

# CHRIS WILLIAMS

**Chris Williams is an aspiring pigeon fancier. He is young, articulate, committed, enthusiastic – oh, and just one more thing – he is disabled. Chris speaks for so many others when he says, ‘Disability does not mean inability’.**

## **What first attracted me to keeping racing pigeons**

My passion for pigeons and pigeon racing started when I visited the Mecca of the pigeon sport, Belgium. I should point out, however, that on closer observation my initial interest was kindled by waiting with my dad for his birds in our garden in Coventry. In those days all I seem to recall is Dad's No 10, a cock he owned, trapping into his loft like nobody's business on race days and Dad running to clock him. I also think that in my formative years I was very fortunate in being surrounded by some real local characters in the sport both Dad and I feel privileged to have known. With the seeds having been planted at a young age, it was my trips to Belgium at the age of 12 that I feel sealed the deal, so to speak. I think the Belgian people are ahead of the game in terms of attitude towards pigeon racing. After much thought I decided that I would give it a go. I had just lost my Nan, who was very dear to me, so, if you like, pigeons gave me something on which to focus.

## **How my loft is adapted**

My pigeon loft is adapted with ramps leading to it and the doors have been widened in order to accommodate the fact that I am a full-time wheelchair user. It is also fitted with a feeding table at waist height, which not only enables me to feed the pigeons but also increases the bond between us. This, I think, is one of our sport's unique selling points. The fact is that these birds fly hundreds of miles and return home for what I feel is a love of their loft and the fancier. There is also a corridor which enables me to enter the loft and get into the chosen compartment without the pigeons being able to fly out, or to just stay in the corridor if I don't want to disturb them.

## **My proudest achievement**

I shall never forget the feeling of pride I had, not to mention the lump in my throat, when I timed in a white grizzle hen to take 2nd in my Club. Okay, so it was 2nd but the point was I had done it and the hen had done it for me!

## **How the ETS has made things easier for me**

In recent years the ETS has been introduced and I can honestly say it has been one of the most positive advancements made in the pigeon sport, not only for disabled and able-bodied fanciers with busy work schedules but also for the pigeons as these days you seldom hear of a bad trapper. It is a fact that in the past pigeons became wise to being caught and the use of the ETS helps prevent this. On a personal note, the ETS has given me greater independence as both Dad and I compete in the same local pigeon club as well as at National and Classic levels so, as you can imagine, we are very competitive with each other. Prior to using the the ETS Dad would leave his own pigeons and help me time in but when I obtained the ETS it was up to me. One particular Federation race from Fougères on 6th June, 2009, will always stick in my mind. Dad had gone in the house to make tea, which in our house is a must when pigeons are on the agenda, which is quite a lot of the time, I'm sure Mum will agree! When, all of a sudden, two birds came like arrows straight for me, 'Come on', I called and they trapped. Dad came with the tea and said, 'Well done, mate. Here's your tea'. 'Forget the tea,' I said. 'Where's the whisky?' I was 1st and 2nd Club, 2nd and 3rd Fed that day.

## **Club and fellow members' encouragement**

On the whole I find my fellow competitors within the sport very encouraging. There are a few exceptions here and there but I prefer to focus on the positives of my passion rather than take note of the negatives, and this includes some people's attitudes, but on the whole people have been encouraging and I am lucky enough to have some great friends in the sport! **A message to people with a disability who feel it may be too difficult to participate in the sport**

Since becoming involved in the pigeon-racing world I can honestly say my confidence has grown 100%, so if you are looking for something new as an interest to occupy your spare time, without doubt pigeons and pigeon racing just might be what you're looking for. I can assure you it's better than any computer game that is, or ever will be, on the market. Speaking as a disabled fancier, I feel I can speak to the disabled members of the public and say that I feel this great sport of pigeon racing is one of the few in which I have truly felt able to compete on equal terms with able-bodied people. Yes, there are challenges but I feel that these can be overcome with a little thought and forward planning, which both the disabled community and the general pigeon-racing fraternity encounter on a daily basis. To be more specific, there are many ways in which a disabled person can adapt a system of racing that plays to his or her strengths. I should like to point out that I have been brought up with the motto, 'Disability does not mean inability'.

