



## From a master's wealth of experience



André Roodhooft

# Caretaking of breeders



André Roodhooft's breeders sit in a spacious aviary with metal floor grills installed about 60 cm above ground. The front side is entirely made of wire. The aviary strongly resembles the Natural Breeding Station lofts.

Stephan De Scheemaecker asked me to elaborate upon the way I take care of my birds. Let's start with breeders. They sit in a spacious aviary with metal floor grills installed about 60 cm above ground. The front side is entirely made of wire. My aviaries strongly resemble the ones of the Natural Breeding Station.

After breeding the widowhood boxes are closed and birds sit on perches. An automatic feed silo, the drinker and a container of grit, pickstone and Vitamineral are located outside the loft. That is practical and reduces the amount of work. I only have to

open the door to check a nest or ring a squeaker.

I remove all birds from the breeding aviary around mid-October so I can clean it. I do it once a year with a high pressure cleaner. Once the floor is dry, I put the birds in the loft again and they can seek out a widowhood box.

Birds are pre-paired in the beginning of November. After four to five days every pigeon knows its widowhood box and partner and the hens are removed from the loft till the actual pairing at the end of November.

Pre-pairing means extra work but it

also has some major advantages. A pair which doesn't wish to mate immediately is put in an empty loft for a couple of days. That results in less fighting, fewer broken eggs, etc. at the time of the actual pairing.

### System

I never give away a good racer. My breeding loft consists of my best racers and some summer youngsters from my best pairs. Now don't think it's all roses in my breeding loft. I regularly have to remove a former good

racer or former ace bird because its offspring can't even win lower prizes. Pairs which produce so to speak 'usable' youngsters every year stay together. Pairs from which I didn't even keep a single youngster at the end of the racing season are re-coupled. If their offspring also disappoints in the second year, at least one of the two partners is removed. If one partner remains, it must have a very good list of breeding references in its third year if it is to stay in the breeding loft.

I introduce one or two birds from another breed in my breeding loft every year. Those new birds are given a partner which has already bred multiple good birds. The second laying is floated out so I can train and race at least six young birds. If by the end of the season it is pointed out that those young birds did not perform better or at least equally well as my own breed, I eliminate all 'new' birds, both those youngsters and the birds I purchased. I am convinced that every fancier from whom I bought a bird in the past has been straight with me and has given me a pigeon from his or her best birds. I note down almost everything and those notes show that only one out of twelve purchased birds have more or less proven their worth in my loft.

If you introduce birds from other fanciers and those birds haven't performed the way you expected them to do, don't jump to conclusions by thinking the seller has swindled you. Bear in mind that good birds are rarities.

## Medical guidance

I can summarise my breeders' medical guidance very briefly. They are mated by the end of November. They are always provided with seasonal mixture, water, grit and a pickstone, that's it. I never supply my birds in the aviary with Naturaline, cider vinegar, vitamins or other feed supplements or complementary products. The same rule also applies to widowers and racing hens which spend winter

in the aviary but I will tell you more about that later on.

Once a year, around the end of February or the beginning of March, I have my birds' droppings thoroughly examined. So far not a single examination has pointed out any disease apart from one slight case of coccidiosis. I had purchased two birds from the same loft and they possibly carried the disease. I gave my birds Baycox for one and a half days and all of them were healthy again. I vaccinate against PMV every year in November or December and against paratyphoid in February or March.

My breeders are only treated against trichomoniasis once a year and always during the same period, from 1 until 10 January, with a product based on Ronidazol. Why at this fixed point in time? I pair my birds around 25 November. On 1 January

eight day old squeakers are lying in the nest. That means I'm killing two birds with one stone.

Once the breeders have been treated, they aren't given anything else and I have never had problems with trichomoniasis in my breeding loft. That way, early youngsters have also had their treatment. Four months later, just before the first prize winning race, they are again treated against trichomoniasis. Young birds from the second round and after are given a capsule of 125 mg of Metronidazol during weaning. I treat all my birds, including the breeders, with Baytrill 10 % for ten days after the racing season.

That's about everything there is to say about my breeders. An easy and far from impressive system but it keeps my birds in perfect health. Why make it more difficult then?

André Roodhooft pre-pairs his breeders in the beginning of November. After four to five days every pigeon knows its widowhood box and partner and the hens are removed from the loft till the actual pairing at the end of November.

