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Rats of the air or heroes of war? The surprising history of pigeons

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Often referred to as rats of the air, pigeons are seen as dirty, smelly, disease spreading vermin. But their gentle cooing has won pigeons their fans, including Andrew Blechman, who's written a book about them called *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird*.

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Peter Mares: Often referred to as rats of the air, sometimes as winged cockroaches, pigeons are seen as dirty, smelly, disease spreading vermin. They thrive wherever people congregate, feasting on our leftover chips and sandwich crusts and nesting in the nooks and crannies of our buildings, splattering our public monuments. It's a bit hard to look kindly on a bird that fouls its own nest, yet the dove (which is a pigeon by another name) is a key cultural symbol. It was a dove with an olive branch that showed Noah the way to dry land. A holy spirit appeared as a dove at the baptism of Christ and the bird is a universal emblem of peace.

But with their gentle cooing and comical bobbing heads, pigeons have their fans, including Andrew Blechman, who's written a book about them called *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird*.

Andrew Blechman joins me on the phone from his home in Germany. Andrew Blechman, welcome to *The Book Show*.

Andrew Blechman: Thank you, pleasure to be here.

Peter Mares: Are you actually a pigeon fancier? Do you keep pigeons?

Andrew Blechman: It's interesting, I'm actually a journalist, so I came across the topic just by accident, but the more I came to learn about the bird the more I came to admire them. This recent hatred of pigeons is really little more than a modern fad if

you look at it in terms of the long view. Pigeons have been our best domesticated friends other than the dog for about 10,000 years. So the more I began to learn about these birds that are so prejudiced against, the more I came to admire them. But I'm not a birdwatcher per se, I don't even own binoculars.

Peter Mares: And you don't have any pigeons in your loft?

Andrew Blechman: No, I have no loft.

Peter Mares: They are extraordinary birds. You describe them in your book at one point as feathered rockets.

Andrew Blechman: Yes, put it this way; your modern racehorse will race around a one and a quarter mile racetrack at about 35 to 40 miles an hour. By comparison, a race pigeon will race 600 miles from a place they've never been before, so they're flying through uncharted territory, and they're averaging 60 miles an hour, and they won't stop for food, rest, water or anything. And they find their home, almost like a laser guided missile, it's unbelievable.

Peter Mares: How is it that they do that? I mean, they're called homing pigeons of course and we know about that extraordinary ability that they have to find their way home, but how do they do it?

Andrew Blechman: No one is exactly sure, although many of the top university scientists have looked into this. It seems to me they have a double internal compass; one that senses the Earth's magnetic field and the other one that is able to work with the position of the Sun. But they also use ultrasonic hearing, they use ultraviolet vision and actually a sense of smell. But for whatever reason they do do it, they do do it. It really is phenomenal. One of the people in the book that I talk to, Orlando, he's a pigeon raiser, immigrant from Puerto Rico who spends really his life raising pigeons on the rooftops of Brooklyn, New York. My favourite story is...Orlando, his favourite bird was released for a race about 300 miles away and never returned. The bird's name was Marty. Orlando waited all day for Marty to return on this rooftop from the race, but he never did. Two weeks later, Orlando (who assumed a hawk had eaten Marty) was at his front doorstep leaving the house and there's Marty on the stoop with a broken wing. He had walked home.

Peter Mares: It's an extraordinary story. I found it hard to believe, but you're convinced Orlando wasn't making this one up.

Andrew Blechman: No, you hear these stories. They do return home. If you take a pigeon to a vet (actually it's funny, they're almost like a sports vet because these are athletes), you don't pick your bird back up, they just release it out the window.

Peter Mares: You talk about pigeon racing and that is a pretty serious sport, but it's not as popular as it used to be.

Andrew Blechman: No, it's not. A lot of things aren't as popular with things like Nintendo and television and that sort of thing, but it was very popular earlier in the last century. But it still has a lot of fans, and there are still actually thousands of immigrant racers on the east coast of the US as well as all sorts of farm kids and their

parents who race pigeons in the American Midwest, and you also have all sorts of races down in Australia.