## **What of the future? How can we change the dated stereotype and attract a new generation of flyers?**

Pigeon racing has a rich and royal heritage so it is important that we remain true to this fact; however, I do feel that in many ways the sport in this country lacks the wider publicity that is commonplace for fanciers on the

Continent. More publicity needs to be given to the fact that pigeon racing is a global sport rather than just a domestic pastime. I feel that more needs to be done to promote the sport and to make people aware that it is very much a sport for here and now, which has participants from all walks of life, not only the Royal Lofts in this country but also the royal family in Dubai, celebrities such as footballers and even the boxer, Mike Tyson. In terms of attracting the next generation, I feel that it is up to all of us, as fanciers, to go along with the sport's governing bodies. This can and must, I feel, be achieved by positive media exposure. I've heard people talk about the price of publicity but the truth is, our great sport, which is a great bridge builder between peoples and generations, will pay the ultimate price if maximum publicity is not given to it.

## **Raptors – why should they ruin my sport?**

I am sorry to say that the raptors in Dorset are a major problem and I have first-hand experience of how devastating they are. At the end of the 2011 young bird season I was left with a small team of birds that I intended to send in the 2012 old bird races; however, due to constant attacks from raptors, in particular a female sparrowhawk, I was left with no option other than to cull these birds as they would not fly. The only way I can describe my birds' behaviour is comparable to 'shell shock'. They would not even leave the loft! As you can imagine, I was heartbroken as I had just returned to my beloved sport after a serious health problem. On 28th March this year my youngsters were out flying. I called them and they began to land and enter the loft, when all of a sudden a hawk dived down and attempted to snatch a young, blue white flight cock. The youngster turned, entered the conservatory and ended up in the living room, followed by the hawk! I must add that the hawk was undeterred by my presence and almost hit me in the face! I felt so angry at what had taken place that I wrote to DEFRA about the issue of raptors and gave an account of the attack. I was left outraged at the inappropriate response from a respected Government department! I have attached both a copy of my letter and the 'advice' I was given. I was told that alternative prey could be provided – a loft of less valuable birds! Is this what is regarded as an appropriate response when fanciers spend huge amounts of their hard-earned cash on birds, not to mention the large sums that are donated to charity, not just at the Show of the Year in January but also throughout the year in general?

*'Dear Sir or Madam, My name is Christopher Williams and I live in Weymouth, Dorset. I am a young, disabled person so, as I am sure you will appreciate, due to my disability the social and sporting activities in which I can take part are somewhat limited; however, in recent years I have become an active member of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association (or, as it is better known, the RPRA). I have found this sport to be of great benefit to me both socially and in terms of my own personal health. However, my enjoyment of it, and that of other fanciers, has been decimated in recent years, largely due to the ever-growing population of sparrowhawks and other birds of prey. Now allow me to make it absolutely clear that I am a lover of nature in all forms but I, among others in our sport, feel that the plight of our pigeons is being ignored whilst the birds of prey are allowed to increase in numbers. Please be aware that in recent years the songbird population has also suffered a decline in numbers and yet the population of the birds of prey continues to grow. I understand that the RSPB has a duty to protect endangered birds but is this any longer the case regarding the sparrowhawk etc., when it is quite clear that the population has grown dramatically? Surely the fact that the organisation bears the name Royal Society for the Protection of Birds implies that this should refer to all species of birds, including the songbirds and racing pigeons that also inhabit the length and breadth of this country. In the past, pigeon racing was regarded as a "cloth-cap" sport, the reason for this being that it was a sport enjoyed predominantly by the working class both in this country and abroad. In recent years the image of the sport has changed dramatically and the pigeon-racing community, like the UK, has become a socially ethnic diverse group, which, I might add, raises countless sums of money for charity and other worthy causes. Another point I wish to make is that if the RSPB is in favour of encouraging birds of prey, why then do they not encourage the eagle owl to take up residence within our shores? Perhaps the reason is that the eagle owl is a natural predator of the very species that the RSPB seems to have sworn to protect but in doing so it has, in my view, neglected its duty to all the other species of the bird family. I understand that all creatures on this planet have a right to eat in the way their natural instincts dictate; however, surely it cannot be regarded as natural that a sparrowhawk should enter a house in pursuit of its prey, as was the case at my address in Weymouth on Wednesday, 28th March, while my birds were being allowed back into my loft after their exercise. A sparrowhawk attacked them and, in order to avoid it, several of them flew towards the conservatory. Luckily the door was open and the terrified birds flew inside, hotly pursued by the bird of prey. Yes, a bird that is known for its hunting ability in the wild is now more than willing to enter a house! Over the last two years I have lost count of the number of my birds that have been ripped to pieces by the birds of prey that inhabit my local area. If this had been a dog and the attack had been upon a sheep, it is my understanding that I would be entitled to shoot*