Pre-pairing means extra work but it also has some major advantages. A pair which doesn't wish to mate immediately is put in an empty loft for a couple of days. That results in less fighting, fewer broken eggs, etc. at the time of the actual pairing.



# Caretaking of racers

I race both cocks and hens but not on total widowhood. Their partners, who remain at home in the loft, await the racers on their return. Total widowhood is said to be much easier. You only have to keep half your amount of birds and the partners don't have to be relocated every time before basketing or after arriving home. However, I don't dare race on total widowhood. In Germany nearly everyone races on total widowhood and in Holland an increasing number of fanciers do it. Because of my work here at the breeding station, because I visit many pigeon shows abroad and also because of my articles I am in contact with many other fanciers.

I often hear that mainly the cocks raced on total widowhood lose their shape after a few weeks and have a hard time racing consistently. Perhaps they lose their motivation when they arrive home to an empty loft?

Because of my tough selection process, I only have a limited number of old birds which I race. I never motivate my old birds extra. Lou Wouters always said: "A good pigeon doesn't have to be motivated and a bad pigeon won't perform well if you try it." The risk of demotivating my birds by racing them on total widowhood is one I do not wish to take. That is why, just like most fanciers who participate in short distance and shorter long distance races, I stick to the classic widowhood system.

## Widowers in the course of the year

Every year I start with 40 widowers of which the greater part are yearlings. The old widowers need to make every effort if they wish to stand my selection test. You know as well as I do that there is much more chaff than wheat. Every year I am confronted with more empty nest boxes than I like. I re-occupy them with summer youngsters or inexperienced late youngsters from my best pairs. I'd rather have an inexperienced late youngster in my racing loft than an early young bird that didn't race regularly and won too few prizes. One should be more patient with late youngsters. They still need to develop their orientation skills. The first races are usually hard for them. If one of them does pass the first races with flying colours, it is hopeful-

ly a true ace. Tulle, Mustang and Nestpenner were nearly never raced as youngsters but I have only had a few birds in my loft which were better.

## The pairing

I once more wish to repeat that my racing birds, both the widowers and the racing hens, stay in aviaries, separate ones of course, from the beginning of October till around 20 March.

Around that date I relocate the widowers to the loft. I darken them in the loft starting 20th April from about 5pm till 8am. I let them fly around the loft as soon as possible. On the first and second day I sometimes have to wave the flag during training because some birds aren't thinking about training around the loft.

After three to four days they are all circling around the loft, however. In Germany, birds are sometimes kept inside the loft during the entire winter because of birds of prey. When they can once again fly around the loft, it often occurs that some pigeons get problems with their muscles and can't fly anymore. These birds can fly better again but fully healing isn't possible. As a result, fanciers can forget winning prizes with these birds. After putting my birds in an aviary for five months on end, I have never had birds having difficulties with flying around the loft afterwards. I did, however, had muscle problems with several birds after a very tough race and after they spent a couple of days in a basket, even if there were known as very good racers.



You can make widowers which have been locked up the entire winter fly by carefully waving a flag.

## The 1st of April

My widowhood loft consists of four sections. The sliding doors are always open so it is in fact one very spacious loft. During the racing season I attach a nest box cup to the nest boxes and I feed the birds separately. Why? That way, they become tamer so I can easily catch them for basketing. Well, feeding them separately is perhaps incorrect because they would rather steal from their neighbour than eat from their own cup.

I want to make it as easy as possible. A shared drinker is placed in the section right near the water tap. After the last race, I remove the nest box cups and put the birds' feed in a shared feeder. All birds have to come to the first section if they wish to eat and drink.

On the 1st of April, the widowers are paired. Prior to pairing them, I visit the loft on several evenings to see which widower is sitting in which nest box. Pairing them is easy. I just relocate the hens to the loft, put the nest bowl in and let them do whatever they want to. On the third day, most pairs have been formed. Then I just sit in the widowhood loft all day. After the birds have eaten and drunk, I walk around. I note down each pair that is sitting together in a nest box and lock them up. Every ten to twenty minutes, I return to check. By the evening, most pairs are locked up. I then close the sliding doors. The pairs which have formed stay together for the next day and remain locked up. One day without feed and water is not a problem for birds.

