

# Sanitation and Disease Prevention

These two subjects, sanitation and disease prevention, are so closely allied that they must be considered together. Sanitation is basic in disease prevention, as basic as isolation. This chapter constitutes a summary of all that has gone before.

Sanitation in the loft helps to prevent virus, bacterial and fungus diseases as well as to keep parasites in check or eliminate them altogether. It is one of the principal bases of health and success in dealing with pigeons. It keeps fancy pigeons in show form, is fundamental in squab production and gives homers a chance to do their best in racing.

Sanitation involves loft care. Ventilation, cleaning, feeding, watering, bathing, even sunlight exposure are all concerned with this subject as well as isolation, disinfection, preventive medication and prevention of fielding.

What constitutes a filthy environment? Many factors, some of which are invisible. A filthy loft is not necessarily one with inch-high droppings under the perches. One of the top English fanciers cleans his loft only twice a year, according to his own written words; a prominent and successful fancier in Massachusetts, U.S.A., never cleans his until the breeding season. Anesthetically filthy, yes, but perhaps not medically filthy. There are many worse practices than leaving dung on the **floors**. If successful men do it, perhaps it is in order to ask, might they not be more successful if they removed the droppings frequently? Perhaps these men feed the birds so that their food never comes in contact with droppings.

A filthy loft may be one infested with red mites; one with pigeon flies developing in the nest bowls; one with Psittacosis spreaders among the birds; one with bath water older than 36 hours; one with lice on the birds or Para-typhoid in many of the pigeons. These things one would not see from a casual observation, but the owner knows, or should know, if he is giving proper attention to his charges.

In disease prevention our aim must be; (1) To prevent our birds from coming into contact with other pigeons, poultry, rodents, or the places these other species have been. (2) To prevent vectors such as sparrows, or mosquitoes, from transporting infection from other species to our birds. (3) To prevent our pigeons from being annoyed and made anaemic by insects. (4) To keep them away from contamination from intestinal parasites. (5) To prevent their being poisoned. (6) To ensure proper ventilation. (7) To prevent overcrowding. (8) To prevent the spread of established diseases within the loft. (9) To keep our birds in such glowing health that those diseases which develop in weakened birds, may never get a chance to develop. (10) To feed sufficient food and no more.

Here are the *whys* and the *hows* of the above points.

1, *Prevent contact with pigeons, poultry, rodents, or other species capable of transmitting diseases*

*Why?* The answer is obvious. Poultry yards, barn yards, wild pigeons coming to one's loft, are all sources of disease contamination. You have read about the diseases which are transmissible from other species to pigeons, and now you know how important it is to keep the species separated.

*How?* By not permitting an open left where one knows his birds can fly to these sources; by preventing wild pigeons from even alighting on the loft, much less coming in and eating or living with our birds; by destroying every wild pigeon as soon after it enters as possible; by quarantining every stray homer; by covering fly pens to prevent droppings of wild pigeons or wild birds from tailing in.

And of great importance, as I shall point out in a later chapter, is the trapping of all the wild pigeons in the neighbourhood, even if it entails a concerted effort by combined pigeon fanciers to have city ordinances changed to permit such trappings and eradication.

2. *Prevent vectors from transporting infection from other species or from pigeon to pigeon*

*Why?* One answer is obvious: Because we want our birds to keep well. A less obvious reason is that we do not want our pigeons blamed for being reservoirs of infection for other species. During one epidemic of sleeping sickness in horses, authorities knowing that the virus had been demonstrated in pigeons, stated that perhaps pigeons were the latent source which kept the virus alive and that mosquitoes transmitted it from them to the horses. Swine erysipelas, too, infects pigeons but we do not want our birds blamed as being the reservoir. If mosquitoes cannot reach our pigeons, then our birds certainly cannot be the reservoir.

*How?* By not only screening our loft, making it impossible for a single mosquito to enter, but by spraying with drugs with long residual effects which will stick to walls and screens and kill mosquitoes and flies which light on them. Also by including enough phenol or other mosquito repellent in our indoor sprays or paints to repel insects.

Easiest of all methods is to hang Vapona bars in the lofts so that every flying insect which enters will be killed, as well as external parasites if any are making their home on our birds.

By using wire on the flies and porches with mesh small enough to preclude sparrows and by providing tops to the Hies and porches so that bird droppings are prevented from falling in.