the offending animal in order to protect my livestock so why, then, am I not permitted to act in the same way in order to protect my racing pigeons when there is a direct threat against them? Yours, Christopher Williams.'

'Dear Mr Williams, Thank you for your email of 29th March about sparrowhawks killing pigeons. I have been asked to reply and apologise in so doing. I am sorry to hear of your concerns and am aware that many pigeon fanciers throughout the UK believe that the increase in raptor numbers is leading to the loss of many of their birds and would like steps to be taken to reduce predation. DEFRA officials have recently met with representatives from the Royal Pigeon Racing Association and have visited a number of pigeon lofts to talk with fanciers and listen to their experiences. However, across the range of research that has looked into this issue, the general conclusion has been that there is an over-perception of the impact of raptors on racing pigeons. Therefore the available evidence does not currently support a reduction in protection afforded to sparrowhawks.'

'In 2000 the DEFRA-led Raptor Working Group published a report in which it assessed the predation of racing pigeons by raptors and concluded that failure to return home or straying appeared to be the most significant underlying reason for losses, whereas raptor attacks were estimated to account for about 7.5% of the loss of racing-pigeon populations in the UK. The report contained some recommendations for steps that pigeon fanciers could take to reduce the predation risk at or near lofts. These recommendations included:

- timing and varying release of birds to avoid the regular visits by raptors;
- use of physical, audible and visual deterrents on or near the loft;
- loft design and location;
- use of repellants and behavioural conditioning;

•provision of alternative prey (additional lofts of less valuable birds).

'The full conclusions and recommendations of the Raptor Working Group can be found at: [https://www.rspb.org.uk/images/raptorworkinggroup\\_tcm9-188714.pdf](https://www.rspb.org.uk/images/raptorworkinggroup_tcm9-188714.pdf). Pigeon fanciers across the UK are strongly encouraged to ensure they are aware of and follow these recommendations to help prevent predation of their birds by raptors.'

'A 2004 study funded by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Scottish Homing Union also suggested that there is no evidence that birds of prey cause major losses of racing pigeons at lofts or during races. The report, *Racing Pigeons – Impact of Raptor Predation*, concludes that much more could be done using deterrents and other novel techniques to reduce the small number of successful attacks that do take place. Its website address is: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/index>.

'The Scottish Executive also commissioned a review of an exploratory trial of two management practices designed to reduce sparrowhawk attacks on racing pigeons at pigeon lofts, which was inconclusive in its findings due to difficulties in obtaining data. It is available online at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/2010/01/15105533/16>.

'The evidence suggests that birds of prey account for a relatively small proportion of lost birds. To help reduce this number further there are a number of recommendations for pigeon fanciers to follow that will decrease the chances of predation. This research and the recommendations should provide an integrated solution to many of the problems faced by the racing-pigeon enthusiast. Sparrowhawks, like all birds, are protected under the *Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981* and we have no plans to reduce the protection afforded to this or any other bird of prey. Yours sincerely, Christiana Millard, Customer Contact Unit, DEFRA.'

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