

Acknowledging the Familiar:  
The Unsung Heroes of the Bird Show World

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ABSTRACT

Familiar can often become boring to people when they see it every day. New and exotic species can often feel more exciting and engaging, pushing the more everyday out of the limelight. Animals in collections seem to follow the same trend: more exotic animals join the show and those who are more commonplace in our lives may receive less attention. This paper will feature four groups that are sometimes under appreciated when compared to more exotic and novel species: Chickens, Pigeons, Ducks, and Rats. This presentation will focus on a group of four pigeons, highlighting one individual, that I have been working with to try and dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding these surprisingly intriguing birds and help others understand their true value.

When most people go to a bird show at a zoo or amusement park, they are expecting to be wowed by rare and exotic animals performing behaviors that they wouldn't have imagined possible. Boldly colored macaws from far away rainforests performing aerial acrobatics, endangered eagles flying inches over children's heads, and condors with wings that blot out the sun, making unsuspecting eyes widen in wonder. More often than not, these are the experiences that people appreciate when they sit in our bleachers and applaud our efforts to educate and entertain. There is without a doubt something to be said about exposing the general public to species from mystical places they have only heard about on television: African savannas, Indonesian Rainforests, and Arabian Deserts. However, it can be equally important and enjoyable for visitors to our shows to explore the animals that they can find in their own yards and neighborhoods. This is my way of highlighting those supporting actors and giving them the fifteen minutes of fame they are due.

It is often said that the best place to hide is right out in the open. Seeing something every day threatens to make it become mundane. As a result, we easily overlook and under-appreciate those things. In the field we all know and love, what groups of animals fit into this category? Honestly, there are probably dozens of animal groupings that classify. However, we will focus on four that most facilities have incorporated into their collections: Chickens, Pigeons, Ducks, and Rats.

The importance that all these animals share in a program is not just to connect the audience to themselves, but also to accentuate the underlying message being presented by the activities onstage. Acting in the part that I like to call "Animal Accents", these animals provide an extra punch to the messages we hope the audience will absorb. Rats are a superb example of an excellent Animal Accent. In most shows, these little furry racers run along a route, to provide emphasis to the

message that birds of prey are incredibly beneficial at keeping rodent populations under control. Watching the rats populate the stage increases the likelihood that the average audience member (especially youngsters) will remain engaged in the routine and retain the general message “birds of prey eat LOTS of rodents so let’s keep those birds around”. As a presenter wishing to pass information to an audience member, we need this audience attention to be sure that our messages are being absorbed.

Pigeons are also a fantastic representation of an Animal Accent group. It seems that their most common location in a show is at the very end. A flock of white pigeons flying together at the end of the show evokes a powerful response from the public. “Oohs”, “Ahs”, and other exclamations sometimes drown out the sound of twenty or more pairs of wings as hands rise up to point and clap. As with the rats, these pigeons help to fortify a greater connection between the show and the audience. For example, one of our most popular shows presented in Orlando, Florida, ends with the two characters onstage bowing to the audience as they send them off to enjoy the rest of their day. As they begin to bow a flock of about 18 pigeons burst out of one of the wings of the stage and cross behind them before flowing over the opposite side of the stage and disappearing. The effect can bring shivers to the onlookers and create a lasting, memorable atmosphere of awe that the audience carries with them out of the theater.

Now, as many bird shows have most likely experienced, during certain times of the year there is an increase in wild birds of prey passing through our area. With the influx of predators during migration, we remove from shows a couple of species that seem to be especially tempting. Pigeons are always the first on the list. They are also at the top of the list for behaviors missed from shows. Even with strong ending dialogue, without the pigeon flight ending the show the effect is weakened and at times it seems as if the audience questions if the show is over. There are no exclamations, no pointing, just applause. There is usually a sigh of relief and satisfaction from the show crew when pigeons are back in shows.