The widowers which have not yet found a partner are split into four sections along with an equal number of hens. Because only a limited number of nest boxes are open and the remaining birds are not disturbed by the locked up pairs, they quite quickly form pairs. The stubborn ones are put into an

empty young bird loft. One or two days alone with a hen in the loft is mostly sufficient to let love grow. After pairing them, I have some extra work left for a short period of time. The sliding doors remain closed till each pair knows its nest box and no longer fights over other boxes. I then have to provide the birds in each section with feed and water and let the pairs walk and

fly around separately several times a day. After three to four days of intense observation, everything is starting to fall into place and I can open the sliding doors again.

The widowers can brood for five to six days. All eggs and hens are removed from the loft together, even if a hen has not yet laid or has only laid one egg.



André Roodhooft's widowhood loft consists of four sections of which the sliding doors are always open. That is why it is in fact one spacious loft.

# André Roodhooft's loft

My loft is southeast oriented, has a dry climate and is very airy. A good air circulation is necessary to create a healthy and dry loft climate. I have even had some ventilators installed which see to sufficient oxygen in the loft when the weather is very hot. Furthermore, I put wind shields in front of all windows day and night during summer.

At the back of the loft along the entire length there is a corridor of over one metre wide where sufficient feed, baskets, nest bowls, etc. are stored. The space in which birds sit is, if we include widowhood boxes, less than two metres deep. The morning sun shines through the windows, which are quite big, into the widowhood boxes.

Wooden grills are installed a little over 50 cm above ground. After thoroughly cleaning the lofts, I spread pellets till a layer covers the entire bottom. Thanks to that layer the bird droppings become as dry as a bone and I can leave them lying around in the loft till next year's thorough cleaning.

## Training

As soon as the widowers have their partner and a fixed widowhood box after being mated, I start training them. However, I don't put much effort in it. Weather permitted I even take them away four to five times during driving or when they sit on eggs which have only just been laid. They are then liberated all together 15, 30, 40 and 50 km from the loft. Afterwards, they are basketed in the club for races of 120 km. If the weather is bad and time is running out, I sometimes take them away and liberate them till about 80 km from my loft. I then immediately basket them in my club for a race of 220 km. During the racing season, I

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never take my widowers away for a training race.

## Basketing

As said before, the sliding doors in my widowhood loft are open. Old and yearling birds, middle distance and shorter long distance racers, they are all together in the same loft. Every week I participate in the same middle distance race (380 km) with four old birds. The other old birds and the largest part of my yearling team are basketed for shorter middle distance races (500 till 700 km) every two weeks. I never show a hen when basketing my birds for the shorter long distance. However, I do put a nest bowl in the widowhood boxes of the birds which are to be basketed so I can more easily catch them. The nest bowls remain there until the birds return from the race whereas the widowhood boxes are of course closed. The birds which are basketed the next day don't have any problem with that.

I basket on Thursday evenings for shorter long distance and on Friday evenings for middle distance races. If the weather conditions are normal, all birds are liberated on Saturday.

When basketing for middle distance races on Friday evening I do show racers their hens, however. I mainly do that so they land and enter the loft quicker upon arrival. The shorter long distance birds which stay at home during the weekend are locked up in their widowhood boxes while I basket the middle distance racers. They are mostly a bit nervous but as soon as their neighbours' hens are removed from the loft and their widowhood boxes are once again opened peace returns. The widowhood boxes of the birds basketed are locked anyway.

## Arriving home

Over an hour before the expected arrival of my birds from a race with a shorter distance I put all hens in the half-closed boxes in the loft. The widowers which stayed at home are

also given time with their hens and pairs are immediately put together. I put their feed in cups attached to the widowhood boxes and they have to drink from a shared drinker which is placed on the floor. I don't let them stay together for a fixed time after they return home from a race. Shorter long distance birds arrive later than middle distance racers. I always remove all hens and nest bowls at the same time. The time they have together depends on the liberation time and race duration. Birds which weren't basketed and middle distance racers sometimes spend about five to eight hours with their hens if the middle distance race was far from demanding and the shorter long distance race was tough. A widower which arrives very late or only returns the next day won't get to see his hen. He should have hurried a bit more when he was on his way home. Because I don't provide any drinking water in the widowhood boxes - too much work to be honest - I wait for at least fifteen minutes after the birds have arrived home before putting widowers together with their hens. That way, my widowers have enough time to drink water in peace and quiet.

