



Dennis Kuhn currently has some 600 pigeons that he raises in the backyard of his rural Belle Plaine home.

Just Winging It

Belle Plaine Man Uses Flock of White Homing Pigeons to Top Off Special Events

by Dan Ruud

Dennis Kuhn worked at a Dairy Queen headquarters office in Bloomington for almost 15 years before making a career change. And quite a change it's been.

Kuhn, who lives several miles south of Belle Plaine on Hickory Boulevard, owns and operates White Dove Connection, a business he founded and has been working full-time at for a couple of years now. Kuhn has some 600 birds that he brings to special occasions such as weddings, anniversaries and funerals, etc. He then releases them at the event as a symbol of love, peace and prosperity, while at the same time adding "a touch of class" to the occasion. Kuhn said he normally charges between \$125 to \$175 for a release, depending on the number of birds requested and the distance of the release.

Although the business is called White Dove Connection, it's actually pigeons that do the work. Although white ring neck doves are a well known symbol of love, peace and prosperity, their flying abilities leave a lot to be desired. In fact, white ring neck doves cannot fly more than a few feet at a time, nor can they fend for themselves. If released outdoors, white ring neck doves, which are only about the size of a robin, will more than

likely attempt to "run" away and can easily fall prey to cats and hawks or get run over by a car, which is not something you would want to see at a wedding or funeral.

That's where the white homing pigeon comes in. Not only is it a descendant of the rock dove family, but it's a flying machine, equipped with an uncanny navigational system. Kuhn said a homing pigeon, can fly over 60 to 70 miles per hour with the wind, and 40 miles per hour against it. So if you released one of Kuhn's pigeons in downtown Minneapolis, it would likely be back in its loft on Hickory Boulevard within an hour.

"Most of the time I release a bird they get home before I do. They don't have stop signs and lights and they have a straight shot," said Kuhn, a native of Anoka who moved to Belle Plaine in 1993.

After the birds are released, Kuhn said they'll normally circle around the event two or three times while getting their bearings straight for the flight home.

"How they're able to find their way home from great distances is one of Mother Nature's mysteries," Kuhn said. "There are theories but nobody has been able to pinpoint exactly how."

What is known is that homing pigeons are gifted with a superior

eye sight and memory, which some experts believe they use to help locate and remember landmarks such as rivers, lakes, mountains and building structures. Pigeons can use their "homing" instinct only in daylight.

A 2004 article in ScienceDaily said a series of behavioral experiments on pigeons have shown it's possible that pigeons have a magnetic sense that goes beyond just a simple magnetic compass.

"The findings boost the possibility that pigeons - and maybe other birds as well - use the Earth's magnetic field to navigate just as sea turtles do," stated the article.

Kuhn, who also races and sells his pigeons, said he sold one of his birds to a pigeon buyer (fancier) from Middletown, N.Y. Apparently homesick, the bird took flight one day and made the 1,250-mile journey back to its Belle Plaine loft. Kuhn said it took the bird about 3 1/2 weeks to make it home after it escaped from its new owner. Kuhn kept that same pigeon for another year or so before selling it to a California man. The pigeon never returned, not yet anyway.

Kuhn said pigeons can live 10 to 12 years in captivity as opposed to just three or four years in the wild. Their biggest enemies are hawks, owls and power lines.

The oldest pigeon Kuhn ever had lived to be 20 years.

"She was born in 1987 and died last fall," said Kuhn, adding that he saved the bird's leg band, which he uses to identify his birds.

Kuhn said his fascination with pigeons started many years ago.

"I had pigeons when I was a little

BPBS 2nd in Annual Seat Belt Challenge

Belle Plaine Shows Greatest Improvement

Belle Plaine High School students finished second in the Second Annual Seat Belt Challenge competition this spring.

the competition.

Overall, for the second year in a row, Shakopee High school won the competition with 94 percent of

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Many, not all, of Dennis Kuhn's 600 pigeons are completely white and are the preferred birds for the special events he releases them at.

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boy and my interest just progressed from there, especially with homing pigeons. Then I saw there was market for pigeon releases and here I am."