### 3. *Prevent pigeons from being annoyed by insects*

*Why?* A bird which is kept awake at nights by mosquitoes, lice, red bugs, ticks, bed-bugs, cannot possibly be kept in the same good condition as the ones *free* from such annoyances. And remember, too, that these pests often cause anaemia as well as nervousness.

*How?* By studying all the means of insect control and employing them; not by sitting comfortably in an easy chair and planning to do it some day.

### 4. *Keep pigeons away from internal parasitic contamination*

*Why?* Because these worms and protozoa weaken our birds so materially. They cause anaemia, poison the blood, and generally weaken the birds. Coccidia even change the blood picture considerably, especially the blood sugar.

*How?* By cleaning the loft thoroughly once every 5 days during summer and once a week during winter. By changing drinking water once a day. By never leaving bath water available where droppings can fall into it for more than 12 hours. By meticulously preventing any food or grit from any contamination by droppings.

This means that the food must not be thrown down on the floor where there are droppings nor left on the clean floor where birds may soil it. A covered food tray which prevents pigeons from stepping on food is almost essential. Some of the best fliers clean the floor with scrapers and mop with a damp rag before feeding and then give only the amount of food that the birds will eat in a few minutes.

Self-feeders can also be arranged which preclude food contamination and prevent the food from scattering or coming in contact with droppings.

Parasitic contamination can also be prevented by using floor coverings, litter, of absorbent material. Dry sand has been proved satisfactory but it is heavy. Dampened peat moss is favoured by some" but it tends to become dusty and blow about. Shavings are also clean, light, and absorbent. Chopped straw, such as the kind used in poultry houses, makes a good litter. Pigeons do not scratch as hens do and spend much less time on the floor than poultry.

Open loft must be restricted. We cannot permit pigeons to eat snails and other intermediate hosts of tapeworms and expect to keep them free from these parasites. Nor can we permit them to eat Sow and Pill bugs without paying the penalty of having sickly birds infested with stomach wall worms. Even pigeons which only occasionally light on the ground may find these intermediate hosts coming out from under old boards. Miscellaneous old boards lying around the loft should be removed and, if overturned, the bugs should be scuffed and mashed. Inside the coop, derris sprinkled on the floor and in cracks will kill all such insects and the flapping of wings will also help spread this insect poison, harmless to the birds.

## 5. *Prevent Poisoning*

*Why?* No answer needed.

*How?* By watching the food, no mould being permitted; by being careful there is no food or water where insect sprays may drift on it and contaminate it.

Fielding should be restricted, especially in spring when agricultural fertilizer is being spread. Often mixtures with tankage, bone meal and other ingredients attractive to pigeons is spread and the birds are poisoned and die after eating it. Caution should be practised when garden sprays are used on nearby foliage so that pigeons do not eat the succulent leaves and become poisoned by the sprays. Rodent poison, left where pigeons can reach it or when it is dragged from a safe place by a rat, can cause deaths. Warfarin mixed with grain is one of the principal rat poisons today and it, as any other, should be well covered to preclude pigeons reaching it.

## 6, *Insure adequate ventilation*

*Why?* No positive answer can be given except that it seems that pigeons given the maximum amount of air, no matter how cold the temperature, are the healthiest. Pigeon fanciers assure us this is true, but there are no published figures to test it that I have been able to find. There are some results showing that birds kept in lofts with no ventilation whatever were a sickly lot. And of course the Bible says that Noah had 2 of nearly all the species of animals in the world in a ship 3 stories high, with the only ventilation being found in a roof opening 22 inches square.

*How?* Noah's ventilating system, however adequate it was for the birds and animals, would not suffice today. We know that even in climates where the temperature drops to 30 degrees below zero, F., pigeons are kept in lofts completely open on one side. They fluff out their feathers, 'pull in their necks', and thrive. But is this best? For early squab raising it is not, because too many youngsters will freeze. Some protection is necessary. On cold nights a loft that can be completely closed, just for the night, seems somewhat more humane and certainly puts the owner more at ease. A loft arranged to prevent wind from blowing through it is advisable. We are still told that 'draughts are sure to cause disease'. Many persons continue to believe that draughts cause human colds, when recent discoveries show they have little or nothing to do with colds; it is virus contracted from another person having a cold which is responsible.

I know of a loft which is divided so that the front half is completely open and the other section closed except for a 3-ft. square window. Both sections are the same otherwise. The birds all chose the closed section in which to spend the night, using the open section for most of the day.

In damp, badly ventilated lofts, there seems to be much more disease than in airy lofts into which the sun can shine.