## Bathing

Once I have removed the hens and nest bowls and widowers can once again fly around freely in the loft, they are given a bath. That happens only once a week after the race and my birds are usually very keen on going in, even when it is sometimes 7 or 8pm. In front of the loft I have a small aviary on wheels which is solely used for bathing. I add 2.5 ccm Noromectin to about twelve litres of bathing water. The lice can't bear that product and it doesn't harm the birds when they drink it.

## Training

Widowers stay inside on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings



The small aviary on wheels, solely used for bathing.

during the racing season. I let them fly outside on Sunday evenings. If the weather isn't too hot, I usually keep my birds up in the air for about fifteen to twenty minutes. I always use a flag. They know what it means pretty quickly. As long as they see the flag, they remain up the air quite easily. Exhausted latecomers after an unnatural race ignore the flag and sit back on the sputnik trap after a few rounds. I keep them inside for a few days so they don't affect the other birds' shape.

My birds train twice a day from Monday morning till Thursday evening. I used to let my birds fly around at a fixed time but now I don't pay that much attention to my watch. It regularly happens that they are liberated an hour later or even not at all. That doesn't mean they performs worse. In general I keep the widowers up in the air for about 45 to 50 minutes in the morning and 30 to 40 minutes in the evening. If the weather is expected to become boiling hot, they have to fly for an hour in the morning. I then let them out a few hours later than usual in the evening for a five- to ten-minute training without a flag.

The widowers for the shorter long distance train as well on Thursday evening, just before being basketed. On Fridays, when I basket my birds for middle distance racing, not a single widower leaves the loft.



Wooden grills are installed a little over 50 cm above ground. After thoroughly cleaning the lofts, André Roodhooft spreads pellets till a layer covers the entire bottom. Thanks to that layer the bird droppings become as dry as a bone and André can leave them lying around in the loft till next year's thorough cleaning.

# Feeding and medical guidance



The first three times André Roodhooft feeds his birds after they have arrived home from a race, he provides them with a light diet: 5 portions of diet mixture, 2 portions of racing mixture and 1 portion of Nutri-Power. That mixture is moistened with a good dash of garlic oil and afterwards mixed with brewer's yeast. Afterwards, they are given heavy feed: 6 portions of racing mixture, 3/4 of a portion of Nutri-Power, 1/4 of a portion of peanuts and 1/6 of a portion of small seeds.

I used to spend a great deal of my time to feeding. I was convinced that feeding pigeons was an art. When my birds were flying outside, I put some small seeds in each widowhood box. I provided them with feed afterwards, followed by giving them some peanuts. Luckily I am now, so to speak, cured from that disease.

The past few years I just mix everything in one and the same bucket. On Saturdays I prepare the following mixture for my birds' arrivals on Saturday, for Saturday evening and for Sunday morning: 5 portions of diet mixture, 2 portions of racing mixture and 1 portion of Nutri-Power. That mixture is moistened with a good dash of garlic oil and afterwards mixed with brewer's yeast. If a part of that light diet is still left on Sunday evening, the remainder is given to the racing hens. Widowers

are given heavy feed from Sunday evening till basketing time: 6 portions of racing mixture, 3/4 of a portion of Nutri-Power, 1/4 of a portion of peanuts and 1/6 of a portion of small seeds. I want them to recover and train as quickly as possible.

I don't stick to a fixed schedule when it comes to supplying feed supplements to my birds. However, I do regularly mix oil, probiotics and brewer's yeast into the bird feed in the beginning of the week. By the end of the week, however, I am careful with that. After all, if a product is then still present in their feed, they don't really feel like eating and consequently they don't eat enough.

I always provide more than sufficient feed but my birds have to eat everything I supply them with. They can't look for the best and leave the rest. As said before, I feed my wid-

owers by putting feed in their cups. When they train in the morning, I go around the loft with a tablespoon. I always provide them with sufficient feed without exaggerating. When I check the cups around noon, most of them only contain a few grains. A couple of hours later, all cups are empty. In the evening I offer them about 10 per cent more feed than they eat. When they have been inside the loft for ten minutes, I walk around and slightly refill those cups which are practically or entirely empty. Ten minutes later I remove all cups and give the remaining feed to my young birds.

## Drinking

As mentioned before, my racers are given feed and water in the aviary for

five months. When they are sitting inside the loft they are, however, never given clean water. Apart from when a medicine or another product is added to their drinking water, Naturaline or cider vinegar is present in their drinker every day.