Chickens and ducks seem to be a shoe-in for comedic relief. The best part is, they are really good at it! The audience doesn’t expect to see chickens and ducks because they see them in their everyday life and are assuming that rare and exotic animals are all they are going to see. However, just because they don’t expect to see them, doesn’t mean that they don’t appreciate them! In fact, seeing the chickens and ducks among the strange and exotic, seems to get a huge reaction from the crowds, possibly because of the surprise or recognition. One of the most common questions we get after a show is over is, “You can train *chickens*?!” Again, familiarity seems to cause an under-estimation of a great species. Just because these animals are thought as “every day”, they are not thought of much in regard to intelligence or trainability. Another reason why some people may not think of including chickens and ducks for shows may be because they are too used to seeing them in a different way: cooked and on a dining table. It may upset some people to think that the chicken that is so tasty on their plate is also capable of evoking thought and emotion in a show... while fully alive. Little do they know that the very chicken they saw run across the stage is a valuable asset to the show roster and is not only trained, but is often one of the most reliable performers.

Ducks are great for shows too if not for their adorable walking style, but because of their aquatic abilities. This factor can add an element to a show that many more exotic animals are not able to provide and the effect can be amazing.

The focus of my passion of incorporating species such as these into our shows stems from the belief that we, as educators and conservationists, want to make a difference in this world we share. By having our audience make a connection with our animals we are heading in the right direction. By creating a reason to care about the animals in their immediate area, we are able to bring the idea of conservation closer to home and thus possibly create the opportunity for them to take steps to help conserve nature. By learning to care about animals such as pigeons, ducks, and chickens, we are helping them to learn more about the world they live in.

These undistinguished species are still often overlooked and judged despite their unique or interesting adaptations for survival. It was with all the pre-conceived ideas and stereotypes in mind that I proposed a project that showed promise to banish those labels and stereotypes. My idea: to train and present pigeons (yes – common, everyday pigeons) in a show with a set of more complicated and advanced behaviors. My hope is to bring a stronger connection between these birds and the attending public, as well as dispel the cultural fog surrounding what these birds are capable of. The idea for the end behavior is to have an individual pigeon trained to fly behind a larger flock and peel off from the group to circle the theater, and then land on the presenter's hand and remain with them while they are onstage. Another idea for these pigeons is for them to fly out to stage and land on the outstretched hand of a child volunteer.

With behaviors like these, it is obvious that there will be some challenges. Some of the most distinct are: the idea that some of the labels and stereotypes surrounding these birds may have some truth, training a behavior that resists a typical survival strategy and management of these pigeons. There are few trainers out there with experience managing or training Columbiformes in this manner; and some have their own discriminations to consider about pigeon capabilities. However, I was convinced that these birds had more going for them than others gave them credit for. Fate, and the AMAZING management team at NEI, decided to give the idea a shot.

One of the most glaring concerns was that for the end behavior I was asking this individual pigeon to fly away from a flock of its peers. My plan to combat this was fairly simple, I felt I needed to hand-raise these birds so that they would imprint on people and therefore the desire to follow the group might be outweighed by the desire to be with people. The situation that disrupted my plan was quarantine. We were acquiring these pigeons from a breeder and so they would have to go through the typical 30-day quarantine. If they cannot be kept at our facility, then they cannot get the multiple formula feedings they would need for proper growth. This is how it came to be that I got four feathered housemates in the middle of June. In those four weeks, they learned a number of behaviors from stepping onto the hand, to the scale, to flying several feet in the entryway of the house to my hand. With the help of my human housemates, they also were introduced to several variables such as vacuums, Chihuahuas, and four-year old girls.

## QUARANTINE

When the plans for getting these pigeons was still in progress, I was spending as much of my free-time as possible researching the rearing of pigeons. This is how we came to the decision that 5 weeks would be appropriate for the number of formula feedings they would need while they were younger. At 5 weeks of age, they are beginning to eat independently and would only be getting fed from their parents about twice daily. So, with this information, I planned to give them a formula feeding in the morning before leaving for work, and then give them another feeding of formula when I got back home. My hope was that at this age, they would also be more open to accept me.

