Taking to the Skies by Les J Parkinson

A few years ago I wrote an article called “Wings in Flight” that went down well and was published in several countries by other magazines. Since then I have been asked other questions so because most is going to be the same I am modifying the original article and bringing it up to date. However the first article I wrote was based on my findings over many years of handling winners at all distances. When you study birds in the wind they also have variations in their wings for different reasons. The sparrow hawk has a real fast wing that comes about because it has a very short back wing that does not create drag. When you look at the sea faring birds they have big back wings that keep them in the air where they can also sleep of a fashion I suppose it suits their needs.

Although I have studied the flying mechanism of racing pigeons this particular project came about when Derek Woodward called in for a conversation and the subject most discussed was the wing theory. I first started compiling loft reports in the late 70’s and have enjoyed visiting many fanciers both in the UK and abroad. I said at the time that I thought that now is the time to re-evaluate those ideas on what I have seen over the years during many loft visits. In one of my articles on Cheshire News I touched on the wing and the theories that surround it and I am now going into a few more details on this subject mainly for the comparative new starters. There are probably not a lot of those about but never-the-less there will be some and of course the existing fanciers who are always interested in reading anything about racing pigeons. I like everyone else am always learning and looking at what my views of the past have been and I am not afraid to say that I have changed my views for whatever reason. We can all get stale by sticking to the same routine year in year out and can lose focus on the way to get to the top. When you are prepared to change you can put new vigour into both the pigeons and yourself. The way to the top is to improve all the time and to improve you have to change. Should we change when we are winning, of course because we are all looking to move forward and achieve the highest acclaim in the sport. There are many household names in pigeon racing and you can bet your life that they have made many changes on their way to the top.

There is no doubt about it the flight of a bird has come a long way since the first known bird in flight which was the Archaeopteryx whose fossils were found in limestone in the Southern part of Germany in 1861. The fossil is thought to be from 140 million years ago, how they come to that conclusion I have no idea it was before my time. However this fossil did give the ornithologist an insight into the first birds of flight because the fossil did have both reptile and avian characteristics. Even so the new breed of animal (the bird) did not develop a great deal over the next 25 million years but then when it did change different species began to evolve. The evolution of birds and their survival rate has made them one of the outstanding forms of life in the world; they see everything from the air and survive in all sorts of conditions on all continents.

Over the years different birds have developed and their wings became suited to the requirements of that particular line. The racing pigeon is no different it has changed considerably over the years and has become suited to the distances it is expected to cover. The racing pigeon has not achieved success at the fanciers chosen distance by luck they have been cultivated over many years. The sprinters have bred for speed while the distance fanciers have bred for endurance and that has been the harder of the two because they need age and experience. What suites one fancier in the breeding for a distance may not suit another, which is why every fancier cannot have a team of birds to cover all eventualities if they did there would be no real challenge to racing pigeons.
The wing of the racing pigeon is no different from any other part of this racing machine, which is generally developed to perfection. There have been many theories over the years and through extensive breeding to near perfection of the distance that the pigeon is required to fly. Experienced fanciers have bred pigeon’s for their preference in racing i.e. the wing for the sprinter or which in the modern day of racing can be anything up to 300mls. In my early days of racing pigeons this distance was classed as middle distance but with the improved knowledge gained by the observant fancier the sprint distance has been increased. This also applies to the middle distance of 300 to 500mls; these races have been covered by more and more pigeon’s yearly. In fact if you do not clock on the day from 450 to 500mls then it is considered that there is something wrong.

The long distance races are upwards of 500mls where the numbers clocked are considerably reduced unless you get favourable conditions even so there are fancier’s who clock from such distances with a greater degree of regularity. After 600mls we are practically always looking at second day birds and again unless there are favourable conditions. Even then to compete towards 700mls on the day is no mean fete because they still have to put the time on the wing. We know that the Central Southern have this idea of “At dawn we go”. But in reality there are very few pigeon’s that will do that kind of distance on the day from such places as Pau even to the South Coast where they are covering a band of 500 to 525mls to the shorter flying members. The only problem with the pigeons arriving at the coast late at night is will they or won’t they attempt to cross the water. I have very often thought of how many pigeons try to make it across the water late at night and fail to reach their destination. One thing that you must remember about distance racing is the preparation and there are not great numbers of pigeon fanciers who can prepare them for 600/700ml races. This is where the good pigeon comes into its own because no matter how much work you put into the pigeons not many will keep going over such a distance. Top class sprint pigeons will rarely do the distance because they put everything into the opening of a race and they will give everything and the get tired. Then when they get to their maximum distance they go down and find it hard to get going again so do not return to their home loft.