Electrolytes are always added to the drinking water on Saturdays when the birds return home from a race. On Wednesdays, Naturaline, cider vinegar as well as a crushed clove of garlic are put in the water. The taste cannot be too strong because otherwise the birds won't drink the water. If the weather is very hot, the water has to be replaced by fresh water before feeding in the evening because of the danger it might have fermented. As far as drinking water additives are concerned, I don't follow a fixed schedule as well. Sedochol, Blitz and a product based on oregano do stain the water in the drinker from time to time. On the day of basketing, I am careful when it comes to adding products to the drinking water. I usually give Naturaline and cider vinegar. My birds then still drink enough water because they are used to both products. If the weather is very hot, I add a small dose of electrolytes to the water.

I used to supply my birds with vitamins one day a week but I no longer do that nowadays. Nutri-Power, brewer's yeast, probiotic preps and other feed supplements also contains vitamins.

## Medical guidance

I vaccinate my birds against PMV in the course of January, when my widowers are still in the aviary. By the end of February or the beginning of March, a vaccination against paratyphoid is scheduled. During the five-month period in which my widowers stay in the aviary, they are not given any medicines at all.

Mid-March I have my birds' droppings examined and so far those examinations have never pointed out any problems. I don't have my birds



André Roodhooft pairs his racing birds on 1 April. At the same time he starts with an eight-day treatment against trichomoniasis.

tested for trichomonads anymore. Those examinations usually show that some pigeons have been infected while others are entirely free from the disease.

I pair my birds on 1 April. At the same time an eight-day treatment against trichomoniasis starts. I treat my birds about every 2 to 3 weeks on the day the birds return home from a race. Those treatments last about one to one and a half days and are administered during the entire racing season. Next to that, no regular or blind treatments are given. Worms or coccidia don't keep me up at night. A dry loft, a good hygiene and having my birds' droppings examined from time to time enables me to sleep well at night.

Even though I always have antibiotics for the respiratory tract close at hand, I try to be extra careful when using them. As long as my birds perform well and regularly, I don't touch them. However, if their results or physical appearances do indicate a loss of shape, or if I just think there is something going on, I immediately take action. If you start with it in time, a two- to three-day antibiotics treatment will work wonders. That is to say it at least did and does in my loft. Which antibiotics you should use is

best decided by a vet. I have achieved good results myself with Ornisol and BelgaTai. In that way I try to keep my birds in excellent shape throughout the racing season. The less I have to use antibiotics, the better the birds' performances. Young birds mostly need a bit more guidance. For old birds two to three times at most throughout the entire season is sufficient. Take it from me: If you have to treat your birds all of the time, you will without doubt experience a bad racing season. After the last race of the season, when birds will no longer be basketed, all pigeons are given a ten-day treatment with Baytril. I am still very grateful to the vet who advised me to do that.

It can happen that pigeons which were basketed bring salmonella to your loft. It's hard to notice if your birds carry them. A few weeks or months later, when the moulting period or breeding season starts, birds will weaken and a disease will break out. I am afraid of paratyphoid and all of its consequences. By preventively treating my birds I hope to kill a possible infection and thus save myself a lot of misery. The treatment doesn't affect birds during moulting or squeakers which are still in the nest.



# Caretaking in winter and selection

My widowers are raced until mid-August. Those which go through the selection process and pass the test can start their first and only laying. Around mid-October, when squeakers are weaned and my pigeons start brooding again, they are moved to the aviary. Unlike what people think, it is not my intention to harden them during the winter months because I don't believe in that. I am even convinced that they are better off in a loft than in an open aviary. However, it is much easier for me to put them there. When they are sitting on grills in the aviary and are fed through a feed silo, I needn't spend much time on their caretaking. The widowhood loft is empty for five months so I have ample time to thoroughly clean it. I put moulting mixture in the feed silo until the end of December. When the new year starts and the biggest moulting period has passed, and so to speak the last wing feather is growing again, I solely give them a widowhood mixture. Every time I take them in the hand in February or in the beginning of March to vaccinate them, I am surprised that they look well and don't carry too much fat in general. If some birds do feel a bit fat, I close the feed silo for 3 to 4 days. When they are sitting in the aviary, I never give them any medical treatments. They only have grain feed, clean water, grit, a pickstone and Vitamineral at their disposal.