Immediate acceptance of me was out of the question from the beginning. Even with the introduction of the formula, which I'll admit I was expecting them to go crazy for, they made it very clear that anything to do with me was at the absolute bottom of their wish list. Since they had never had formula before, in retrospect, it wasn't that surprising.

To be sure that they were healthily gaining weight, I started weighing each one twice a day. However, being picked up to be weighed was not helping my cause. Therefore, the first order of business was getting these kids to eat out of my hand so that I could give them more information about where they should go, like on a scale. After careful record-keeping of the food they were consuming, the grain was the clear favorite over the pellet or mealworms. Keeping this in mind, I started saving some of the grain for relationship-building sessions with me and they could have all of the pellets they wanted the rest of the time. What started with me just being present when the grain was added to their bowl became them letting my hand be present in the enclosure while they came forward to eat. Interestingly, but not incredibly surprisingly, competition proved to be a large factor in these sessions. Once one made the decision to come forward, then the rest would rush after him. A session or two more led to them eating from the hand and stepping onto the hand just two weeks after coming to live with me. Stepping onto a scale occurred just the next day and after that our relationship grew in leaps and bounds. Stepping onto the hand grew to staying on the hand while I moved short distances from the ground and perches to the scale. When they started showing signs of fledging it led to flying lessons inside the house. As the end of their quarantine term started to come near they were trained to voluntarily crate for transport.

Naturally, as they got older, individual personalities started to make themselves known. As the only real way to differentiate them was by band number (all are completely white, and only one has any kind of distinguishing mark) I only knew them as #'s 65, 66, 72, and 73. However, as time went on names were needed. Since I didn't know the sexes I decided to find four names that were unisex and had some kind of theme, just for fun. Therefore, these pigeons were christened Suzuki, Nissan, Toyota, and Mazda.

## DALLAS

Once they were moved to their new home at our facility in Orlando, they started weighing on a scale placed on a removable platform. After a couple of days of

this, having four pigeons living together was no real problem, it was the four pigeons all trying to get on the hand and scale at the same time that was the real challenge. Also, it seemed that competition was starting to lead to some aggression between individuals. Thus, we decided to separate them into two pairs. Suzuki and Nissan were kept together while Toyota and Mazda were moved to an enclosure next door. This proved to be a huge help in managing these pigeons.

When we started to train them to run from crate to crate in pairs, the competition was still a problem because they would push each other out of the way and it was almost impossible to be sure that they were getting a correct amount of food. But running them separately created the challenge of loading them separately. To help with this, we started stationing one to the side with treats while opening the door for the other to go into the crate for reinforcement. This seemed to work well and training continued until it was decided that all four pigeons would be part of the team going to our show at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. The idea was to have them be part of our show where they would fly to a child volunteer, inspiring the child to care more about the natural world around them with “just a touch”.

By the time they were sent out to the fairgrounds in Dallas, both Toyota and Mazda were running from one crate to the other individually up to a distance of about 20 feet and had progressed to coming out of the crate, flying a couple of feet to the hand, then being sent back to the crate. Suzuki and Nissan seemed to be having a little bit harder time and were still working on being confident with crate to crate at 1ft. So when they arrived in Dallas, I gave them a day or two to adjust to the new environment, then they went back to work. Not surprisingly, Mazda and Toyota still excelled and were soon flying from the crate to my hand over about 20 feet then being sent back to the crate. As the time for the opening of our State Fair show drew closer, it became clear that I would not have time to train all four of them every day. Therefore, it was decided that Nissan and Suzuki would be able to enjoy the rest of their Dallas experience with a full bowl of food and the enrichment of being asked to step on a scale every day and watching our trainers perform their daily duties. They didn't seem to mind and consistently stepped up for me the entire duration of the fair. It was evident that the relationship I had worked so hard to build with these birds remained strong even in the absence of diet management.

