

Crop problems at our pigeons

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The problem of 'gorging'

It is known that pigeons, and in particular croppers, can have problems with their crop, or to be precise, with the food that is in it. In an unguarded moment the pigeon can gorge itself (eating too much too quickly). The pigeon will fill the crop with far too much food and/or water, causing over-stretching of the crop, not being able to hold it up. The crop will become pendulous, stretching, hanging down. Now the bird will really get into trouble, as it will not be able to swallow that food, so it will get hungry and thirsty, logically followed by eating and drinking more until its crop is crammed! It is of great importance that the fancier will notice this in time in order to try and solve the problem at an early stage. If it takes too long, the pigeon may possibly start rubbing up the crop or scratching with its toe nails. This will lead to fluids dripping out, making things only worse and the movement of food in the Crop is definitely impossible.

Right:

A Gaditano Cropper in trouble. The crop is hanging down and the bird is sitting with its head between the shoulders, as a sign that it is feeling sick. It suffers from crop bound; in the crop is a hard ball of food that cannot be swallowed. A call for action!

Photo: Ellen Jongerling.



When a pigeon is crop bound, the crop is hanging down, over-stretched, and filled with a ball of food and/or water which cannot be swallowed. The ball of food hangs too low and cannot be carried by the crop muscles. The food will start to ferment and if the pigeon is held a real stinking smell will be noticed

coming from out of its beak. This is called 'a sour crop'; in fact this is a normal fermentation process. It is just because the pigeon cannot swallow the food and so the fermentation will continue in the crop instead of in the gizzard. When we intervene too late, the pigeon is a dead bird for sure. So let's investigate how situations like this tend to occur.

Left: To compare: this is a healthy Gaditano Cropper, accidentally also a brown pied. The Gaditano is known for its pleasant character. The crop is blown round and carried loose.

A crop has several functions

It is mostly the breeds with larger crops, like Norwich, Marchenero and Gaditano Cropper that get troubled by crop bound and sour crops. Although I must add that some fanciers of the named breeds will contradict immediately, because their pigeons never are troubled with that.



Right: A blue-pied Norwich Cropper, just 'saved' from an overfilled (hang) crop. Especially during exhibitions one should be extra alert on this!

Below: A healthy red-pied Norwich Cropper with a perfectly round blown crop, in conformity with the standard also blowing in the neck.



Of course not every fancier has to deal with this problem. The one breed or blood-line is more conceptive than the other. We must realise that the strength of the crop lies in the muscles in the crop lining, which are responsible for controlling the crop. It is a fact that we can select on this quality. In general, pigeons that fly free will be more vital and practise their crop muscles more and better, so they are able to control the

crop much better. Besides that, a certain 'eating-discipline' is wanted with Croppers, meaning that the pigeon itself regulates the amount of food in such a way that the crop is not over-stretched and the food can be normally swallowed. This is the ideal situation.

It may be clear that we are starting from the situation that there is a balance between the bird's hunger and the maximum amount of food that can be stored in the crop. It may sound strange, but the crop is in fact a part of the intestines; a dilatation in the neck region of the gullet and an entrance to the gizzard, where the first ingestion takes place. However with Cropper breeds, this part of the gullet also has a 'display' function far greater than with a 'normal' pigeon, because it can be inflated often to a prodigious size, to impress the partner. Another function of the crop is that the crop produces a nutritious substance known as 'crop milk' in conjunction with egg laying and the rearing of young. This will affect the inside lining of the crop, so for this reason (some) fanciers don't like their croppers to rear their own young. Of course these pigeons are fully capable of raising their young, but their crops will not regain that superb flexibility and stretching capacity. In the next show season we will realise that the cropper has lost at least a part of its show value.

Development of a sour crop

The biggest problem occurs when the pigeon is in stress, e.g. due to transportation and additional climate change when moving to another loft or to an Exhibition. It is very important to allow them some time to 'acclimatize' in 'familiar' surroundings, giving them a private cage and certainly not straight away in an aviary with other pigeons, bringing them unprepared in a pecking order which they cannot cope.

Right: In 1937 the Valenciana Cropper was introduced for the first time in Holland, being the precursor of a number of other Spanish breeds with a very 'Developed' crop structure, but that do not inflate their crops. This was a shock at the Dutch Shows and was a thing that troubled most pigeon judges for a long time, expecting the birds to fully inflate like 'normal' Crop-pers. But also the breeders had to learn how to cope with a crop like this, especially when having a too large and loose crop skin, which certainly was giving troubles at feeding. In the picture you see an



old-fashioned type of a blue grizzle Valenciana Cropper with too voluminous crop skin. In the eighties this was the wanted ideal; a broad and long, hanging crop skin with much structure, meaning the crop linings and musculature had very little tensile strength. This resulted in the Valenciana becoming a difficult breed to manage, with the crop so overdeveloped that occasionally the crop had to be shortened by surgery. Today the Standard is adapted in such a way, that the crop skin is more in control and these problems no longer occur.

Left: A healthy, modern Valenciana Cropper with a controllable crop skin, with which today there are no longer problems. This cock was Best in Show at the 2007 NBS Union Show (Dutch Pigeon Union) and nominated for the Giesbers Prize.



