

Wings of War

Juan Isidro, age 10

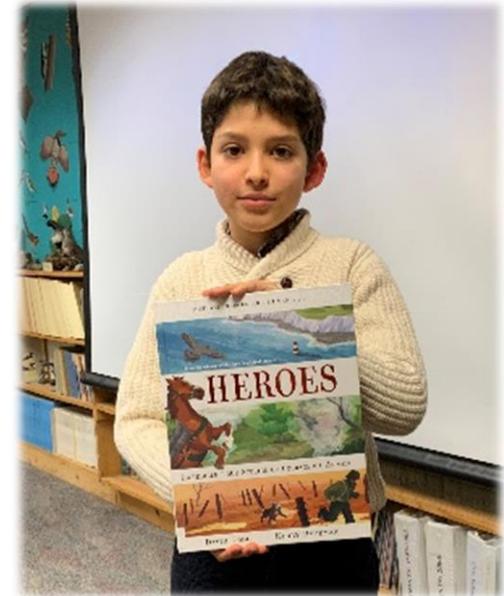
Young Birders Club

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Juan Isidro combined his love of history *and* birds to develop a very informative and fascinating presentation. Juan Isidro told us that the humble homing Pigeon, has a very important place in history. The homing Pigeon is a variety of domestic pigeon, with the scientific name of *Columba livia domestica*. The homing Pigeon was derived from the Rock Pigeon through selective breeding. Rock Pigeons are native to Eurasia and North Africa. Homing Pigeons can fly quite fast and average 60 mph and can reach 100 mph.

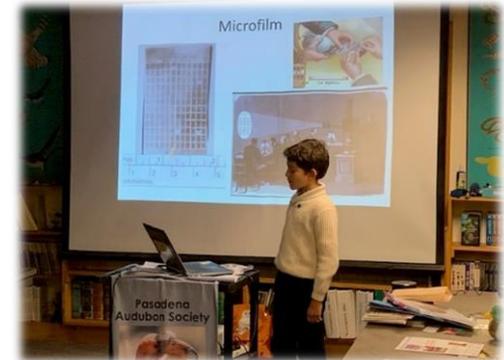
Homing Pigeons have a remarkable ability to find their way back home without a map, smartphone or GPS device! But how do they can they do this? Scientists say it's still something of a mystery! Some theories include that homing Pigeons:

- may have an internal compass that relates to the stars or the sun and they use the position and angle of the sun and stars to determine the correct direction to fly.
- use familiar landmarks once they get closer to home.
- use magnetic fields for guidance. Scientists found that homing Pigeons have iron particles in their beaks that may allow them to detect the earth's magnetic fields and use their ability to create a map of the magnetic field and then use it to navigate back.
- use their sense of smell to gather information from the atmosphere, winds, and odors they sense and from these sources they are able to create a map to navigate their way back home.



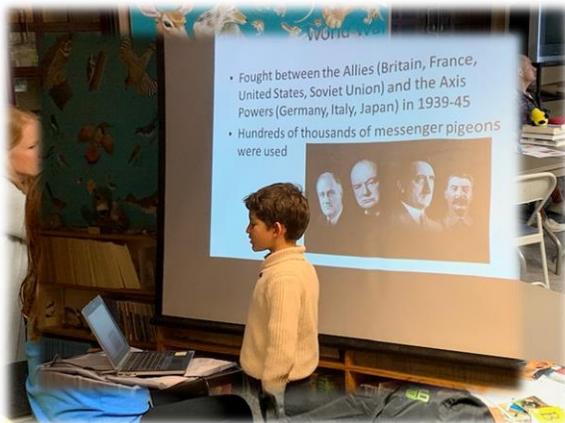
Homing Pigeons have been used throughout history.

- Egyptians, Greeks and Romans used homing Pigeons to proclaim the results of chariot races.
- Egyptian, Persian and Assyrian armies carried homing Pigeons on military campaigns and sent the Pigeons back home with messages.
- Messenger Pigeons were used during the Franco-Prussian war. Pigeons were transported in hot air balloons during the siege of Paris, with handwritten messages or microfilm attached to their tails. In 1906, France erected a monument to honor the messenger Pigeons.



Juan Isidro told us other interesting uses of homing Pigeons:

- Financially: In the early 1800s, the Rothschild family used homing Pigeons to communicate between their businesses and allowing them to get ahead financially.
- News: In the 1850's, Reuters News Agency used homing Pigeons instead of the railway to expedite the news.