I devoted two days to training a stationing behavior for loading into the crate. Before, I would try to just hold one off to the side while hoping that the other would go in without the other breaking away and having both in the crate at the same time. So I added a small perch about 5 inches off the ground and trained Mazda to that while Toyota stayed on the ground near him. While Mazda was on his station perch, Toyota could be free to crate without having to worry that Mazda would come barreling in to steal his reinforcer. It worked so well that eventually I stopped feeling the need to check band numbers to be sure I had the right bird.

With Mazda and Toyota having mastered the crate-to-hand-to-crate behavior in a couple novel areas it was time to up the stakes: introducing a stranger as a “volunteer”. The volunteer would stand with his/her arm straight out in front of his body and the pigeon would land on the arm and eat food in the hand formed in a bowl. To begin, I asked the pigeon to perform the same behavior that it was very comfortable with- flying from the crate to my hand. I had the volunteer stand near

me so that the pigeon could get used to this new variable. Then when he seemed to be adjusted and I had him on the hand, I introduced him to the arm of the volunteer as I would if I were introducing him to a new perch, which essentially it was. I kept him on the hand instead of sending him back to the crate and moved him closer to the arm, reinforcing him for calm behavior and body posture. After he was behaving in a calm manner near the arm I used a baiting strategy by offering my target/food hand on the opposite side of the arm from where he was. After only one repetition of this, the pigeon tentatively stepped onto the arm, which was followed with a very substantial reward. When he was moving off and on the arm without hesitation and eating out of the volunteer's hand, I began asking him to hop to the arm and this grew to flying within just a couple repetitions.

With the increase of confidence in the volunteer's arm, I put the pigeon back in the crate and started a new step. What I asked from the pigeon was to come out of the crate, fly to my hand for a small reinforcer, then fly to the arm of the volunteer. Once all the food was gone from the volunteer he was more than welcome to return to the crate. The plan was to fade myself out of the equation so that he would eventually fly from the crate straight to the volunteer without any help from me. As he began to realize that the reinforcement was heaviest at the volunteer, after only a couple of repetitions I was no longer necessary; in fact, Mazda once flew past my offered hand to fly to the volunteer. It was amazing how quickly Toyota and Mazda picked it up. Within just a couple of days they were flying over 20 feet from the crate to the volunteer and then going back to the crate. An amazing thing to witness!

To keep the idea of an audience volunteer as a constantly changing but still appealing location, nearly the entire staff was requested to be pigeon volunteers during this phase of the training. I also was sure to add variables that were bound to turn up such as wristbands, watches, jacket sleeves, and rings. At first, changes like these were a shock to the pigeons and would require steps backward to regain lost confidence. However, with each day (and each ever-changing person) that passed I could see the confidence rising in these young birds and I couldn't help but think that this experience would be incredibly helpful in their future as show birds, no matter what behaviors they ended up doing. Even though both Mazda and Toyota were doing well, it was Mazda that was still the more confident and reliable. He would perform entire sessions with an incredible amount of focus and if something made him nervous, he was already developing the behavior of flying to a "safe perch", evaluating the environment, then coming back to either the crate or myself when he had decided that it was safe. It was this behavior in particular that proved to me that he was ready to try his very first sessions outside. Again, due to limited time, I decided that it was best to focus on Mazda and Toyota was given a diet while I trained Mazda and if I had time I would work with him.

While we were still prepping for the opening of the show I had the fortune to put Mazda out in a desensitization cage on the stage for a couple of hours. Now was the moment of truth. All the training and work led to this. As with all first sessions in a new environment, I just started with the bare basics for his first time outside. Come out of the crate for a reinforcer then go straight back in. Period. Done. That's all I am asking for now.

