap-year day being in February. In 46 BC, Julius Caesar reformed the Roman calendar (hence the Julian calendar) changing the number of days in many months and removing **Intercalaris**.

In addition to the months we have what we describe as seasons. The **seasons** are one the major divisions of the year, generally based on yearly periodic changes in weather. Seasons result from the yearly revolution of the Earth around the Sun and the tilt of the Earth's axis relative to the plane of revolution. In temperate and polar regions, the seasons are marked by changes in the intensity of sunlight that reaches the Earth's surface, variations of which may cause animals to go into hibernation or to migrate, and plants to be dormant. During June, July, and August; the northern hemisphere, where we reside, is exposed to more direct sunlight because the northern hemisphere faces the sun. The same is true of the southern hemisphere in December, January, and February. Contrary to what some people may believe, the seasons do not result from the varying distance between the Earth and the Sun. Instead the tilt of the Earth causes the Sun to be higher in the sky during the summer months which increases the solar flux. In temperate and polar regions generally the four seasons are recognized as spring, summer, autumn and winter.

Understanding each season and the hours of daylight that it provides and the weather conditions that we can expect, is key to the management methods required in relation to the needs of our pigeons. If we are to rear the best youngsters possible, have our racers in the best feather at the time when we need them most and feed them correctly, it is impossible if we do not understand the impact, that nature's seasons has on our birds. There are no secrets about nature, it is all documented somewhere on the Internet or in the books at your local library!

I hope the above will cause reason to throw open your mind as you read my writings. I am not always conventional in my thoughts, when compared to age old pigeon folk law but I will try to explain why I do some of the less obvious things that I do over the course of the coming season and maybe they will be of interest to you.

Three very famous quotes by **Confucius**:

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.

I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.

Only the wisest and stupidest of men don't change.

January -- Janus's month

Janus is the Roman god of gates and doorways, depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions. His festival month is January. **Januarius had 29 days, until Julius Caesar in 46 BC made it 31 days long.** The start of 2009 has seen January arrive with snow and cold temperatures, almost like the winters we knew of 20 years ago! Sun rise in the North East corner of Cheshire is at 8:19 AM and Sunset: 4:13 PM on this day 9th January as I tinkle with the key board to produce this article. As you can calculate there is barely 8 hrs of daylight (sunlight) and therefore no natural incentive from nature to prompt birds to go to nest. Of all animals in existence today, birds are one of the most profoundly affected by light. They have survived and evolved for millions of years relying on the full spectrum of light created by the seasonal cycles of the sun. They rely on sensory input from their eyes possibly more than any other species. And light has a tremendous influence on their growth, metabolism, reproduction, and behaviour as well.

The timing of the reproductive cycle is governed by the length of the daylight hours --- longer days stimulate reproductive organs and sexual behaviour. When approaching their breeding season, one of the most critically important minerals to a bird's overall health and development is calcium. Calcium promotes strong bones as well as the maintenance of many physiological functions. Without calcium, birds can suffer spontaneous fractures, which may cripple them for life. Unfortunately, calcium cannot be absorbed by the intestines, nor can its level be regulated, without the presence of **Vitamin D3**. Vitamin D3 can be obtained in 2 ways: through the birds diet; and via a process in the skin known as synthesis. The process of synthesis requires ultraviolet radiation of a specific wavelength. The most common source of this radiation is, of course, **sunlight**. So, in a nutshell, your breeders and early youngsters need sunlight (or full-spectrum artificial light) in order for their body to absorb calcium. This essential ultraviolet radiation is filtered out by normal window glass; hence, light coming through a window in your will not cannot stimulate the production of of vitamin D3 in the body of the pigeons inside. Sexual behaviour, egg production, the development of the gonads in the male..... all of these factors and more are affected by light. Egg production can be improved by artificially creating longer periods of light, simulating natural seasonal light cycles.

Prior to the pairing of my stock birds, which I began on 5th January this year, I ensured that they had lights for two weeks from 08.30 a.m.. to 20.30 p.m.. In seasonal terms, this simulates the amount of light that occurs at the time of the Spring Equinox (Vernal Equinox) when day and night are each 12 hours long and the Sun is at the midpoint of the sky. This occurs naturally around 21st March when in 2009 the sun will rise at around 06.16 a.m.. and set at around 18.27 p.m. in my part of the country. I know from using this practice over previous seasons that the breeding program will be best supported. With regards to my race birds, I will pair them on 11th January to coincide with the phase of the full moon on that evening. The time that it takes to lay and the rearing of youngsters is not significant to me here as my focus for my racers is the control of the moult during the race season and they therefore do not rear youngsters. The race birds only have the light provided by nature. The assistance that they do get is via radiant heat to control the humidity inside the loft to ensure the correct levels of oxygen required.

At this time of the year I do not let my birds out for exercise, this will begin in February, with an 8 week program of exercise and fitness training prior to the race season.

NESTING MATERIALS: In 2009 I have decided to try the nest liners that were first shown to me a couple of seasons ago by Frank Tasker. Made of a woven coconut material, well ventilated by virtue of the material used and extremely user friendly to wash clean, Frank had brought them back with him from a visit to China. They are now advertised in the UK. Via the pigeon press. Below are some of photos showing how I have used them in conjunction with a paper wrap on the nest bowl and then secured them in place with a simple cable tie. I use the paper for extra warmth and added ventilation, via its crinkles and folds under the nest liner and the cable tie is to prevent the pigeon's claw becoming caught in the liner and dragging the nest out and breaking eggs or killing young. The nesting material used is tobacco stalks.



Nest liner secured to nest bowl with cable tie.



Nest liner secured underneath nest bowl.



Before the tobacco stalks are given to the pairs.



Shortly after the pairs have had the stalks given.

