

▶ Van Gent

THE MONTH BEFORE THE RACING SEASON STARTS...

We are a month away from the beginning of the racing season 2014. Last year it was still freezing weather and we had 20cm of snow. This year the temperature hits the 15 degrees and mother nature is ahead of schedule instead of three weeks behind as in 2013.

The breeders

My breeders are now on the second round of eggs. How I prepare them I covered that last time. But the first round I got 18 out of 20, so a very good score again. The first two rounds are all for myself, and then I can breed for others. I have some vouchers for youngsters and they are able to get from the third round.

The racers

Due to the very nice weather, my flyers have already got some training. Normally, I start with training the birds again somewhere halfway in March. Due to weather and light it is not possible, but now the weather is bright and the temperatures are great I am able to let them train twice a week already. Because I kept them on a very light mixture of 50% moult feeding and 50% depurative feeds, the birds are already at the right weight. They are also very lively and are very sharp. I also tend to skip a day feeding every week when the weather is like it is now.

Getting to know each other

Because my peak in the season is in June-July, I have not mated my flyers yet. What I did, I pre-mated them three weeks ago. My flyers may choose their own partner. So I put 18 cocks and hens in the loft with 18 nest boxes and they may go on for an afternoon and a night. Then in the morning, I check which pairs are there and I lock them up in a nest box. Then I wait for a couple of hours and do the same again. And in the afternoon of day two, I make the last pairing myself. Check if they like each other, if not, I change them quickly. In 10 minutes time the last couples are done. I hate cocks who destroy their hen, so I'd better change them before it is too late. When there is one combination left, I start with this to leave their nest box open in the loft. In 8 out of 10, they will find each other after a night and you find them somewhere cuddling. I write down the combinations and a separate them again.

Wedding bells

On the Friday afternoon that I am going to mate them, normally early March, I get my list and I mate the couples in their nest boxes. I have two lofts with nine nest boxes. Three by three. So first I open up top left, bottom right and the middle of the second row. After an hour or so, I close the previous ones and I open middle left and right, top middle and bottom middle. And again after an hour, I close the previous opened and then top right and bottom left. I try to open each time more and more nest boxes. During these "getting to know your nestbox" sessions, there is always feeding and water available. What I am trying to accomplish is that after a weekend all pairs know their nest box. I add the next bowl only after a day or two. With a nest felt in it and with tobacco straws on the ground. There are some who build giant castles with it and there are others who do nothing with these.

For me, this is the hardest period of being a pigeon fancier. You have to remain patient and be very patient with certain cocks and hens. If possible, I like to get them out of the loft during the first days that they are mated as much as possible. It is always good for couples to get out in the open. They can play around and have fun. When this is all done, I make notes of when the eggs are there and after a day of 10, I check if they are occupied or not. My goal is to have one youngster per pair. So I throw away the eggs that are not filled and I move the eggs around so every couple has at least one filled egg with a date that is maximum two days apart from their own. One or two spares of course for any mishaps.

Some tips

I must say, I have always some spare hens and cocks. I never have the exact amount available. Due to the fact that the marathon pigeons are

slower in development, I never know for 100% if a cock is a cock and a hen is a hen. More than once, I mated two cocks with each other. So I have a few spares also for pre-season or early season losses. These pigeons are in the young bird loft and when I need one, I can put them in the racing loft.

'Pipo', my Damascener cock

This year I have two hens and four cocks spare. The advantage is that they teach the 2014 young birds how to get out and in to the loft, and they stimulate them to fly. These "teachers" are very useful. I also have



'PIPO', MY DAMASCENER COCK

a fancy pigeon cock in the young bird loft. It is a Damascener, which are white with grey bands. He almost does not fly, he parades over the roof of the loft and like that, it is easier to train the youngsters in the beginning. They know him and I can put him out when one of the 2014's is late or hesitates how to get into the loft. And later in the season, he has got four or five girlfriends who like him very much. None of these gets lost during the young birds season!

Getting the loft ready

Everyone has to do some stuff before they can start racing. First, I have to finish some stuff with the roof of my loft. I have some glass roof tiles which I like to move from the front to the back of the roof. Then I get the morning sun in the loft. I also have to install deflective netting under the first roof tile in the front of the loft, then the air intake is more controllable. I have to install my ETS landing boards in my Sputniks. I also take these sputniks down and give them a thorough wash with the high pressure cleaner. Test the system and the landing boards. Then I also have to get my E-rings connected in my ETS. All these things I try to do before the season starts.

Never a dull moment

A pigeon fancier almost never has a dull moment. Maybe during the moulting and winter season, but when the month of March is there, there is always things going on in and around the loft! Enjoy these times!