

IN PRAISE OF THE PIGEON; A BOOK REVIEW BY FRANK POVAH

Imagine New York City without pigeons—empty skies; stark, soulless buildings devoid of these stealth flyers. You may as well visualize the Everglades without alligators, or the Antarctic without penguins. Pigeons are NYC's nature—and for many New Yorkers, pigeons bring joy.—*Andrew Garn*

NOT KNOWING what to expect, I ordered a copy of Andrew Garn's latest book *The New York Pigeon*. Behind the feathers through eBay. The site didn't tell me much and I thought perhaps it may have contained some pictures of the New York Flying Flight – a breed of which I am particularly fond or the other breeds kept – many in rooftop lofts – by fanciers in that huge city.

It was not to be. Garn's book comprises 144 beautifully produced, full-colour pages of photos of feral pigeons – some domestic strays among them – and information in praise of pigeons generally.

There are photos of pigeons in flight, of pigeons bathing, and of street pigeons being street pigeons, just hanging around on buildings. Then there are close ups of the many and varied eye colours and of the intricacy and beauty of pigeon feathering. All the photographs are stunning in their detail and resolution – there is one of a blue chequer bird rising, its flights touching in front of its body and a bright, orange eye just visible through a small gap.





Okay, they're still street pigeons, but don't let that put you off. Scattered throughout the book are brief accounts of pigeon history and behaviour, and strong arguments for them as an intelligent bird, not the "rats with wings", a description coined in 1966 by then New York City Parks Commissioner, Thomas P Hoving and borrowed by Woody Allen for one of his films.

A chapter is devoted to "pigeon people" of New York. Two brief biographies in the chapter are those of fanciers whose birds are kept on rooftops in the city; one of them owned the second-to-last loft in Lower Manhattan until he was forced by his landlord to remove it. Fanciers all over the world know only too well the effect "gentrification" has had on the hobby in our cities and suburbs. We also meet Jennifer – a New York opera singer, expert in raising newborn birds, who travels with four pet pigeons – and "Mother Pigeon", well known to tourists and visitors for her "flash flocks" of felt pigeons.

The book also allows us a glimpse into the work of the Wild Bird Fund, a New York City Charity that rehabilitates some 6000 sick and injured birds every year; a little over half of them pigeons. It was surprised to learn – though I suppose I shouldn't have been – that lead poisoning ranks high on the list of ailments and injuries treated by the clinic, a legacy of our love for the motor car. Garn is a supporter of the Fund, and part of the book's proceeds are being directed towards that organisation.

To sum up, I'm glad that I've added it to my library and I'm sure there are others of you out there who would feel the same. Whether or not it would convince a dyed in the wool pigeon hater to change their mind I can't say, but it might give a pigeon sceptic friend pause for thought.

The New York Pigeon, behind the feathers, by Andrew Garn. powerhouse Books New York, NY, USA, 2018. ISBN 978-1-57687-869-9. <http://www.powerhousebooks.com/books/the-new-york-pigeon-behind-the-feathers/>
Penguin Random House is powerhouse's wholesale distributor.
My copy through eBay \$AU56.74 - though the prices on eBay vary greatly.

Front page (inset) APOLLO: One of the first patients of the WBF, he now lives happily in the front window of the WBF headquarters on Columbus Avenue, where his elegant beauty enchants passersby.

Front page (at bottom) JANA: Jana was rescued in Riverside Park, after exhibiting signs of Torticollis (twisting of the neck) most likely caused by lead poisoning. Once treated, she recovered, and is shown here exercising her finely-hued brown and gray wings.



Top of page: Baby's first mambo steps: orphaned at two days old this fellow was hand-fed by a concerned rehabber. Now at ten days, he is curious and confident.

Left: Pigeons over Bushwick, Brooklyn. [A fancier's flock of New York Flights, ed.]

Right: The broad range of eye coloration.