I have both up and over nest boxes and side by side boxes in my stock lofts and you will notice that in the up and overs the nest bowls are on a wire tray which gives complete ventilation beneath the bowl throughout the breeding program. In the side by side boxes where I do not have a sliding wire tray, I place a plastic tray on short legs beneath the bowl to create the desired air flow and ventilation needed to rear healthy youngsters and prevent the damp sweaty patches beneath the bowls which harbour bacteria and other problems. The use of the newspaper is significant in ventilation terms as it channels air into the bowl beneath the nest liner. The cleaning of bowls after breeding is also much easier than when the paper is not used. Prior to this season, I also used a wooden stand with the up and over boxes to elevate the bowl but have concluded that I gain no benefits and that they make cleaning a more difficult job, hence they have now been discarded.



As you can see from the photos of the two pairs above, a nice neat nest results with good air flow.

THE RACERS: As I mentioned earlier in this article, my racers do not fly out at this time of year. There are two main reasons for this, firstly I believe in complete rest throughout the moulting period and secondly I do not wish to supply the growing hawk population with the essential proteins that they require before they start their breeding program. I witness daily the efforts of the hawks to attack a nearby population of feral pigeons and I know from experience that this activity will subside when the female sparrow hawks go to nest. It is essential for me to ensure that my birds are through their moult and that I have their body weight correct for flight, in the very early part of the year, as this is when the danger exists from the hawks. It therefore fits very well with my plan to commence fitness training in February, as I can ensure that everything is in place by then. When out to exercise, the birds are called in immediately on completion of exercise and this is repeated until the birds are race fit.



Opposite you can see some of the 2008 bred hens. These hens have been trained to 60 miles as Ybs and will be paired on the January Full Moon, 11th Jan. This will signal the start of their 2009 season. They have completed a nice moult and are ready to pair. The main aim will be that they bond to their mate and their nest box as fitness training will commence after they have sat a pair of eggs for nine or ten days. All pairs will be split at the same time and be given a few days of sulking time and a strict diet to reduce weight before the flying commences. The same applies to the cocks that they will be paired to, of which 50% will be older race experienced pigeons.

The subject of whether pigeons need to rear youngsters before being raced on the widow system is one which is continually debated but from my own point of view, I know from having tried various nesting conditions prior to the widow, that it has no ill effect and that it can help control the moult. In fact the best season that I have ever enjoyed in pigeon racing, winning the Northern Counties 2 bird at 300 miles, 1st Section NFC at 598 miles and 2nd Section NFC at 700 miles, the cocks were never paired before racing began. It is also true to say that I have won many many top positions and thousands of pounds in pools and prizes with birds that did not rear youngsters in the race season. I am also aware that pigeons which do rear youngsters, win top prizes but I am only explaining why I do not deem it to be necessary.

If there was only one road to Rome, pigeon racing would not be as exciting and entertaining and I think that there would be many more fanciers bailing out of the sport than there already is. It is a very hard sport to reach the top at nowadays, especially at the highest levels of competition and it certainly isn't easy to stay there. The higher the level, for example National level, the bigger the geographical spread and the greater the influence that geographical position, wind direction and numbers of birds flying into certain sections has! Perhaps that is why it is the ultimate level to succeed at. When I think about competition at the highest level, it brings to mind the words spoken by two very famous lady tennis players who respectively said; **"Whoever said, It's not whether you win or lose that counts, probably lost."** **Martina Navratilova** and **"Champions keep playing until they get it right."** **Billie Jean King.**

January has been a rather special month for me for quite some years now, on reflection the last twenty at least. In the autumn of 1985 I bought the home in Woodley where I still live today with my wife Karen, in 1986 I bred the very first YBs at that new address. With the exception of only one year since 1986, Karen and I have attended the BHW show of the Year at Blackpool which, normally falls just about one week before Karen's birthday. This year it falls only a few days before her birthday which, will make the weekend all the more to look forward to and enjoy. To be able to dedicate as much time as I have over the years to my hobby, I am fortunate and there has been no bigger contributor to that achievement than Karen. Her patience and understanding of my commitment and passion for my hobby, is what has made it all possible. She has never shown a personal interest in the pigeons but her support has always been 100%. There is also another very good reason that I look forward to the Blackpool event but it does not relate to racing pigeons. It relates to showing pigeons. Ever since a small boy, when I would attend shows via a local coach run by the local pigeon club back in Winsford, I have had a fascination for the "show racer" as a breed. So much so that over the years I have kept the odd pair or two for pleasure and today I have a dozen pairs or so which, with a bit of luck I will be able to show in seasons to come. The Blackpool Show is without doubt the one that all of the show world would like to win BIS and there is also the extra attraction of the Supreme Champions class, made up of the BIS winners from several large qualifying shows. Last year I judged a couple of classes at the Blackpool show but was not lucky enough to draw any of the show racer classes. I found it to be a great experience as a so called "racing man" to judge a high quality class of show racers and it is far removed from the club shows held by local racing clubs. It sometimes grieves me to hear the somewhat bitterness expressed by one faction of the pigeon sport towards the other, both racing and showing have their champions and each deserve recognition in their own right. There is one thing that you can be sure of and that is that both camps will be well represented at Blackpool on 23rd, 24th and 25th of this month as once again North West's best known seaside resort becomes a meeting place and Mecca for pigeon fanciers from all over the world.



Above are some of the show racers that I have, which I will be pairing in February hoping to produce something that may just be good enough to succeed at the highest level at some time in the future..

January may not be the most glamorous month of our year but in the pigeon sport it is just as important as any of the other eleven months. Anything therefore that helps to maintain or boost our enthusiasm, has to be worth while! Perhaps you have found a little something via this article? Enjoy your pigeons! **Chris K.**