## The selection process

A very tough selection is the shortest way of achieving lasting success. I have often written that I don't believe in names or breeds. I do believe in a bloodline or family which produces a good racer or breeder. You have a bigger chance of success



André Roodhooft's widowers are in this aviary for five months on end during winter. Caretaking is very easy. In the aviary, you needn't spend much time on their caretaking when they are sitting on grills and are being fed through a feed silo.

with a beautiful and nicely built bird from such a bloodline but that is of course no guarantee. I sometimes instantly put a summer or late youngster from a good pairing in the breeding loft. That sometimes results in success but it mostly doesn't. Unfortunately, there are only few good birds.

I won't examine and select my birds by taking them in the hand if I don't know their backgrounds. I no longer do that unless, and against my better judgement, I don't have any other option. We can all recognise a beautiful bird. However, there are numerous pigeons which feel great and complete in the hand but aren't worth a penny.

## Selection process in my own loft

In my own loft the selection process starts at birth. Squeakers which don't grow well or which

don't feel right in the hand during weaning are immediately removed. Afterwards, I actually select 365 days in a row. Young birds which are old enough are thoroughly test by racing them. I remove one or several pigeons which don't fulfil my needs from my loft almost every week. They cannot stay in the loft or move to the aviary. They have to be gone! That way, I am not tempted of keeping some of them.

My widowers and racing hens go through the same process. I draw to conclusions after five 'normal' races. Pigeons which fall short of my expectations are removed, just like young birds are. I won't waste any more feed on them. The selection process will last till the very last day. Birds which do not win enough prizes, which do not rank themselves among the best in the prize list or which are weaker by the end of the season are in danger of losing their lives.

It is claimed that widowers lose their motivation if pigeons are removed from the loft during the racing season. I have never experienced that. Every year almost half of the widowhood boxes is empty after just a few races. The fewer birds are in the loft, the better I can observe them. I am also under the impression that the remaining pigeons train better and stay better in shape if the weak birds and doubtful cases are no longer part of the racing team. It goes without saying that the prize percentage increases week after week as a result of such a tough selection process.

## Racing hens and young cocks

They receive the same feed and medical guidance and are taken care of in the same way as my widowers. Hens are raced on the widowhood system till the end of July. Afterwards, I put them on a nest so that they are sitting on eggs or have a squeaker in the nest bowl when I basket them for the last national races.

I race my young birds on the sliding door system up until the last race of the season in the beginning of September. Promising young cocks are removed from the racing loft around mid-August. However, I do like it when they have completed at least one or two races of about 500 km before ending my selection process.

## For beginners

Even though we are an ageing community and fanciers quit the sport on a regular basis, new people start racing pigeons every year. Especially for those people I wish to conclude this series of articles on daily pigeon caretaking with a good piece of advice. If you wish to be part of the cream

of pigeon racing, you need to introduce and implement a very tough selection process. Do you have a racing bird which does not meet all requirements or a breeder which hasn't bred a single more or less good young bird in its first two years? Eat it or just remove it from your loft. It doesn't matter how you do it but do take action. Don't postpone it or don't move the bird to the aviary. After

moulting the bird will look fantastically and will be given an extra year of credit. Time wasted! There are exceptions but don't hang on to that. It is difficult enough to achieve success with good birds so don't waste any time with weak or doubtful birds and test them. Breed many birds, race many birds and "sift" them. You will see the quality of your family of pigeons increase year after year.



A view into the loft which, during the week, is populated by André Roodhooft's racing hens.

# Young birds

I wean them at a very young age. They are twenty days old at most when they have to take care of themselves. Some birds are already weaned at the age of eighteen days but they also manage. I never do it but when you put a cup with feed in it next to a nest bowl, the squeaker sitting in that bowl will start eating by itself really soon. Weaning birds at a young age only has advantages. Young birds learn to be independent much quicker and it only very rarely happens that I have to remove a crybaby.

During the first days after weaning I always put a few handfuls of diet mixture in the feeder for the youngest birds. A few days later they no longer experience problems when eating bigger grains. Once and a while I have to put a bird's beak in the drinker if the bird is blinking its eyes but that also happens when they are weaned at 30 days of age.

## Feeding

When weaning I give breeding or young bird mixture, depending on what I have available at that time. I do think it's important that maize is present in the mixture. They have to learn to eat maize at a very young age. When they are in a basket for a prize-winning race, they are often only given maize. Learn young, learn fair!