Sure, he was a little taken aback right out of the gate, but then by the third or fourth repetition he was hopping to the hand about 4 feet from the crate and going back in like a pro. Luckily, I had asked a “volunteer” to be on standby if the situation presented itself. After a little bit of nervousness wore off, he did several repetitions to the volunteer before ending the session. That day led to about two more weeks of training on stage for Mazda at our bandshell at the State Fair of Texas. As with all birds, he had his good days and bad. From being rock solid on the whole behavior to looping the 5,000 person theater. But no matter how big his loops were, he would always return to stage and eventually go back into his crate. His routine evolved as well. He learned what a shadow box was in our backdrop as his entrance and exit through a hole in a faux log. He would walk to the lip of the stage and fly straight to the volunteer (a distance of about 40 feet), receive his reinforcers, be called to my hand so that I could have more time to talk about him before sending him back to the stage to exit through his hole into his crate. Pretty impressive for a pigeon that was just barely 6 months old. (Not to mention, a pigeon – even more impressive to some for that reason alone.)

By the time it was agreed that he was nearing show-ready status, we had about a week left of our 3-week run of Birds of the World. It was decided that he could be a part of the pre-show segment of our show we called the Game Show, accompanied by a trivia question on a PowerPoint presentation that asked “Which of these animals has received the most medals for bravery in the military? A: Horses B: Bald Eagles C: Pigeons D: Dogs”. This question came from my research which found that 32 pigeons have been awarded military bravery medals for their service as Messenger Pigeons during World War II, outdistancing dogs (28 awards) and horses (3 awards), and 1 cat<sup>1</sup>. On the day of Mazda’s first show, he did fantastic. What I did not expect was the volunteer not wanting to participate! After figuring out that the answer to the trivia question was a bird, I informed the child (I tried to pick kids about 9-10 years old) that the answer was going to come out and land on their arm. Out of the three shows that Mazda was able to do, one volunteer was scared of him, one was excited, and the last was willing to have him land on the arm once but when I asked if he would like to feed him again he replied coolly, “No, I’m good.” I think he was a little disappointed that he wasn’t a Bald Eagle.

This routine ended up getting paired with another Game Show routine for our preshow because it was determined that even though it was a fun way to get people to realize how important pigeons were to our military history, it was not a strong enough routine to stand alone. So we decided that Mazda would start out the Game Show with the trivia question and then another routine with another bird would follow after. This compromise was a great way for this young bird to make his debut into show business. With another routine following Mazda with a more seasoned bird, the Game Show could still recover if there was an early mishap with the inexperienced Mazda.

As Mazda’s training progressed and evolved into a more set schedule (especially after he was put into shows), I was able to use the previously occupied time to introduce Toyota to the idea of performing a retrieve behavior. It started with a small metal washer (small enough that he could pick it up and hold it comfortably, but large enough that he couldn’t swallow it) and at first I just had it

visible in the environment while I had him out on the table in front of his crate. This progressed to him eating around the washer while I held it in the middle of the food I was offering him in the hand. I started offering food through the hole in the center of the washer, and then holding the food under the washer so it was no longer visible but in a position that it could quickly be pushed through. After a moment of hesitation, he tried the behavior that got him the food before- pecking at the center of the washer. With this done, I would immediately push the treat through the center hole for him to take. He quickly learned that every time that he pecked the washer he was presented with the treat he was looking for. It was only a matter of time that he took it to the next step of grabbing the washer in his mouth when I began reserving the treat for only those times when he was able to pick up the washer from my fingers.

Soon Toyota would stand in front of me on a table and grab the offered washer from my fingers. He would drop it when I presented him with the treats he was after. At this point, I introduced a food cup lid we use for diets and began the process of shaping him making deliberate motions to move the washer from his mouth down to the table/lid. It was also at this point that I made a mistake... I lost my only washer. Luckily, Toyota took to a small quick-link with surprising finesse. Around this point is when the State Fair of Texas came to a close. I knew that once we got situated back in Florida, I could continue this with Toyota and possibly have a pigeon that would know a retrieve behavior.

