

Pigeon pageant for beautiful birds dispels 'rats with wings'

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Carrier pigeon. Credit: Wikimedia.

Dogs aren't the only animals that vie for best in show. Hundreds of breeds of pigeons compete in their own version of the Westminster show, strutting on long, thick legs or fluttering curly, lacy feathers in their bid to be best bird.

These [pigeons](#) aren't the nuisance flocks that swarm food scraps at outdoor restaurants. They are genetically rich [birds](#), including variations bred to look like turkeys or sound like trumpets, that drew thousands of enthusiasts—including boxer and pigeon lover Mike Tyson—to the National Pigeon Association's 93rd annual Grand National Pigeon Show.

Showing pigeons is one of the oldest and largest hobbies in the world. It

thrives at a time when pets are becoming a more important part of people's lives and animals kept as companions range from the traditional to the unique, such as rats and tarantulas.

More than 7,800 birds packed the Ontario Convention Center in Southern California last weekend, cooing and strutting in their cages, which sent feathers and feed flying. But the well-behaved show birds wouldn't let one drop of waste fall on a judge's shoe as they were examined for build, color and weight.

There were birds in blacks, whites and browns with feathers on their feet, circular crests framing their faces and 8-inch necks. Some looked like street pigeons but bigger and stronger, with massive shoulders and thick necks.

Tyson, the four-time heavyweight world champion, kicked off the three-day event by releasing 100 white pigeons. He agreed with the mostly older male owners about the need to infuse young blood in the aging hobby.

"Take this opportunity at a young age to enhance your responsibility and enjoy it," he told youngsters who asked for photos and autographs.

Tyson, 48, who had pigeons as a kid, keeps 1,800 birds. He said he was 10 when he won his first fight because a bully killed one of his birds in front of him.

"They teach you a lot about yourself," Tyson said of pigeons.

Nearly a thousand different breeds of pigeons exist. Not only can these birds become pampered pets, they can be raised for racing and stunt performances. Racing pigeons can fly for hundreds of miles a day and flap as fast as 80 mph, and performers will unleash death-defying stunts

midair.

"Racing pigeons are the Ben Johnsons of the world and fancy pigeons are the Naomi Campbells of the world," said Fadiel Hendricks, president of the National Fancy Pigeon Association of South Africa.

The performers are dubbed rollers and tumblers because of their motion during flight. The popular Birmingham roller dives into a series of backward somersaults, stops the roll before hitting the ground, then heads back up and performs the feat again.

Hendricks, who traveled 36 hours from Cape Town, South Africa, said age is a problem in his country, too. In his group, 90 percent of the members are over 50.

"We are up against computers and computer games," he said.

Bob Nolan of Dana Point, a historian and 60-year member of the Los Angeles Pigeon Club, which hosted the show, said new variations are rare because "kids aren't much interested in breeding anymore."

"All these pigeons are man-made. None of them occur in nature like this," said Nolan, who raises English trumpeters, known for their acoustic sound of distant trumpets. "All of these breeds have evolved from man's creative genius."

Samantha Wendell of North Hollywood and her fantail Francis, which looks like a turkey, are inseparable.

"Pigeons are just like dogs, they love you like a dog if you spend time with them and love them back," she said. "He is all hugs and snuggles."

Tyson says he will watch his birds for hours. The fighter who bit off part

of Evander Holyfield's ear explained his softer, pigeon-loving side by saying: "What I am just wasn't what I did for a living."

More information: www.npauasa.com

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