

Pigeon Patrol

by Karin Lynn Kandur

Did you know that the pigeons you see at the park and on the sidewalks can be trained as rescue heroes? While we may only see them coo and peck at the ground in search of food, they were once an important part of search and rescue missions.

5 Jim Simmons is a scientist who recognized the power of pigeons. In 1976, he started Project Sea Hunt, a program that trained pigeons to spot people lost at sea. The project was sponsored by the United States Coast Guard.

10 Jim's experience with animals qualified him to run this program. He once trained bottlenose dolphins, pilot whales, and gooney birds. He also studied their behaviors and abilities to learn. He used food to reward them when they performed a task correctly. It's like training a dog to sit by rewarding him with a biscuit.

15 What would you do for your favorite snack? Jim taught the pigeons that every time they saw the colors red, orange, or yellow and pecked at a special button, they would be rewarded with a seed. Why those colors? They are the colors of life jackets, life rafts, and distress signals, such as flares and flashing lights. These objects are often used by people to get help when they are stranded in the ocean.

20 "The Sea Hunt pigeons were selected first for good health and secondly on the speed and reliability that each bird learned the behavior that was being trained," Jim explained. While a large number of birds were originally selected for the program, approximately 12 to 14 of them completed the training and were able to perform actual searches, Jim says. Training usually lasted 10 months.

25 Why did Jim choose pigeons for rescue missions? A pigeon's sharp eyesight and ability to search long hours without getting tired made it the perfect worker. Before using pigeons, search and rescue teams consisted of humans scanning the ocean from boats and helicopters. When going nose to beak against a human during training, the pigeons spotted objects faster and more often. What's even better, the pigeons could see objects from as far away as 2000 feet. That's the distance of almost seven football fields. Plus, the pigeons didn't have to concentrate on flying the helicopter while they searched.

30 To put their skills to the test, the pigeons were used in several official search and rescue missions. Three pigeons were strapped into a clear capsule attached to a helicopter. Two pigeons faced forward and one faced backward. This allowed them to see in a complete circle. The pigeons pecked at an alert button in front of them when they spotted

something red, yellow, or orange in the water below. Meanwhile, the pilot was notified in the cockpit by a flashing light and could begin a closer search.

35 While the birds did not find missing people in any of their official rescue missions, they did find small objects in the water that matched the colors the birds were trained to identify. The missions took place off the coasts of Hawaii and California.

40 Project Sea Hunt ended in 1982. “The effort helped draw attention to the difficulties of searching for small objects in a big ocean,” Jim said. Since then, technology, such as infrared and radar sensor systems and emergency transmitters, has been developed to make search and rescue missions even more successful.

With their search and rescue days behind them, pigeons prefer living in parks or on top of tall buildings. The next time you think about calling someone a birdbrain, think again. That birdbrain may be able to save your life.