## ORLANDO

After about a week and a half off when they got back to Florida from Texas, we started again with training all four. However, with the IAATE conference not showing any sign of slowing its approach it was again decided to focus on our best team – Mazda and Toyota. We didn't have to start from scratch, however. We had a nice base to work off of now. We did have to revisit some things though. Crating Toyota individually with Mazda on his station had to be reworked but soon was back on track, and even though we skipped crate-to-crate training we worked especially hard on crate to hand with both. Mazda began training long-distance flights in several novel areas from the crate to the hand in preparation for his goal behavior of flying out of the turret at the right wing of our stage with a flock of pigeons and looping the theater to land with the presenter onstage. Toyota began working the retrieve again with his quick-links with the goal of being a bird we could rotate with our Galah that returns an item to our actor onstage during the end of our show.

## Mazda

With Mazda, we knew that flying was going to be the largest part of his end behavior, so this is what we decided to focus on first for his training. Our Mixed Species area where we house a large amount of our birds was the ideal area to begin long flights for several reasons: it was netted so there was no danger of the environment being uncontrolled, it had several different hallways which allowed us to work Mazda in multiple novel areas while staying in the same vicinity, the areas



were surrounded by enclosures of other birds which made for new variables for Mazda to get used to, and it was also where he and Toyota were being housed, making it a very efficient location for us. Once Mazda was flying without hesitation from the crate to the hand and back (a distance of around 50 feet, one way) we decided that another novel area was necessary. Therefore, we moved over to our net-covered Weathering Yard (after the birds of prey that stayed out there during the day were put inside for the night). Within a short two weeks, Mazda was the master of the Weathering Yard as well. The next step of Mazda's training in the yard began now instead of waiting until he was outside so that when we did go into an environment that was less controlled, we would be confident that he could have several behaviors that might help him to focus.

When thinking what the final behavior was going to look like, we realized that Mazda would benefit from learning to loop around a pole so that later we could have him fly over the audience without the risk of the audience missing him. Therefore, we decided that introducing the loop pole and shaping the loop while still in the yard would be the best course. Surprisingly, Mazda learned the function of the loop pole in the first session! Starting with him flying straight to me from the crate while I was in front of the pole introduced him to its presence and desensitized him to it. Then I began moving myself with each repetition so that he had to fly around the pole from the left side (facing the pole from the crate) around to the right to me. Within just about two sessions, he was flying around the pole to me while I stayed stationary standing back from the pole about 5 feet with my back to the crate; encouraging him to fly past me to get to the pole. Then I would catch him on the hand for treats then send him back to the crate where he would go inside for more reinforcement. We very early on had decided that if he did it incorrectly, I would still catch him on the hand, but I would not offer any reinforcement and direct him back to the crate- which had the door shut. He could land back on the turf in front of the crate, see the closed door and turn back to me for more information. Then I would cue him to try again. He quickly learned that if the door remained shut, and eventually if I did not pay him after catching on the hand, that he had missed something and would immediately try again. It was astonishing to observe his quick understanding of correct vs. incorrect.

Once he was performing the loop fluently, the next step was to begin moving the pole so that the loop became more elongated, thus making a larger flight. It seemed like a simple idea. However, when the plan was put into action we observed something incredible. After moving the pole about 18 inches, we sent Mazda out to perform the loop as always. He flew out and turned where the pole used to be and seeing that I did not offer anything for him he tried again mid-flight to correct himself. Being a little confused, he landed on the wall of the yard to, it appeared, survey the area then took off, to LOOP THE POLE! The next attempt after that took some adjusting too with a couple of incorrect attempts, but he eventually made the correct loop around the pole. I discovered in the next training session that if the pole was moved, all I had to do was fade myself to standing next to the pole one repetition, then I could go back to where I had been before and he would quickly adjust to the new location.