Peter Mares: Yes, the Mallee Classic. A colleague of mine was telling me about the Mallee Classic which apparently is a big pigeon race here in Victoria where I'm based.

Andrew Blechman: Yes, you have...pigeon racing is actually still very popular down your way. It's interesting, there's two kinds of races; there's the one with...the small time, people who are just...this is what they do and they do it out of their back yard, then you have races with million-dollar prize money, and they're international races often and the winner is often worth a few hundred thousand dollars for breeding purposes. Las Vegas has a million dollar race, South Africa has a million dollar race, Barcelona has a million dollar race.

Peter Mares: But not everyone keeps pigeons for racing. Where I grew up, which was in the Adelaide hills, we overlooked the valley and down in the valley was a neighbour that had pigeons, and I used to watch them circling, making these patterns in the sky of an evening. Presumably they weren't racers, they are what you called flights.

Andrew Blechman: Actually that's the same bird that Mike Tyson breeds.

Peter Mares: The boxer and convicted rapist.

Andrew Blechman: Yes, exactly...and ear biter.

Peter Mares: And ear biter, indeed. Not the kind of man you'd really associate with a gentle, bird-loving disposition.

Andrew Blechman: No, it's not, and some people look at it as a dirty bird, and yet the Queen of England is a pigeon fancier, so it really runs the gamut. Tyson grew up with pigeons. He grew up in a very bad section of New York City, and his only enjoyment was to go onto his rooftop, let his pigeons go and watch them circle above in total freedom. It was about as close as he got to such a thing. And unlike everyone else in his life they always returned to him and they didn't really want anything from him except for maybe a handful of seed. So he's still a huge pigeon fancier.

Yes, those birds can sometimes fly for 18 hours without ever landing. They are extraordinary athletes, which is why Mike Tyson is so into them. He likes them because they're not lazy.

Peter Mares: Other people breed show pigeons, fancy birds or ones with special markings, and there are some that are called parlour rollers and tumblers. What are they?

Andrew Blechman: Yes, tumblers will tumble out of the sky, almost like at an air show where a plane purposely stalls and starts falling backwards, goes into a nosedive and then corrects itself. These birds will do that automatically. And then there's other ones called the parlour rollers, and those you roll almost like a bowling ball down a pitch and...

Peter Mares: So, on the ground?

Andrew Blechman: On the ground.

Peter Mares: They're not tumbling through the air, they're actually tumbling on the ground?

Andrew Blechman: Yes, they are tumbling on the ground, it's really an unusual sight, to say the least. And they tumble backwards as if...I don't know why they do it, no one is sure why they do it but it seems to be a genetic quirk, like a tear in the brain somewhere, but it's been bred and bred until these birds are able to roll backwards for maybe 100 yards or more.

Peter Mares: Andrew, you were talking there about breeding, and I hadn't realised how important the breeding of pigeons was or the whole history of pigeons was to Charles Darwin as he developed his theory of evolution.

Andrew Blechman: It's funny, everyone...when they think of Darwin they always think invariably of the finches, but the reality is it was pigeons that Darwin was focused on in terms of trying to demonstrate his theory of evolution. As you were talking about, there are all sorts of exotic pigeons. They're all the same bird, they're just different breeds within the bird. And of course a pigeon is just a kind of dove and really the only particularly interesting one of the dove in terms of being domesticated and in terms of their ability to fly long distances and find their way home, and its history with mankind.

Darwin...in London at the time, pigeon fancying was extraordinarily popular, and the birds came in and still do come in extraordinarily unusual variations, like curly feathers like corkscrews, which is hard to believe but I've seen it, as well as other pigeons that have these giant fantails, almost like a turkey might. At the time it was believed that each of these birds was put on the planet as is. Darwin had a feeling that they weren't, and what he did was he bred them in his backyard, became quite a fancier himself, but he would breed them amongst each other and every time after a few generations he would just get a 'park bench' pigeon.

Peter Mares: So when he cross-bred them, when he bred these different varieties back together they'd end up being your common and ordinary pigeon.

