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John Celia has been raising pigeons for 40 years, and some have pedigrees that go back a dozen generations.

Photos by Linda Lombardi / The Associated Press

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# These speedy pigeons always know their way home

By Linda Lombardi / For The Associated Press

Published: December 14, 2009 4:00AM PST

WASHINGTON — At first glance, the animals in three small, white-painted wooden buildings in John Celia's backyard look like the street birds that get little respect in cities all over the world.

But look a little closer and you see that these pigeons are different: clean, sleek, shapely and with an alert spark in their eye.

What's most remarkable, though, is listening to Celia talk about what these specially bred racing birds can do.

"They race from 100 up to 600 miles away," he says. Comparing them to the familiar urban pigeon, he says, think of how a racing Thoroughbred differs from your average farm horse. "The racehorse has been bred for endurance and speed," he explains, "and it's the same for the pigeons — they've been bred for generations for endurance and speed."

Celia bought his house in the suburbs to make room for the racing pigeons, animals that by some accounts are getting more popular. The American Racing Pigeon Union has nearly 10,000 members across the U.S., and gains about 100 new

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members a month.

Racing pigeons are fitted with a leg band and transported to the starting location in a specially designed truck that can release them all simultaneously. As each bird returns to its own home loft, the owner removes the band and drops it into a device that records the return time. (Newer systems are wireless, with the bird simply passing an antenna, like an automatic toll-paying device.)

Since the distance to each home loft is different, the winner isn't the first to arrive. Rather, the average speed of each bird is calculated, and the fastest one wins. (Racing pigeons can fly 40 to 60 miles per hour.)

Training a homing pigeon to race doesn't mean teaching it to fly home — they do that by instinct. Breeders have to sell a bird before it's a couple of months old, because where it lives at that point is where it will always return for life.

So preparing for a race is partly putting the birds into the best physical condition, "like an athlete," says Celia.

Also, he says, "young pigeons, just like school kids, they have the tendency to fool around," so they need to learn to come directly home and fly into the loft to have their time recorded. "If a bird comes home and sits in a tree, it hasn't come home as far as the clock is concerned," Celia says.

Celia has been in the sport for more than 40 years, but there are much younger enthusiasts as well. Wade Tischner, of Cedar Hills, Utah, got started in the sport three years ago when his then 6-year-old son asked for racing pigeons.

They're not a cuddly pet, Tischner says, although they clearly know their owners. Rather, the attraction is the amazing natural abilities of such a small creature.

"You get up in an airplane and you look down ... you can see big bodies of water and such, but to find an individual house is amazing," he says.

The care of these birds is not a casual matter. Tischner's family raised one fledgling by hand when it got displaced from its nest, feeding it around the clock for a week, and Celia has champions whose reputations are known across the country, with pedigrees that go back a dozen generations to his very first birds.

It might be hard to imagine putting that kind of effort into an animal and then letting it loose several hundred miles from home. But racers have faith in their birds' abilities.

Still, allowing pigeons to behave naturally inevitably exposes them to natural dangers, such as being attacked by hawks. The Tischners' hand-raised fledgling never came home from one training run.

It's sad, but it's sometimes the price of having a relationship with a bird that can fly free. And that's part of the appeal of these birds as well: that given their freedom, they choose to return.

"I let them go every day, and they're free to go or stay," says John Froelich, of Westlake, Ohio, who runs the Web site [www .PigeonTV.com](http://www.PigeonTV.com). "I get birds that sit on my shoulder and eat peanuts out of my mouth. They love to be at home, just like a dog loves to be at home."

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