Having gained confidence in several novel areas and some new behaviors as well, the day came to go outside for the first time on our stage. Our plan was to take it as slow as Mazda wanted and perhaps introduce him to a couple of new perches on the stage that he could possibly look at as a “safe place” - he had always chosen a specific perch to land on when he got nervous and needed a moment to collect himself. In Dallas it was the stage itself, in the Mixed Species area it was the turf in front of his crate, in the Weathering Yard it was the narrow wall along the side of our barn. So by giving several choices on our stage, we were trying to help him be successful later if he feels overwhelmed or nervous. We started with something very simple, walk out of the crate for a couple treats then go back inside. Just like in Dallas. And just like before, he was nervous of the new area but quickly gained enough confidence to fly to the hand and be introduced to one of the stumps on our stage that our owls use for their behavior.

The next day, we thought that adding a new perch to his “safe places” would be a good idea. Well, that is where I made a mistake. I moved too quickly for his taste and he flew off my hand and started looping the theater, climbing higher until he was nearly touching the shade structure over our seating area. After a couple of turns, he came to rest on the lip of our roof. So there we were, our first fly-off in Orlando. Luckily, all the previous training paid for itself in the next 4 minutes. After giving himself a minute or two to calm down and take stock of his surroundings, he heard me calling him, moved to an area where he could see me and tried to fly down to the hand. Unfortunately, he was a little too nervous to land on the hand so he buzzed by and eventually landed on his owl stump. I reinforced him there. Then he stepped up onto the hand to go into his crate right on cue. We made sure he got a very nice reward for going back into the crate as well.

After that event we did a couple more sessions of that but quickly switched gears and began training our final behavior. We re-trained the loop in the theater with the pole at the first two rows of seats. It was decided to start with Mazda being released from the hand for the loop, however we eventually shifted back to him going from the crate for reasons of his comfort and confidence. Once he was completing the loop (released from center stage, flying out into the theater, circling around the pole clockwise and landing on my hand while standing next to the release crate), the next step was to begin fading the release farther back towards the turret on our stage, which will be the final release point.

One day, he did have his first big fly-off. After a couple of large loops in the theater, he landed on the roof of our backdrop as he had done before. However, on this day he turned towards the back of our area and took flight, flew loops over our Mixed Species area at about 500 feet high, then disappeared from sight. During the next 25 minutes or so, we tried to get a visual of our pigeon, but he was nowhere to be seen. I saw this as a true test, both of my relationship with Mazda and my idea that if a pigeon were to fly off will they return to their home area. My supervisors that were with me that day confirmed that they also felt that Mazda would come back to his loft where Toyota was. Luckily, Mazda arrived at our barn shortly before the next show was about to begin and quickly found his way to his Mixed Species enclosure. He hopped right to my offered hand from the roof and walked calmly into

his crate as if it was just another training session. It was truly an amazing thing to witness.

Once the loop behavior release had faded to our turret, a shift in training was established. Mazda needed to learn to fly out of our turret to get to stage, which included flying two sharp blind corners. With me on the stage we moved the release crate into the turret and asked Mazda to fly back and forth to the hand from the crate and back again with plans for him to enter and exit stage from the same location. With repetition we were able to move the release crate farther back in to the turret walkway until we stopped at the location where the crate would be during show. When Mazda was confident with this arrangement, I began moving myself farther out onto the stage. The loop was incorporated back into the chain when he was flying with confidence out of the crate, through the turret and to me at center stage.

With adding the loop into the behavior we had just created, we had to make some adjustments to be sure Mazda was getting all the information that he needed to succeed. I asked one of our trainers whom he had a relationship with to stand on stage and I went out to the house to stand next to the pole. When Mazda came out of the turret I tried giving him a large prompt by waving and calling so that he would be directed out to the pole. After reaching the pole, I would stop calling and sit down while the trainer on stage called him and bridged him for looping the pole. In the first repetitions, I had to call him directly to the hand and send him to the pole because he started circling before reaching the pole. Eventually, we tried having me stand on stage to see if that would make a difference. It turned out that having the person with the strongest relationship with him out by the pole was a hindrance to Mazda because he would rather stay with me in the house than fly to the stage. By changing my location, we were able to give Mazda the information and encouragement he needed to complete his behavior.