Andrew Blechman: Exactly, which just shows you...it's called reversion and it's one of the ways of showing that evolution does occur. Evolution is very hard to see, it takes place over tens of thousands of years which is why Darwin was using pigeons. Actually the first 60 pages of his *The Origin of Species* is actually all about pigeons, and when he handed in the book, his publisher said, 'You know, what do you say we just expand that first chapter on pigeons and we drop this evolution stuff?'

Peter Mares: Luckily he didn't take his publisher's advice.

Andrew Blechman: Exactly, because his book actually did sell out within the first week, which was one of the first times in history that ever happened.

Peter Mares: We've talked about pigeon racing but there's another pigeon sport and that's trap shooting. These days trap shooting of course uses clay pigeons, clay discs shot up into the air, at least they do at the Olympics, but you found some gun clubs in the US that still use live birds.

Andrew Blechman: Yes, also hard to believe but they do, and they poach them from farms and they also poach them from the streets of New York City, which is kind of semi-legal, semi-illegal. It's kind of in a hazy world of...basically there are no protections for pigeons.

Peter Mares: Especially homeless ones who live on the streets of New York.

Andrew Blechman: Exactly. So they take them out to gun clubs across the border in Pennsylvania, and they will go through several thousand pigeons in a morning of shooting. They shoot them as live targets. They're very dazed and underfed and they're released out of spring loaded boxes and they're shot with shotguns, and the fields are littered with dying and dead birds which are left there. Prejudice and hatred always has a conclusion, and people love to make fun of the bird at this point, even though one million of them served in WWI and WWII and saved thousands of allied lives and they were treated as decorated war veterans at the time. Just 50 years later people love to make fun of the bird, and what happens is they're viewed as trash at that point, so why not shoot them up?

Peter Mares: It is interesting, isn't it, given their military history. You've got stuffed pigeons in the Smithsonian Museum who are decorated war heroes.

Andrew Blechman: The stories abound about the heroics.

Peter Mares: Just explain how they became heroes, these pigeons.

Andrew Blechman: Let me tell you about the story of Cher Ami. Cher Ami was in WWI, the trench war, and the soldiers would take the birds with them in baskets into the trenches. There was one battalion which became known as the Lost Battalion, about 500 men or so, who were lost behind enemy lines in the dense forest, and they were being hit by the Germans because they were surrounded but then they were also being bombarded by friendly fire by the allied forces. All they had to get a message back to headquarters was three pigeons.

The first two were shot down immediately, the last one, Cher Ami, was sent up and it was shot down by a barrage of gunfire, almost to the earth, but for whatever reason it plucked courage and was able to flap its wings again, gained enough altitude to get out of gunshot range and 20 minutes later was back at headquarters. When it landed it was missing an eye, its breastbone had been cracked and the message was dangling from all that was left of its leg which was tendon, and yet the message was there. The message said 'please rescue us' and it was sent immediately to the commander of the allied forces and the soldiers were rescued. Now, you're looking at hundreds of men's lives literally dependant on one pound of flesh and feathers.

Peter Mares: Do military forces still use pigeons?

Andrew Blechman: The US stopped using them officially sometime in the late 50s. There are still several of the world's military that do use them. I believe the Chinese use them. Saddam Hussein used them when communications are cut, and instead of having Condoleezza Rice listen in with her satellites he sent a pigeon. I guess instead of Wi-Fi it's Wi-Fly, but you get the message across and it still works. The insurgents are

using them to send messages back and forth. Sometimes the lowest technology is the best.

Peter Mares: Andrew Blechman, it's a fascinating book about a fascinating bird. There's much more in the book that we don't have time to talk about, about the history of pigeons and efforts to control them, often failed efforts to control them, particularly by poisoning which doesn't work, we can tell you. Andrew Blechman, thank you very much for joining us on *The Book Show*.

Andrew Blechman: It's been an absolute pleasure, thank you for having me.

Peter Mares: Andrew Blechman is the author of *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird*, which is published in Australia by the University of Queensland Press.

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