When young birds start training around the loft for the very first time, I switch to moulting mixture. It contains all sorts of feed and is less heavy than breeding or racing mixture. Young birds which are given a feed which is too heavy become lazy and slow. Consequently, it will be impossible to get them up in the air. If they race



André Roodhooft weans his youngsters at a very young age. They are twenty days old at most. Consequently, they learn to be independent much quicker. During the first days after weaning he always puts a few handfuls of diet mixture in the feeder for the youngest birds. A few days later they no longer experience problems when eating bigger grains.

well, I mix depurative mix into moulting mixture. I don't carefully measure how much depurative mix I add. The older the young birds, the lighter their diet. However, they are always given plenty of feed. In the last weeks prior to the racing season the early youngsters are given almost 100 per cent of depurative mix. Depending on my agenda or how much time I have, I add garlic oil, brewer's yeast, probiotics and sometimes a small amount of Nutri-Power to the feed for one to three days a week, starting on the day of weaning up to and including the first prize-winning race. As soon as the first prize-winning race is held, I stop giving them depurative mix. I wish to stress that my birds are raced in middle distance and national races. I don't advise real short-distance racers, so fanciers who participate in races from 60

till well over 100 km, to copy my feeding system. For shorter and longer middle distance races I like that my young birds eat as much as they can and by doing so build up their reserves. If races proceed normally, I can basket my birds week after week. That is impossible if you give them depurative mix and a light diet.

## Feeding system

On Saturdays upon arrival from a race I give them four portions of diet mixture, two portions of racing mixture and 3/4 of a portion of Nutri-Power. On Sunday evenings till basketing they are given about six portions of racing mixture, 3/4 of a portion of Nutri-Power, 1/6 of a portion of peanuts and 1/8 of a portion of small seeds. Upon arrival from a race and in the be-

ginning of the week I alternately moisten the feed with garlic oil, lecithin, sedochol, brewer's yeast or probiotics. I don't follow a fixed scheme or system, however. It all depends on the circumstances and how much time I have.

During the last days before basketing I no longer dare moisten the feed or mix something into it. Experience has taught me that birds will then eat less and lack reserves when they are basketed.

## Medical guidance

I find myself, especially when it comes to trichomoniasis, worrying far less than I used to. My breeders are treated once a year against trichomonads, in January when the early youngsters are lying in their nest bowls. Back in the days I would put a capsule of 125 mg of metronidazole against trichomoniasis in a youngster's beak when weaning the second and the next rounds. Nowadays I just put them in the loft without giving them any pills. All young birds are given Naturaline and cider vinegar in their drinker every day, starting from weaning. Scientists doubt whether that has any effect but I am convinced that trichomonads are in that way kept under control. Shortly before the first prize-winning race they are treated for an entire week. During the racing season that treatment is repeated every two to three weeks for one and a half days in the beginning of the week.

In spring I have their droppings thoroughly examined. The result is usually negative so no treatments have to be done.

Vaccinating against PMV is of course necessary. To avoid any risk I had my young birds vaccinated a second time in the past few years. An injection against smallpox and diphtheria are highly important in my opinion. Prevention is better than cure.

As far as the rest is concerned, I try to leave things the way they are and not intervene. No blind or preventive antibiotic treatments. Should a disease break out or should my birds suddenly lose their shape, I of course need to take action. I won't hesitate for a second and will act immediately. However, as long as I can keep things under control by using natural means I won't touch antibiotics.

As I have said before, I don't have a fixed scheme. I just follow my gut. One week can look entirely different from another. I play a bit with natural products such as Naturaline, cider vinegar, fresh garlic, lecithin, catosal, electro-

lytes or Nutri-Power and regularly switch between those products. During the last days before basketing I don't add any products to the feed. Otherwise, everybody would know my secrets.

Or perhaps not because I would like to tell you my biggest secret: "There are no secrets in pigeon racing." Good birds, perfect care and especially a very tough selection process, those are the secrets in pigeon racing. Don't believe that quality, excellent shape and first prizes can be found in a small bottle or pillbox.

*André Roodhooft*

When young birds start training around the loft for the very first time, André Roodhooft switches to moulting mixture. It contains all sorts of feed and is less heavy than breeding or racing mixture. Young birds which are given a feed which is too heavy become lazy and slow. Consequently, it will be impossible to get them up in the air. If they start racing well, he mixes depurative mix into the moulting mixture.

