

Topic: Hawks
Date: May 2, 2003

A response Dave sent in to the PML (PIGEONS-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU) after a reader indicated he was having hawk problems.

Regarding Larry's question about hawks, I would like to relate a few lessons I have learned. I realize that the hawk problem is a little bit different in each part of the country what with the different species and their migratory patterns. However, I think some of the things that I have learned, might be of benefit to some. For a point of reference, I live in Northern California.

For years I had no problem, then one day while my YB's were out, a hawk came out of nowhere and hit one that was on the lawn. That day began a three year sojourn which has lead to my current thinking and practices wherein I have almost no hawk problems. For the next three years after that first "hit", hawks were a very big part of my pigeon world. At one point about 18 months later it got so bad that I lost over 60 YB in one season. I stopped loft flying altogether and dutifully basketed them up everyday and took them down the road. This helped cut the losses, but I was still vulnerable for the rest of the flying season as they had learned where the food was and they continued to hang around occasionally getting a lazy trapper.

The next year I observed the most amazing event. About 4 miles from where I live there was a brush fire that burned about 40 or 50 acres of pasture. The next day there were Egrets all over the burned field and literally hundreds of little grey patches on the highway that passes the burn site. These patches were of course mice and rats that cars had hit when the rodents were crossing the road looking for new shelter (or escaping the smoke and fire). The next day, was the amazing event. I wish I had photographed it, but unfortunately I didn't and it only lasted a few days. As I drove by the burn site on the third day, I saw what had to be hundreds and hundreds of hawks all sitting about 3 feet apart from one another totally covering the burned field. They were basically opportunistically waiting for the next mouse or rat to come out of their burrow to look for food. The great rodent feast didn't last more than a few days and then the hawks were forced to go back to their more traditional hunting style and to the casual observer there were no hawks to be seen in the general area. The point that struck me though was this - I REALLY didn't know there were that many hawks in the entire state let alone within 4 miles of where I live! My approach to hawks was going to have to be one that recognized that hawks were here in my neighborhood and here in huge numbers. No amount of trapping and relocating would solve the problem, because it would only be treating the symptom and not the root cause. I was also intrigued by the fact that I had not had a problem for several years and then had consistently been blasted.

Here is what I have done and it has worked very well for several years:

1. In my situation I am dealing with two types of hawk populations. One is the group that comes here for the winter and then migrates out of the area. This group is usually here from sometime in the late fall to the early spring. The other group consists of the permanent residents which appear to live here year round. **Rule 1: I do not loft fly anything from around October 1st through around March 15th.** I watch and vary these dates a little as the migratory patterns do vary from year to year depending upon weather patterns. This allows me to avoid the problem of a very large temporary

population that doesn't have well established feeding habits. It also allows the new hatches of the permanent residents to establish feeding patterns before I start loft flying. During this period I do fly my birds, but I basket them and take them to work where I release them, varying the release time so there is no clear pattern as to when they arrive at home.

2. Once the temporary population has migrated out, I do loft fly my OB team. I am not the master at it that some are, but I flag fly them and do not allow them to sit on the roof or pick at the ground. **Rule 2: I keep them in the air or in the loft.**
3. My YB's are given only a few days of free loft to learn how to get back to the landing board and then they go down the road. Other than this the YB's are not loft flown or given free loft. If I had the time to flag fly the YB's this would probably serve the same purpose with respect to the hawks, but I am one of those who thinks YB's benefit from road work and so that is just how I do it. Whatever your approach, I think the key is to not allow birds to be sitting around. They should be in the air or in the loft.
4. Now occasionally a hawk is going to happen by and find the pigeons. When this happens, I invoke **Rule 3 - simply remove the opportunity.** It might mean stopping loft flying for a week and taking the birds down the road.
5. I do lose pigeons to hawks, but instead of more than 60 in one season, it is now more of the order of just one one or two a year. **Rule 4 - remember it is a strategy of balance.** The hawks are here in huge numbers (at least in my area). They can not be defeated, but I can manage my birds in a way that I lose very few. As Dick Wirtzburger very aptly said in his post, "If you are careless with your handling of exercising your birds too freely you would lose some...but taking precautions and being alert and savvy.... we keep them flying here".

I hope this has been helpful.