



THE AUSTRALIAN PIGEON CENTRE

"Where Passion takes Flight"

Do pigeons use or identify land marks while flying or racing home?

By Barry Trewin

Pigeons are suspected to use landmarks, pigeons have a remarkable ability to navigate over long distances and find their way back to their loft. They rely on a combination of various cues, including visual landmarks, to orient themselves and navigate effectively.

Pigeons can recognise and memorise prominent landmarks such as buildings, mountains, rivers, or other distinctive features in the landscape. They use these landmarks as reference points to create mental maps of their surroundings. By comparing their current location with the memorised landmarks, pigeons can determine the direction they need to fly to reach their home.

In addition to visual landmarks, pigeons also rely on other environmental cues, such as the position of the sun, the Earth's magnetic field, and even olfactory cues, to aid in their navigation. These cues help them maintain a sense of direction and make adjustments to their flight path as needed.

Research has shown that pigeons have an impressive ability to navigate using landmarks. In experiments where pigeons were transported to unfamiliar locations, they were able to find their way back to their home loft by recognising and using landmarks they had previously seen during training flights.

Overall, pigeons utilise a combination of visual, magnetic, and even smell, including landmarks, to navigate and find their way back home while flying or racing.

In addition to recognising landmarks, pigeons also possess an innate sense of direction, known as "homing instinct." This instinct is believed to be a result of a combination of genetic factors and their ability to perceive and process environmental cues.

When pigeons are taken to unfamiliar locations far away from their home, they have a remarkable ability to orient themselves and fly back in the correct direction. They can rely on their memory of the landscape, including the positions of landmarks, to guide their flight.

It's worth noting that pigeons don't simply follow a fixed route or rely solely on landmarks. Instead, they continuously assess their surroundings and make navigational decisions based on multiple factors. They integrate information from different sensory cues, including visual cues from landmarks, the position of the sun, the Earth's magnetic field, and even the odours in the air.

Scientists have conducted various studies to understand how pigeons navigate and make use of landmarks. For instance, pigeons have been trained to associate specific landmarks with rewards or food, and they consistently demonstrate the ability to recognise and home in on those landmarks.

In most racing pigeon competitions, the organisers release the birds in unfamiliar locations and this tests their navigational skills. Pigeons rely on their ability to identify and interpret landmarks to find their way back to their loft. The fastest pigeons are often the ones that can accurately identify landmarks and navigate efficiently especially in the last legs of the race as they need to break from the flock and head to their individual lofts. If pigeons continue to follow the flock they will lose valuable time and this can cost them the race.

Pigeons have a sophisticated navigational system that involves using the magnetic field of the earth, landmarks, along with other environmental cues, to fly or race back home. Their remarkable ability to recognise and utilise landmarks is a testament to their impressive navigational skills and adaptation to their natural environment.