

## HEALTH MATTERS

From a veterinary health point of view pigeons represent an extreme therapeutic challenge. In a closed stock loft or parrot aviary, where the movement of birds in and out is very low it is simply a matter of testing birds, identifying what diseases are present and treating them. Once this has been done good care, good nutrition and the provision of good housing should then prevent any stressed based disease from flaring. In racing lofts however, a large proportion of the residents leave each week and then return after mixing with birds from many different lofts usually under conditions that favor the spread of disease.

Obviously we cannot give medication to these birds all the time and so we try to develop a strong natural immunity in them. It is this natural immunity that protects the birds from disease in the longer term. A strong natural immunity develops through ongoing good care and the correct use of medication. With this in mind I find it easiest to divide the year into six stages. Each stage has its own aim and the correct way to use medication differs in each stage. These stages are:

### **Pre-breeding stage**

To start the breeding season with healthy stock birds.

Parasitic disease and diseases that were a problem in the loft during the previous breeding season are best treated now.

### **Breeding stage**

To produce healthy robust young ready for weaning no later than 28 days of age and to maintain the health and condition of the stock birds.

With the exception of canker, disease appearing now often reflects inadequate preparation for breeding. Medicating breeding stock birds is a challenge because many of the drugs used can have side effects during this period and accurate dosing is difficult because of the variable water intake in feeding stock birds depending on the age of their youngsters.

### **Post weaning stage**

**Aim:** To allow a controlled exposure to disease organisms so that the youngsters can develop a strong natural immunity to them. This is achieved by providing a stress-free environment and by avoiding the use of medication if possible.

Medication is best avoided now. Mild disease now can sometimes act almost as a mini vaccination, strengthening the growing birds natural immunity through low-grade ongoing disease exposure. Usually disease is only treated if it progresses to the stage where it compromises the bird's growth and development.

### **Moulting stage**

To have a good moult resulting in the production of a lustrous set of feathers and to allow ongoing development of a strong natural immunity. This is achieved through the maintenance of a stress-free environment, drug avoidance, parasite elimination and a complete diet.

Because feather growth occurs continuously over several months, and feather quality is poor if the birds are not healthy, examining the bird's feathers is like looking at a diary outlining the bird's health during the moulting time. Feathers have to last all year. A poor moult results in poor quality feathers and compromise of race performance for the whole season. Many common drugs such as antibiotics and some wormers affect feather quality. Best always to check with an avian vet first before using medication during this time.

### **Pre Competition stage**

Having allowed as much time as possible for the birds to form their natural immunity it is now a matter of assessing what health problems are persistent, and then using drugs, if necessary, to get the birds completely healthy before the first race.

Interestingly when many birds from good lofts are checked at this time no disease is apparent. A clinical examination, crop flush and faecal smear will identify most of the common problems. If present, now is a good time to treat them.

### **Competition stage**

To maintain winning form through the entire season by good management and maintenance of health.

This is when it gets interesting. It is also the time when most fanciers start making serious mistakes.

During competition medication is used to maintain health. It is vital that the birds are completely free of any health problems to give of their best. Winning birds are always not only fit but also healthy. If the natural immunity they have formed is not strong enough to keep them healthy during the inherent stress of racing, then medication is used to ensure that health is maintained, so that success can be ongoing and unnecessary losses avoided.

Each loft has its own set of parameters all of which affect disease. Loft parameters include such things as the genetic base of the birds, the loft design, the geographical location of the loft, and the way the birds are managed generally.

If the set of parameters governing a particular loft is unchanged then any health problem that occurred in previous years will predictably reappear. This is why successful, preventative health programs can be reapplied in particular lofts year after year.

However, some health problems are more likely to occur in a particular type of loft, or in lofts in particular locations. This explains why a program that works well in one loft is inappropriate in another.

Fanciers racing these birds therefore need to ensure very good control of this problem. Similarly birds living in cold, damp lofts are more vulnerable to E.coli. Birds with these problems can still win but only provided that the fancier is aware of them and manages them correctly.

Two options are open to the fancier. He can have the health of his birds monitored through regular testing and treat his birds appropriately for his situation, or alternatively he can work through a health protocol blindly. This difficulty here of course is that his birds may have medications for problems that they don't have, while at the same time be under treated for serious problems in his loft. He may in fact be using a health program that would work best in another loft.

Obviously testing and the wise use of medication is the way to go. Basically we don't want to give unnecessary drugs, but also we don't want to race poorly or experience losses due to an overlooked health problem.

Racing studs represent a great opportunity to study the effects of loft parameters. In many lofts fanciers have one or two strains and many of the birds are related. While in racing studs often many birds of quite different genetics are raced. In this situation there is one loft and one training and feeding regime, but many different genes and so the effect that this one parameter, i.e. the birds genetic make-up, has on health can be studied. The results help to explain the conflicting advice that a new fancier can receive from experienced fliers.

If you ask ten different experienced fanciers a question about pigeon management you are just as likely to get ten different answers. It is not that anyone is being non-truthful, but simply that they are answering purely from their own experience and because each of them has a different set of loft parameters, each of which is likely to be different, their answer purely reflects what is correct for them. If the fancier doesn't treat this may be due to the birds having a wet canker flare up after a race which takes three weeks to resolve, at which time the birds are competitive again. Goodgers often form a very strong natural immunity to wet canker at quite a young age. So a fancier that races Goodgers may suggest that, after a steady competition, some birds should be doubled back because the first competition can act as a conditioning. And so we have it, different answers to the one question. Both correct but only for that loft. The correct advice to a novice should be to have his birds checked and see what is best for his loft.

Fanciers often ask, why did my birds get sick during racing? Disease can only appear in one of two situations:

Exposure to disease causing organisms, in particular new strains of wet canker and respiratory infection. Because these strains are not resident in their own loft, the birds cannot possibly have developed immunity to them.

For this reason, disease flare ups can occur in well managed lofts with resultant loss of form and variable losses.

Severe stress leading to flare ups of resident strains of organisms. Overcrowding and low hygiene are the obvious ones in poor lofts. In successful lofts un-foreseen stresses, such as an unexpectedly difficult toss in cold weather, can occur if and when disease occurs medication is used to:

Control disease while the environment or management flaw that leads to it occurring is corrected. The correct approach for a long- term solution is not always obvious. For example, in birds with low numbers of coccidia on their faecal smear, the answer may not necessarily be an anti-coccidia drug such as Baycox, but rather a reduction in the amount of tossing and a multivitamin supplement.

Control new diseases that enter the loft with returning race birds so that health, and with it fitness and race form can re-establish.

It's an interesting thing. If a fancier has seven good races in a twenty week program, then given the

Variability's in wind direction etc, then one would expect his seven good races to be scattered through the program. Yet, in fact, this is rarely the case. More often than not his seven good races are likely to occur in a run of eight or nine starts. When his good run finishes it is explained simply by saying that the birds have "lost form". Yet invariably, when we check these birds we find that Ecoli, wet canker or Chlamydia etc has become involved. Once a loft's health problems have been identified, then they can be prevented. Then given a sensible tossing regime, a well designed loft, and astute care there is no reason why consistent form should not be maintained through an entire season.