Most of the racing done in Britain is on land based on the fact that for the majority of fancier’s there are good races without crossing the water. Obviously depending on where your loft is situated you can get a couple of hundred miles plus on either North or South road points. For those fanciers living in the central part of the Country the racing is good because they can get a good land race before crossing the channel which they then get in the last two thirds of the race. Now for the Southern fanciers who want to race the Nationals it is unfortunate that they have to get their birds across the water early in their races if they are to succeed in the big races. We were down at the Blandford lofts of Tony Haynes a few years ago for a Guernsey race and could not believe the problems that the Southern fanciers have from such a short race. Where you are situated in the country does make a big difference to the results that you are going to achieve. Always remember that there is nothing fair about racing pigeons because the position and wind will always dictate the winners. That is why when you are selecting where you are going to by you pigeons from you must take everything into account.

What we must remember is that the velocity of a particular race will also have a bearing on the winners as will the wind which is why so much must be taken into account when you are preparing pigeons for sprint, middle or long distance races. Why should this be, well on a hard day with the vels dropping to 1000ypm or even less we generally find that the fanciers who do well in the longer events are higher up
the result sheet? That makes a big difference to the way we pair the pigeons and that is why we should be very selective with our choice. We must never make the mistake of rating a pigeon as an all rounder on the strength of one win in the longer events if it has a proven track record on land but never raced across. If you do class a pigeon as an all rounder then you must take into account the vels on the day as well as the distance covered. You can get sprint to middle distance pigeons covering greater distances but that nearly always happens when the wind is in their favour and if the conditions are against them they more often that not do not go down. It is a fact that some fanciers north of the Midlands will not put a pigeon into a channel race that has a good track record in the land races with some pigeons this is wise because the pigeon may only be built for sprint races in the first place and the wing theory will tell you that this pigeon is not going to make the distance.

So what have we picked up so far with the wing theory, the main point being consideration to the conditions of the day? I remember winning a 120ml race when I was working at Foden Trucks Sandbach and every weekday lunchtime we would sit around and have an inquiry about all sorts of things. One Monday in the early days I went in as pleased as punch because I had won the race on the Saturday that was until the late George Stubbs pulled me up saying that you cannot class a pigeon as being good after winning in a tail wind. That point brings us back to the wing theory and which wing suits which distance. Because no matter how much the comment hurt at the time he was right and it makes you wonder just how much some of the top fanciers actually know and keep to themselves. Another fancier who pointed me in the same direction was Roy Smith who could always be seen in the results when it came to the channel races. By this time I was gathering more and more information about what was required to win a good race in comparison to a race when the elements were favouring the pigeons as they soared towards their home.

When you are just starting out in the world of racing pigeons it is hard to take what you consider are unfavourable comments when you have just won a few prizes in the early years. Not in all cases but most of those comments are worth taking into account but do not get the comments from a good distance winning fancier mixed with those of the jealous fancier who does not want to see you winning in the more prestige’s races. Those are generally the fanciers who have tried it and failed miserably and gone back to the easier sprint races. I say easier, they are but you have to put more work into winning those races. Training and good exercise is the name of the game in the sprint events whereas the distance races need patience and knowledge.

This is where the fancier who knows and studies the wing of the pigeon comes into their own. Let’s look at what we need; first of all you need the right breeding for whatever distance you are aiming for. You can then look at the winners in those lines and if they are to the requirements of the chosen distance then you are on to a winner. However you might say that there are an awful lot of National performance pigeons that are not directly off top winners but they can and very often do throw back to winning descendants. You may have two or three generations where there are no winners but sure as houses are house a top winner will pop up through selective breeding. Most of this is a reference to the distance races because if you get a good winning sprint family there are generally several generations of them. You will also find that this will stop when they get into the hands of a fancier who is not really as good as the previous fancier. The winning family then comes to a halt and a few generations are bred because they off such and such a fancier who won everything they had a go at in the sprint races.
A prime example of a good line is that of “Nationaal I” because there are at least 7 x 1st National winners coming from his line in a comparatively short period of time. What’s more a descendant “Nationaal II” who is himself a 1st National winner is currently the best breeding cock in Europe if not the world and is sought after by some of the top lofts in the world. Not all pigeons from this or in fact any line are going to be winners but on percentage “Nationaal I” has got to rate as good as any and probably far better than most. I shall include the wing of “Nationaal II” and a couple of his direct children to show how they follow on.

Picture 1.
Dark Hen winner of prizes to nearly 500mls and has been twice 2nd Niort. This is a full wing to race the middle distance where the strength of both the full wing and the strong flights easily propel the bird forward. Take note of the full back wing and also the width of the flights right through the wing. The end flights become slightly shorter for the middle distance pigeon.
Picture 2.
Is a sprint wing and when the pigeon was tested at 300mls he took rather longer to come home and was not sent to a channel race after that? However when you send a pigeon across the water that is not suited to and distance it does take it out of the bird for future sprint events. But for the sprint races this cock gained many good positions in club and fed. On my travels I have found that this is generally the type of wing that picks up speed. If you look at the wing of the Sparrow Hawk you will notice that the back wing is very small and even the primary flights taper off much more quickly than most other members of the bird family. Take note that the primary flights become proportionally longer for the sprint pigeon compared to the middle and long distance birds.