Perhaps the most well-known use of homing Pigeons was during World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945), when hundreds of thousands of homing Pigeons were used. Homing Pigeons were used to carry messages back to their home coop which was located behind the infantry lines. Homing Pigeons were very useful on the front line and were brought forward with their armies to help update commanders and planners in the rear. When the birds were away from their home coop, they stayed in mobile units, which were converted horse carriages or double-decker buses. Pigeons were carried to the front lines through various methods including: soldiers wearing vests, parachutes, and a bra company, Maidenform, even made a Pigeon transporter! When the Pigeon was needed to carry a message, a tiny canister was attached to one of their legs with the message curled inside. The canisters were often colored coded to distinguish the recipient. Then Pigeon was released and the Pigeon flew back to their home coop. When a Pigeon arrived safely

back with a message, wires in the homing coop would sound and a soldier would know a Pigeon had arrived with a message. The message would be sent to its final destination by telegraph or field phone.

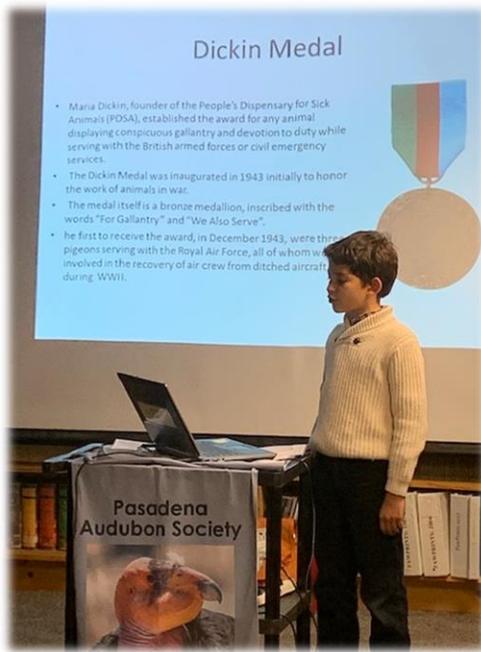
Juan Isidro told us that a homing Pigeon's job was dangerous as enemy soldiers often tried to shoot down the pigeons. Some of these pigeons became quite famous among the soldiers.

- ***Cher Ami***: During the "Lost Battalion" of 1918, Cher Ami was sent through a barrage of gun fire, to deliver a message and though severely wounded, successfully stopped the friendly fire of Americans firing on their own men, thus saving the lives of 194 American soldiers. For the Pigeon's great service, the French government awarded Cher Ami the Croix de Guerre with Palm. Cher Ami's body has been made into a taxidermy mount and is on display at the Smithsonian Museum of American History in Washington, D. C.
- ***G. I. Joe***: Hatched March 24, 1943 in Algiers, North Africa and died June 3, 1961 in Detroit. *G. I. Joe* saved the lives of about 1,000 people in an Italian village and the British troops occupying the village. The village came under control of the Germans, and a message for help was sent. However, the allies won the village back but had no way of transmitting a message to ward off the planned American air raid. *G. I. Joe* was sent with the message and flew 20 miles in 20 minutes, and the message was received just as the planes were preparing to take off for the village.



The Dickin Medal was instituted in 1943 in the United Kingdom by Maria Dickin. The medal has been awarded 54 times between 1943 and 1949 - to 32 pigeons, 18 dogs, 3 horses, and a ship's cat! The Dickin Medals honors the actions of gallantry or devotion during WWII and succeeding conflicts. The first recipients of the award, were three homing Pigeons who contributed to the recovery of aircrews from abandoned aircraft. Some of the recipients Juan Isidro told us about include:

- ***Tommy***, who delivered a message from the Netherlands to Lancashire in July 1942 and served with the National Pigeon Service (NPS)
- ***Mary of Exeter*** who showed outstanding endurance on war service despite injury.
- ***Gustav*** who brought the first message from the Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944.



Dickin Medal

- Maria Dickin, founder of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA), established the award for any animal displaying conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty while serving with the British armed forces or civil emergency services.
- The Dickin Medal was inaugurated in 1943 initially to honor the work of animals in war.
- The medal itself is a bronze medallion, inscribed with the words "For Gallantry" and "We Also Serve".
- The first to receive the award, in December 1943, were three pigeons serving with the Royal Air Force, all of whom were involved in the recovery of air crew from ditched aircraft during WWII.

During the Vietnam War (1955-1975) homing Pigeons were trained to detect ambushes and snipers hiding. The pigeon was equipped with a radio transmitter and launched from a transport vehicle and flew ahead on the road. As long as the bird was flying the transmitter would send signal back to the vehicle. The pigeon was trained that if it detected humans along the road, snipers, to stop flying and roost. This turned off the radio signal and indicated to the soldiers that a possible sniper was hiding ahead.

Recently, Russia has developed a combat surveillance drone that looks a lot like a Snowy Owl! The drone weighs 11 pounds and can fly up to 12 miles or for 40 minutes. The beauty of using a bird drone is that it can track enemy assets and equipment and it can hide in plain sight!



Juan Isidro: We learned so much about this fascinating topic. Thank you for all your hard work into this presentation. You did a great job, we learned so many new things, and we had fun! We are so proud of you!