### *7. Do not overcrowd*

*Why?* Some fanciers tell us that so long as there is a perch for every bird the loft is not overcrowded. Others **will** look into such a loft and tell the owner he has too many birds. If fertility is considered, we may observe that pigeon eggs are more likely to be fertile in under-populated lofts.

*How?* We can take lessons from the big squab farms where every inch is precious. Long experience has taught them that: so long as all of the other features of sanitation are meticulously cared for; and if every pair of birds has its own nest box; if there is ample opportunity for all the birds to eat at the same time; then there is little cause to be alarmed about the health of the birds even though it may seem that the lofts are crowded.

Homing pigeons, Flights, Tiplers and other breeds spending much time on the wing need less space in the **loft** than the same birds kept for breeders or as prisoners.

### *8. Prevent the spread of established diseases in the loft*

*Why?* To avoid disappointment, save money, keep the birds healthy.

*How?* This is where quarantine and medication are most important. Every loft or breeding establishment needs a quarantine cage and preferably two. Flying lofts obviously can do well with two: one in which to keep strays until their owners are found; another in which to **put** ailing birds either for diagnosis or treatment.

When I was a boy, if our pigeons got Sour Crop many of them died. We isolated them, but often the infection had been started and we were too late. Today, we dose the entire Hock with an antibiotic in the drinking water and the disease is conquered in a day or two. So it is with many diseases: instead of quarantining or letting the bird die, we simply dose them as a flock, or individually, with the proper drug, either by mouth or by injection, and stop the disease. Sanitation involves keeping droppings or nasal discharge off the food and in dosing drinking water to kill the germs left by sick birds. Disease control involves medicating the sick and keeping the spread to a minimum. Coccidiosis is a good example. Assuming that all pigeons will have it, as we have seen, our object should be to keep the attack as light as possible. This involves preventing re-infection as far as possible, so we are especially careful with all sanitary measures.

If some of the birds develop blood poisoning which apparently is the cause of their sick appearance, we inject those birds and try to sterilize their blood.

Mere I want to add a further note on the disposition of strays and quarantine. Stray pigeons are bound to see your birds and either enter your loft or try to. If you breed fancy pigeons, you do not want strays sitting on the fly top leaving droppings where your birds can contact them. And if you fly or race pigeons, you do not want strays coming into the **loft**.

There are men and boys in big cities who make considerable money trapping strays and these men are willing to risk disease. The rest of us whose birds these persons catch want to keep strays out or dispose of them. Occasionally valuable birds drop in. Even they should be quarantined. **Homers** which are exhausted more than likely quit because they are sick. **Every** strange pigeon should be looked upon with suspicion.

Naturally, you will try to find the owner if the bird is ringed. Keep it **quarantined until you do**.

#### 9. *Keep the pigeons in glowing health*

*Why?* Because healthy pigeons, when they become infected, are able to recover from many diseases easier than those in run-down condition.

*How?* By proper diet, by sanitation which prevents the spread of disease.

#### 10. *Feed only sufficient food*

*Why?* Because too much food is a health menace when it becomes soiled from droppings. When birds are overfed they become choosy, picking out only certain grains and ignoring others which might offer better nourishment.

*How?* By watching until the birds show they are no longer hungry and then removing all uneaten food. At the next feeding give the amount they ate at the previous feeding.

Pigeons feeding squabs need more and more food as the youngsters grow older, so one must feed them oftener, giving the old birds all they will eat without leaving a grain or a pellet.

An occasional complaint of neighbours against pigeon fanciers is, that their compost heaps or manure piles in the backyards breed flies to infest the neighbourhood. Occasionally the decomposing manure odours are wafted by breezes where they are not appreciated. Aside from the aesthetic objections, there are other important health considerations.

Flies carry parasite eggs and are notorious spreaders of coccidiosis. Unscreened and uncovered piles of manure treasured for garden fertilizer may be reservoirs of parasite eggs. Every fancier knows how the birds seem to enjoy picking around on such piles. We keep a large compost pile for our garden where we put leaves, sheep manure, pigeon manure and anything else which will rot and make fertilizer. The pigeons have often flown to it upon alighting from their period of exercise instead of going through the loft trap. It became such a nuisance in trying to keep the birds away that it had to be screened.

If you have such a pile and can shield it from the pigeons and have no intention of using it for fertilizer, simply spread a thin layer of borax over it every time you add new cleanings to the pile and flies will not be able to breed there.