With Mazda completing his full behavior in our theater, our criteria were re-evaluated and a larger loop incorporated. From our past experience with Mazda's loop training in the weathering yard, we tried slowly moving the pole farther into the seats and I relaxed my location into the seats as well so we could shape a larger loop. For one or two sessions it went very well; however, after those sessions Mazda's loop began to deteriorate. Perhaps we had pushed it to far for him, or we had accidentally relaxed a criterion that made him confused. Whatever the case may be, we took the necessary steps back and reshaped the loop with the crate onstage. Once his loop behavior was back to its previous fluency, we knew we could continue on with training the rest of the behavior with more success.

At this point in time the deadline for this paper is fast approaching and I cannot add much more about Mazda's training. However, from what we have seen, our hopes are still high that we will be able to have this pigeon in shows soon and helping our audience connect with species that live right outside their high-rise windows. I will present the most updated information at the IAATE Conference in February.

Toyota

The idea of having a pigeon perform a retrieve behavior was very exciting for the whole team in Orlando. It was this enthusiasm and support that helped Toyota get as far as he did. Over the course of 5 weeks of training, we brainstormed, attempted, and rejected several ideas and strategies to try and reach our goal. We varied the item that he picked up trying washers, quick-links, leaves, and finally found the most success using small sticks. We tried varying the container that he was to put them in but eventually stuck with the food cup lid. Reinforcing out of the hand, reinforcing out of the cup, Toyota sitting on the mat in front of his crate, him standing on a perch, training one side of the lid only, changing the amounts of reinforcer, the list goes on and on. What we ended up with after all this time was the behavior that we would hand him a stick, he would take it in his beak and deliberately move his head down (it could be forceful enough to send the stick flying) to right in front of his feet and usually hit the lid with the stick two to three times before dropping it- usually scattering the food that I gave him after the first contact with the stick and the lid.

A couple of days after deciding to move on to another behavior for Toyota due to lack of time to train, I noticed something that was very interesting. While cleaning our big teams of pigeons, I noticed that one of them had picked up a feather that had been on the ground. While I watched, he paraded around with it, and then proceeded to move it up and down repeatedly in front of his feet before discarding it off to the side. It looked almost like a courtship behavior. After observing this for a couple of minutes, I realized why this looked so familiar: it was almost exactly what Toyota was doing with the sticks during his training sessions. Is it possible for Toyota to ever learn a retrieve? I believe so, however for the time frame of producing this paper we elected to accept this form of behavior and possibly revisit if it proved to be a behavior that would be valuable in our goals.

## SUMMARY

The information and experience that we have gained by working with these birds has changed the way I perceive them. Here are the things I found to be most important and I hope they help others who attempt to work with these great birds:

- Relationship- Of course this has to be first. Just because they are pigeons doesn't mean that they don't have the ability to recognize certain people and form trust-based relationships with each and every one of them. There were overwhelming numbers of examples where they deliberately chose to be with me over someone else based solely on the observable fact that I was the one with the strongest relationship with them. Never underestimate the power of trust.
- Attention Span- These pigeons all showed behavior that suggests that attention span could be built in large part with behavioral momentum. They may be slow to start at the beginning of a session, but once you get them started they will progress very rapidly. I have also noticed that if you have more than one together, competition can be another way to gain some motivation. Once one individual makes that first step, the others rush in.

- Flight Instinct- As a very popular prey species for many predators, pigeons have a strong flight instinct when they're nervous. This was apparent during training sessions and can sometimes lead to slow progression in training.

I was completely blown away by just how complex, intelligent, adaptable, and charismatic they showed themselves to be. By being able to use them in programs with behaviors that highlight these characteristics, we as educators will be much closer to achieving our goal to inspire caring and action to conserve the natural world these animals represent.

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