

VERMIN: The lovebirds despised by humans

By **danibacon** -



A peck on the cheek in Nottingham city centre. (Image: Dani Bacon)

Now considered vermin, pigeons were once revered for their intelligence and charm. Dani Bacon finds out what ruffled humanity's feathers with insights from the RSPB and a pigeon rescue charity.

Throughout time, pigeons have been domesticated by humans, cherished for their cleverness and used as a reliable form of communication. But during our more recent history, these birds have been dubbed vermin, dirty and even stupid.

I'm a fierce animal lover, I've adored pigeons for as long as I can remember. These coo(l) little fellas congregated in their swarms within my hometown of Norwich and I loved seeing their little bobbing heads each day.

I recall being a kid in the 90's, scrunching my face in annoyance whilst other children chased pigeons for fun. Now, as a (mostly) un-cantankerous adult in my early thirties, I still throw a sneer at passers-by, young and old, when they mess with these soft-natured birds.

Recently, when spending one afternoon in Nottingham city centre, where I now live, I was feeding pigeons seeds that I was given by a nearby couple. I began noticing a hoard of people watching us in horror. As a winged whirlwind spun around me, landing on my hands as they fed, onlookers were laughing and loudly expressing disgust. This experience sparked a curiosity in me—a need to understand these birds better and uncover why they had become so widely disliked.

Pigeon history

After some deep-seated research, similar to when Gandalf goes on a quest to identify the one ring, I found out some interesting facts about pigeons.

The rock dove, the ancestor of the feral pigeon commonly seen in urban areas today, were domesticated from as early as 10,000 years ago, used for both ceremonial and culinary purposes by Ancient Egyptians, as well as helping predict the flood of the river Nile (this might be handy for some UK rivers, let's be honest).

These birds have been nothing short of vital throughout centuries of historical battles, from flying crucial messages to troops throughout the wars during Julius Caesar's reign, all the way to the more recent World War II, where 32 pigeons were presented with medals for their service.

I must also give an honourable mention to Cher Ami, the pigeon that was shot in the chest by Germans during his voyage to an American Air Base in World War I. He fell to the ground but somehow took flight again, travelling at high speeds until he remarkably reached his destination, delivering an urgent message sent by troops. This dedicated little messenger somehow survived, tragically losing his right leg and permanently blinded.

In the past, doves were synonymous with love and peace, often depicted in art and mentioned with positivity within religion, such as being credited for alerting Noah's Ark to nearby land in the bible.

In Ancient Greece, pigeons were associated with the goddess of love Aphrodite, symbolising purity and love.

Pablo Picasso's inspiration for his painting the Dove of Peace came from him receiving a pigeon as a gift from a fellow artist.

Pigeons were once an essential part of human lives, providing entertainment, symbolism, nourishment, and communication. However, thanks to industrialisation, these winged creatures became redundant and consequently released into the wild,

abandoned to fend for themselves. Over time the fond memories and respect humans once had for pigeons has dissipated, replaced with avoidance and disgust.



Nature's litter pickers. (Image: Dani Bacon)

Pigeons today

Looking for more insight into the world of pigeons, I sat down with Sian Denney a fellow pigeon lover and media officer at bird conservation charity, [RSPB](#), "People just see them as a nuisance as a species, dirty and disease ridden. I guess they've gone from heroes to the underdog."

Feral pigeons often nest on the side of buildings, mirroring their ancestors' habit of nesting on cliff edges. However, they're frequently deterred by pigeon spikes and other barriers meant to keep them away. Adding to their plight, feeding pigeons in city centres is now considered 'littering,' a fineable offence in many areas.

When walking the streets, acting as nature's litter pickers, the birds are often met with disdain, people shooing and kicking at them while children chase them for fun.

Denney explains, "I guess, from a public perspective, misconceptions are generally linked to pigeons being dirty, spreading disease and probably lacking in intelligence.

"But they're the only bird species with self-recognition, and I think for a pigeon to do that, that's phenomenal!"

This test involves placing a pigeon in front of a mirror, and remarkably, these birds join an elite group of animals—including chimpanzees, pigs, and dolphins—that can recognise themselves, indicating advanced intelligence.

Contrary to popular belief, pigeons like to keep themselves clean by bathing in rainwater and preening to waterproof their feathers whilst removing parasites and dirt. There is little evidence that they are a major transmitter of disease to humans.



"They can sometimes look a little drab, and their waste can accumulate on the streets, people see that and just automatically assume all these birds are very dirty, and that just feeds into the whole idea that pigeons are vermin," Denney says.

Pigeons: The true lovebirds

Alongside being naturally gentle, these street critters are serious monogamists, often choosing a partner and mating for life.

I spoke to Susan Joyce, 50, from Pembrokeshire who founded the [Little Green Pigeon](#), a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting and funding sanctuaries for the rehabilitation of injured pigeons. Susan, a former vet, began the charity after spending many years taking in and looking after these special birds.

"They love their partners deeply and are fiercely loyal to each other," she says. "I know several pigeons who take gifts of twigs, grasses and flowers to their partners on the nest, it's absolutely adorable to watch!"

Pigeons also enjoy socialising with humans, Joyce explains, "They bond deeply with their carers, often furnishing the human carer with love in the same way they would with a pigeon partner."

"[I think] that's the reason they congregate near people in towns and cities rather than out in the countryside like their wild cousins, wood pigeons and collared doves.

"They are not wild birds, they seek out humans for food and help.

"We really need to change the way people look at pigeons from 'disease spreading pests' to 'abandoned pets'."



Pigeons love their partners deeply. (Image: Dani Bacon)

Pigeons, once humanity's allies in survival, war and communication have fallen out of favour in the modern age. Yet, these intelligent, loyal, and social birds still offer so much to admire—whether through their exceptional resilience or their endearing commitment to their partners.

Perhaps it's time to reconsider our relationship with pigeons, not as nuisances but as remarkable creatures with a rich history intertwined with our own. As Susan Joyce aptly puts it, "They seek out humans for food and help"—a poignant reminder that these birds are not wild strangers but long-time companions deserving of respect and care.

Next time you see a pigeon bobbing along your path, pause for a moment. Consider the history and understated beauty of these misunderstood creatures. You might just find yourself smiling at your new feathered friend.