Kuhn said he has done a number of bird releases for Kolden Funeral Home, as well as Washburn-McReavy Funeral Chapels in the Twin Cities. He's done about an equal number of releases at weddings, and when he does so, he often brings his own small decorative chapel with him, which the birds bolt out from and begin their circling routine and subsequent flight home. Some times the clients, most notably a bride and groom, will hold and release the birds themselves.

A couple of years ago Kuhn performed a 21-bird release at Belle Plaine's Memorial Day Service, which made for a very short flight home for the birds that day. He did a 14-bird release at the funeral of a 14-year-old Minneapolis girl, who was murdered.

But it's not always the number of birds that count.

"Last year I did a two-bird release for an elderly husband and wife at their anniversary party. The wife was terminally ill and it would be their last anniversary. They had all their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren there. That was probably the most memorable (bird release) I've done."

The Gopher State Racers pigeon racing circuit is scheduled to begin its annual spring/summer season this month. Kuhn said his birds have "won more than their fair share of races," which start out early in the season at about 100 miles and gradually increase to some 600 miles by the end of the season. Kuhn's racing club is out of Janesville. Other area pigeon racing clubs are located in Mankato and Hutchinson, as well as about a half-dozen in the Twin Cities. There are about 12 clubs statewide.

"Pigeon racing is referred to as the poor man's race horse, and that's

exactly how it is," Kuhn said. "The races are mostly for trophies and bragging rights. It's more of a hobby than anything else."

But that's not to say money can't be made by selling top-flight racers and their offspring, which are called squabs. Kuhn said he once sold a bird for \$2,500 to a race fancier in California. He's sold birds across the United States, as well as to racers in Canada and Thailand. He said he got a call last week from a prospective buyer in China.

When he sells his pigeons, Kuhn said he mails them in a postal approved shipping box that is sent out in overnight express.

"I'm a regular at the post office. Usually every Tuesday or Wednesday I'm in there," Kuhn said.

Kuhn feeds his pigeons a mixture of corn, milo, wheat, trapper peas and sunflower seeds. When he mixes the ingredients himself, he said it probably costs around \$250 to \$300 a month to feed his 600 birds.

Kuhn said pigeons will mate for life and that one pair will normally produce 8-12 squabs.

"They always lay two eggs and they hatch in about 17 days," Kuhn said. "The mother sits on them from about 5 p.m. to 9 a.m. and the father from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. So they both take their equal turns."

Kuhn said he normally names his pigeons only after they win a race, or his kids may name some. Kuhn and his wife, Alisa, have two children — daughter Siri, 7, and son Bryce, 4.

Kuhn said there are rare occasions when one of his pigeons don't make it home from an event release or race. Sometimes they decide to take their time getting back to the loft.

"I've had pigeons come back six months later and who knows where they were," said Kuhn, adding that overall his pigeons' track record is very good.

When asked why so many people in the pigeon release industry refer to their birds in business titles as doves rather than white homing pigeons, Kuhn said it's pretty much a marketing concept. But it's also been pointed out by some in the industry that the common pigeon is actually a type of "rock dove." So technically speaking, the birds used in releases are doves. Pigeon releasers also want to be aware of unethical businesses that use the smaller ring neck doves for release.

"These are the doves you will often find in pet stores for under \$20. Not only can they not find their way home, they cannot fly more than a few feet. Any bird other than a racing pigeon will die when released into the wild, including white pigeons purchased from poultry farms," stated an industry publication.

Still, true doves, despite their inferior aeronautical abilities, have been basking in the spotlight in front of pigeons for decades. In fact, pigeons have been getting shafted by doves for centuries. King David once said, "If I had the wings of a dove, I would fly out of here." If that was really the case, King David would have been wiser wishing for the wings of a homing pigeon. Also, Doves are referenced to in a number of Biblical scriptures, etc.

War Heros



This squab (baby pigeon) was only a few days old when the photo was taken earlier this spring.



Dennis Kuhn brings his own miniature chapel to special events, from which his white homing pigeons bolt from and begin circling the event area before heading for home. Some of his customers choose to hold and release the birds themselves.