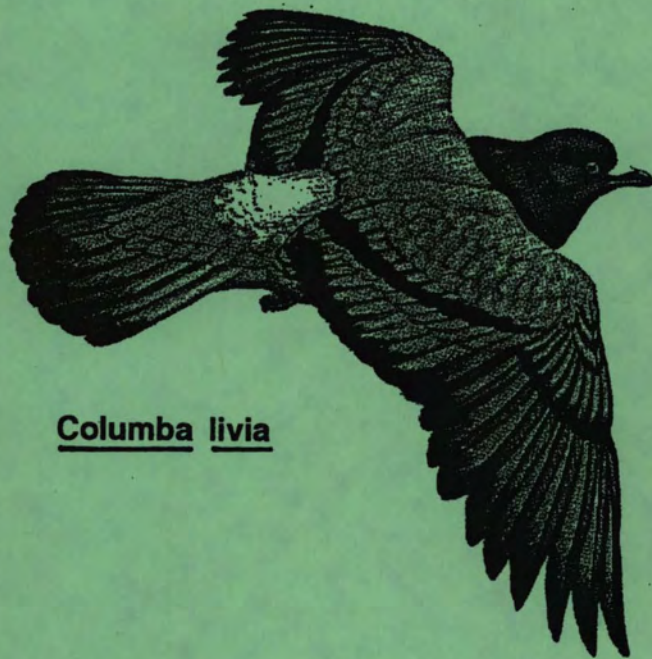


**CARRIER PIGEONS
ON THE IDAHO NATIONAL FOREST, 1922**

BY
Steven E. Stoddard



Columba livia

WILDLIFE PROGRAM
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE
INTERMOUNTAIN REGION
PAYETTE NATIONAL FOREST
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During the summer of 1922, a series of wildfires broke out in the Warren and Big Creek Ranger Districts of the Idaho National Forest (which became the Payette National Forest on April 1, 1944) in the high mountains of central Idaho. Radio was not yet in use for communication, and telephones were relied upon to relay commands and messages. These proved unreliable for use on the front lines of the fires, because they were both susceptible to disruption when the fires burned in the area of the lines, and running those lines to the rapidly moving camps and command locations proved to be a slow and laborious process. Men to fight the fires were at a premium, and could not easily be spared as messengers. At that time, there were no roads to Big Creek, and air travel to the backcountry was still 8 years in the future. The only way in or out was over more than 20 miles of pack trails from Warren to the west, or from Yellow Pine, about the same distance to the south. Both of these locations were more than 50 miles by road from the Supervisor's Office at McCall. Some of the fire lines were another 20 miles from Big Creek.

The Big Creek Ranger, Walter Estep, recalled a solution that had been used successfully since the Civil War in similar situations: pigeons. He requested, and received, several coops of carrier pigeons. These were brought to the Big Creek Ranger Station as an experiment, to see if they could reliably be used to carry messages between the station, the fire camps, and the Supervisor's Office in McCall, more than 60 air miles away over some of the most rugged terrain in North America. The pigeons performed admirably, successfully delivering all the communications entrusted to them with no losses and no misdirected messages. The following pages contain Ranger Estep's report of the experiment and his supervisor's assessment of the program.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE
INTERMOUNTAIN DISTRICT



ADDRESS REPLY TO
DISTRICT FORESTER
AND REFER TO

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Fire
Idaho
Carrier Pigeons

February 16, 1923.

Forest Supervisor,
McCall, Idaho.

Dear Mr. Watts:

I have just read Ranger Estep's report on the past season's use of carrier pigeons a part of which was run in the Daily News sometime ago.

Estep's report has been very interesting to me and I will be glad to watch his future developments along this line.

A copy of this letter is enclosed for Mr. Estep.

Very sincerely yours,

Charles D. Simpson

Enclosure.

Assistant District Forester.

O
Fire
Idaho
Carrier Pigeons

January 3, 1923.

District Forester,
Ogden, Utah.

Dear Sir:

I respectfully submit the following report on the past season's use of the carrier pigeons.

"Pigeons a proven success in Fire Prevention."

The past season, on the Idaho, in addition to numerous successful trial flights, the Carrier Pigeons, on the one Ranger District on which they were used the past fire season, were flown from seventeen different lightning fires, and in every case made successful returns with the messages in time varying from five to twenty minutes. Not a bird was lost on any of these trips, and they would have made a still better record had there been any one at the Headquarters station to receive them, when the later fires occurred, after the supposed close of the fire season and after most of the protective force had been put on improvement work.

It is easy to estimate the saving in worry, time trouble and money gained by an immediate and authentic report of the actual location and conditions existing at a fire and this too without any loss of time to anyone working in connection with the fire.

In addition to the actual fire reports received the pigeons also brought in a signed affidavit in regard

to a fire trespass case, and carried this clear across the Ranger District in a half hour time in order to catch the outgoing mail and save the delay of several days in its receipt. In addition to this they carried a number of other messages of official importance.

The best individual flight record of the season was a flight from the Supervisor's headquarters to the Ranger's headquarters, a distance of twenty miles in twenty minutes. Another flight of twenty five miles and over two mountain ranges was made in thirty two minutes.

An incident which occurred goes to show the inherent instinct of these birds. The Ranger doing the experimenting with the pigeons, sent some young birds just off the nest and which had not yet learned to fly, back to the remote Big Creek section of the Thunder Mt. Area in order that they might be established and used there. One of these birds was taken too far on its initial flight, and not knowing the location of its new home it instinctively took the direction of the old home a hundred miles, and better, air line distant, and the outside of which it had never seen. This pigeon must have passed directly over its old home without recognizing it for it showed up at Cascada on the same line of direction but thirty miles further on.

The pigeons used in this mountainous section are working under conditions which it is believed by fanciers in the eastern states, to be impossible to fly them, for they brag of their birds flights over the low Appalachian

Range which are hardly more than our foothills here. The pigeons used in the experiments on the Idaho are of an imported Belgian strain and especially adapted for the more rigorous work, but in the face of their great handicap they must be carefully and extensively trained by frequent flights of gradually increasing distances.

It is the opinion of the writer that the proper person to look after the pigeons and receive all the messages is the Central Dispatcher, and his headquarters is the place where all the pigeons in use on the Forest should be homed and sent out from there to all parts of the Forest unless it is desired to house a few on certain Districts where the phone service is not dependable, for the purpose of an exchange of messages by carrier.

The Central Office has better facilities for the training of the birds as the trains and stages leave at frequent and regular intervals and many pack strings and other travel gives the opportunity of taking the birds on almost daily training flights, and also of exchanging the birds, held in reserve, at frequent intervals.

It is planned on the Idaho, the coming season, to install a coop of the pigeons at McCall and to use them over a greater portion of the Forest, for they have proven to us that they are a success as well as a necessity.

Very sincerely yours,

Approved

(Signed) Lyle F. Watts

Forest Supervisor.

(Signed) Walter A. Estep,

Forest Ranger

It is unknown if the pigeons were ever used again; there are no additional reports mentioning their use in the archives of the Payette National Forest. The next large fire was in 1931, and by that time radios and airplanes were both in use as fire support.