Picture 3.
This is a wing that will put any bird up amongst the winners up to 400 to 450mls but will then drop away, this cock has won prizes in club, fed and Classic up to 410mls. It has a good back wing that is slightly bigger than the out and out sprinters and will race in any velocity. Notice the step up from primary seven to eight and also the slight gaps between the end four flights, this can be found in the sprint and middle distance pigeons.
The wing of the out and out distance pigeon which has a complete full back wing to make flight that much easier for the bird to stay in the air for long periods of time. This type of pigeon does not have to put in the same number of wing beats to cover the distance when they have a long journey. The bigger back wing does make it easier for any bird to stay in the air with ease. If you look at the birds that soar high above in search of food such as the eagles, vultures, buzzards etc they all have big back wings which effectively keeps their use of energy to a minimum. When you look at the birds that fly long distances in migration they all have big back wings in comparison to their body. In the pigeon world we have fanciers who have a preference to distance racing and they breed for that purpose which leads to this type of full wing. Pigeons, like birds that are migrating know that geologically they have a big task ahead of them with the distance that they have to cover and therefore they do not put all the energy into the faster wing beat. The problem that the pigeon has with flight is that it is a high cost of energy, which is why the sprinter who puts in the faster wing beats cannot cover the longer distance races. I was once in conversation with a local fancier about one of his pigeons and the wing theory and the term came up “Chicken Wing” and that proved to be his best 500ml pigeon, again the full back wing that a pigeon needs to cover greater distances.
The next four are of 1st National winner “Dark Destroyer” and three of his children that are crossed with different pigeons. This is a fine example of breeding from a pigeon with pigeons from other distances.

Picture 5.
Is 1st National F.C winner “Dark Destroyer” where you can see that the back wing is a little over 300mls but with the breeding being Janssen cross Jan Aarden Black giant this cock is ideal to cross into Sprint, Middle Distance and long distance lines.
Picture 5a.
Is a blue pied hen off “Dark Destroyer” when he was crossed with a sprint Van Reet Hen. This pigeon is spot on to cross into the sprint Van Reet lines.

Picture 5b.
This is another out of “Dark Destroyer” crossed with the Middle Distance lines that will cross well into and distance pigeon.
Picture 5c.
Is an out and out distance line that will win at the distance and with the balance of the wing that will cross either way.
We now go onto “Nationaal II” who is probably the best current day breeding pigeon in Europe being responsible for many top winning pigeons on the continent.

Picture 6.
This is “Nationaal II” himself and has a very good 400mls plus distance wing hat would quite easily make 500mls. This cock is a 1st National winner and has bred many winners including a 1st National winner against over 72,000 birds. This cock has bred pigeons via Ferdy Vandersanden to win for many of the top fanciers in Belgium and also the National winner in Holland.
Picture 6a.
This is a daughter of “Nationaal II” and is on the same line as her sire because the sire is also based on the same distance.

Picture 6b.
Another daughter of “Nationaal II” but will not quite get the same distance as her sire because there is an influence of 300/400ml from the dams side.
There are many fanciers who would like to race from the longer race points but very rarely get the birds home. The reason for that is, they are racing their birds in the shorter events and breeding off those that get amongst the prize winners but for the longer races you have to be far more patient if you are going to get into the big league. Now what happens with the fanciers who successfully race the distance is they are selective with their breeding and only breed from the pigeons that have set a standard of racing which will lead to success in the longer events. The steady pigeon that has the breeding will always come through. There are odd occasions when the distance pigeon will produce a sprint to middle distance pigeon and when this arises and you look back through the breeding you will see that this has happened before and therefore a throwback. These throwback pigeons will not necessarily produce the distance pigeon even though they have come from the distance pigeon in the first place this is where you get the all distance loft coming into its own.

One thing always infuriates me when you go to the pigeon shows and there is a competition on selection of wings for what distance. In the first place I have no idea who takes the pictures of the wings but they should learn how a bird uses it's wing before they take the next one then take the photo and ask the question. Taking a photo of a wing that is being stretched out to put it in its full context is about as useful as a chocolate fireguard in a nursery, if you are going to do it get it right and there is no danger of misinterpretation. When they are wrong the interested fancier gets the wrong data set in their mind and therefore they go wrong from the start.

ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT AT THE END OF THE DAY THE FANCIERS MUST KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING OR ELSE YOU WILL NOT GET ANYWHERE. KNOWLEDGE IS HELPFUL BUT NOT WHAT WE NEED TO WIN THE RACE. WHAT DOES MATTER IS HOW YOU PUT THAT KNOWLEDGE INTO USE.