The result is that the Cropper will hide in a corner, giving a dejected impression with the head carried between the shoulders, making the crop hang down. Moreover, the other pigeons in the aviary will chase it away from the feeders and drinkers, causing an extra irregularity in the poor bird's feeding rules. So when finally grabbing a chance to eat or drink, the pigeon will eat and drink as much as he can, and this gorging results in an overfull and uncontrollable crop. Sometimes we see this happen at a show; the pigeon is in an unfamiliar situation and was possibly fed

or watered a bit irregularly. Now there is a big chance that the cropper will gorge itself. The organising committee had better contact the owner and ask him to take the bird home; he will know what to do and 'home' the bird will regain its normal behaviour. The worse thing to do is placing this cropper in the 'sick-room' because it has 'a smelling beak'! For without help the bird will not survive till the last day of the show, when the unsuspecting owner will come to collect his pigeons. So with some cropper breeds you do need to pay extra attention! It is a common say, that whenever the pigeon thinks there will be less food tomorrow, it will gorge itself today! Constant attention is wanted!

How to prevent

It is important to keep your pigeons vital and in good health, and to prevent stress. When the bird has proven to have good discipline concerning its eating behaviour, it is important to provide the food all the time and unlimited, which will make the pigeon adapt and only eat the needed food at a time. However, even the smallest break in this cycle – by stress or a temporarily lack of food and/or water – can lead to gorging, with all attendant problems. Some fanciers keep their pigeons on a diet. I don't mean a slimming diet, no, their pigeons don't lack

anything, but also don't get one bite too much! They are fed one measuring cup each day, same time, same place. And to prevent too much drinking, a dash of lemon juice can be added to the drinking water. It contains vitamin C and taste slows down the drinking habits. Still normal attention of the keeper can help the pigeon in difficult periods, when the bird is not feeling well and tends to drop its crop all the time. Something simple as 'talking' to the bird will bring him to blow the crop and parade; you could not possible get a better sign of being in good terms with your bird! And it will be obvious that a good deal of crop problems will be provided, when giving your pigeons this attention all the time.

Once again, we are talking about things with problematic nature; it may happen, and in the one breed more often than in another. Still you should select on it, or even better exclude these pigeon in the breeding pens.



Left:

In Spain, crop supports like this are very popular. This one is made of a solid fabric with two pieces of elastic that go round the shoulder joints. A pre is that the pigeon can move around normally and often the problem is over in a week's time.

Right:

A more luxury crop support, decorated with embroidery in the colour of the Spanish Flag. This one has Velcro at the little bands for fastening, same way as the other example; under the wings and around the shoulder joint.



How to treat sour crop

When you notice crop bound you always must act immediately. How to act depends on what is in the crop. If it is mostly water, the best remedy is simply to have it 'drained' by holding the pigeon upside down, using your other hand to hold the crop up (higher than the head) and drain it by pushing gently. The bird will open its beak and let the water out. The bird must be able to breathe, so do it quick! The crop may feel warm, depending on how long the problem already exists. This is a sign of fermentation so you had better watch out not to spill any of the sour contents on your cloths! The smell is rather penetrating, oh well, let's say, it stinks like hell! Furthermore you should watch not to squeeze too hard, as this will cause the water to enter the pigeon's bronchial tubes and you see the water literally coming out of its nostrils. This certainly must be prevented; the water could even enter the lungs and the bird will permanently suffer from dyspnoea. Same thing can happen when you use the 'rinse method'. However, when the crop bound is caused by a massive ball of food, sometimes even as big as a tennis ball, a totally different method is needed. The crop is hanging down, making it totally impossible for the bird to swallow the contents. The best method is to roll the pigeon in a newspaper and place in a vertical direction (head up). But before that you have to add water to the crop contents, otherwise it can never be taken and transported to the gizzard. Don't give

too much water, just enough to soften the ball of food a bit. Then roll the pigeon in the paper, making sure that the crop is high. I have seen a method with the pigeon lowered in an empty (plastic) water bottle, with the bottom cut out. The bottle was hanging on a wall (with a nail) and the pouring opening downwards, through which the droppings could get out. However, you should be aware that a pigeon cannot be held in this position for long, because its legs are downwards and pressed to the body when wrapped in a paper (or put in a bottle), in preventing the pigeon from scrawling out. Obviously the leg muscles are burdened in such a manner, that – when kept too long positioned like this – the bird cannot walk freely any more. We learned by experience that 4 hours can easily be tolerated. If needed, you can repeat the treatment the next day and don't forget to put in another bit of water then to further weaken the crop contents. In between you must not feed or water your bird! I experienced a case in which it was necessary to wrap a pigeon in a paper three days in a row, giving in some water each time. After 3 days all the food in the crop was taken and digested. During the first days after a treatment like this you had better feed the pigeon small measured portions, until it is feeling better and totally recovered. After that it is recommended to have the bird get used to a 'filled feeder'.

In Spain I lately saw another method. After it had been drinking too much at a Show, a little rag was tied up at the breast of a Gaditano Cropper. The rag was sized about 7 x 7 cm (2,8 x 2,8 inch), at the upper corners were 2 bands that went over the shoulders, under the wings and then were fastened at the under side of the rag by means of a press-button; a perfect support that held very well and prevented further dropping of the crop. A likewise support can be made pulling a panty stocking over the bird's head (after clipping the toe-part of the stocking, to stick out the bird's head.) The big prerequisite is that the pigeon can walk around normally; the same goes for the 'Spanish' rag. We advise you to check regularly if the panty stocking is still in the proper place, as it tends to move.

If your matured and older pigeons keep on developing crop bound and all attendant problems, you could consider consulting a vet and asking him to take in the crop. In cases like this, mostly only the bottom side of the outer crop is taken in.

Right: In the picture Ruben Feuerberg is showing a cropper in a plastic water bottle with a cut-out bottom. This is how crop bound is solved in France. The bottle is hanged on the wall and the pigeon is offered a drink from time to time, till the food is ingested. By the way, Ruben does not approve to this method.

