Editor's Note: UK professor David Stephenson is the photo adviser for Kernel Media. Typically we wouldn’t feature our own adviser in our magazine, but we couldn’t resist sharing his story with our readers.

At 5:29 a.m., David Stephenson steps into the pigeon loft in his backyard. It’s Wednesday, training day for his racing pigeons ahead of Saturday’s big race. He passes through the first section of his loft, which holds about 30 hens, into the middle section, where his team of 17 young racing pigeons perches. Through another door are about 30 cocks. Stephenson used to wear a headlamp, but he lost or broke it, so he holds a small light. Once he starts grabbing birds, he holds it between his teeth.

“I can do this in the dark,” he says, “because I know where they all perch.” Stephenson picks up the birds one by one, inspecting each one for injury before depositing it into the crate. “Ah, shoot,” he says, when a pigeon wiggles out of his grasp.

By 5:37, Stephenson has all the pigeons stowed in the crate— including the last, “sneaky” one. He counts them
twice, like they’re on the naughty or nice list.

Before exiting the loft, he puts feed down, opens the door for the pigeons to re-enter and starts the clock.

About an hour later, Stephenson and his pigeons arrive in Lebanon, the release point for that training day. He normally “tosses” the pigeons by a hemp field, but he beat the sunrise and he’s always wondered what the industrial park is like, so he follows the signs.

“This is perfect,” he says, parking and setting the crate of birds outside his truck.

Stephenson and his birds wait for the sky to brighten; a pigeon sticks its head out of the barred top of the crate and looks around.

The sun rises at 7:25 a.m. At 7:35, Stephenson opens a hatch on the side of the crate. The pigeons explode out of the crate in a flurry of wings. Within seconds, they are specks in the sky.

“They’re going home,” Stephenson said. “They know where they are.”

Stephenson gets in his truck to drive home. He will try, as always, to beat the pigeons to the loft. He never does.

Stephenson was seven or eight years old when he developed a nearly simultaneous interest in birds and photography.

When he began using his parents’ cameras to take photos, he needed subjects.

“It was either of my buddies or it was nature,” Stephenson said. “Birds were not boring to me. Trees and flowers got old fast.”

He once climbed a hawthorn tree in his front yard to take photos of mourning doves in their nest. Then he noticed a neighbor a few blocks away who had aviaries attached to his garage, which were visible from the street.

Stephenson stopped to ask what was in the aviaries, and the neighbor showed him: domesticated ringneck doves. Then he gave Stephenson a pair of doves of his own.

Stephenson put them in an old rabbit hutch in his backyard, and the doves “made babies and it was all fun,” he said. But he didn’t like that he had to keep the doves cooped up. He wanted birds that he could let out that would return to him.

That’s when he discovered homing pigeons, and he realized “that was the way to go.”

So he found the local racing pigeon club and then-president Loftus Green. He must’ve been about 12 by then, he said; he has a picture of him and Green holding a pigeon, and he looks about 12.

Stephenson bought a pair of racing pigeons—all racing pigeons are homing pigeons but the opposite isn’t true—from Green, but he said he was terrible at raising them. He once let one of the pigeons out, and it returned to Green’s loft instead of his.

Soon after, his family moved from Lexington to Berea because his father had been hired as president of Berea College. Stephenson saved up his money, and when he was in high school, he had a loft built, this time for doves again, in the backyard of the president’s house at Berea. It remained there for a few years after the Stephensons moved out, but it’s gone now.

Stephenson nearly went to college for ornithology—the study of birds—but he decided to study photojournalism at Western Kentucky University instead. He moved away, so he had to get rid of his birds.

“You know how it is,” he said, like most people have pet birds to part with when they go to college.

After college, Stephenson lived the transient life of a journalist, making it impractical to raise birds. But when he and his family moved back to Lexington and bought a house on Kastle Road 12 years ago, he finally had a big enough yard.

He built the loft, and this time he knew what he wanted: racing pigeons.

And he knew where he could get them. He called Loftus Green, and 25 years later, Stephenson got another set of birds from Green’s loft.

And that set of birds has become close to 80 currently in his loft, with other birds he owns living and racing from other lofts as well.

Pigeon racing is based around pigeons’ knowing where their home loft is. For a race, the pigeons are released a certain amount of miles from their loft—100 miles, for example. Then they fly to their home loft, and their speed is calculated in yards per second.

The pigeon with the fastest average flying speed wins—and in some races, winning means big money. One race this fall had a purse of $1.2 million. And pigeons are bought and sold, too, sometimes for crazy amounts of money. The world record for a pigeon sale is $3 million; the domestic record is $100,000. The most Stephenson has ever paid for a pigeon is $2,000.

He compared the high-selling pigeons to thorough-
breds in the horseracing industry.

“These guys are athletes,” he said.

Stephenson said his goal from the beginning has been for his hobby to pay for itself, which is why he also sells birds sometimes.

In the last few years, he’s had another revenue stream to fund the pigeon racing: Kastle Pigeon, a pigeon health supplement company owned and operated by Stephenson and his wife Angie. Formulated with the help of Alftech, they produce and sell various products to other pigeon owners.

It’s not easy for Stephenson to balance his hobby, his small business and his full-time job as a UK journalism professor and adviser to Kernel student publications.

But his various passions also work well together, and a perfect example of that is his pigeon calendar.

He started when he was seven, and he’s never really stopped taking photos of his pigeons. When he realized that people liked his photos, he started producing and selling a calendar of his photos.

“I was uniquely poised to take these two passions and put them together and have something that no one else in the racing pigeon hobby would have,” he said.

He has nearly 12,000 followers on his Instagram account, pigeongrapher, and he’s been featured twice by Apple for his iPhone photos of pigeons.

Stephenson said he particularly likes freezing the motion of the wings in photos, so people can see the different shapes pigeons make in flight that they can’t see when it’s happening so fast.

“But when you can freeze it, and really see what they look like, I think they’re really quite beautiful,” he said.

---

When Stephenson got back to his house shortly before 9 a.m. on Wednesday morning, the pigeons weren’t actually back in the loft yet.

He never beats them home—if the pigeons go straight back home. But sometimes they make a stop first, such as on top of the water tower at the UK Arboretum, where they feel safe from hawks.

Because of hawks and even hunters, there’s no guarantee that the pigeons will ever come home. Sometimes they’re not injured but decide to find a new home with a feral flock or at another loft.

But on Friday afternoon, all 17 pigeons were back in the loft, going through the Wednesday morning ritual again—being

UK professor David Stephenson examines the wing of one of his racing pigeons before training on Sept. 18, 2019, at Kastle Loft in Lexington, Kentucky.
inspected, one by one, and put in the crate.

"Guys, big day tomorrow," Stephenson said to the pigeons.

Saturday would be the 300-mile race, one of the biggest events of the young bird racing season—which is open only to pigeons born this calendar year. Stephenson said he has been working toward this race for 10 or 11 months.

Once he had the pigeons crated again, he took them to the garage, where the Lexington Racing Pigeon Club was about to assemble.

Its membership isn’t just Stephenson and his pigeons. Other humans come. Other pigeons, too.

The Lexington Racing Pigeon Club is a group of (mostly older) men who raise and race pigeons. Stephenson, who is 49, is the club president. Every Friday night of racing season, the members gather in Stephenson’s garage, which fittingly features a racing club poster on the wall and a pigeon mat in front of the door.

Around 4 p.m., the first of the club members started to arrive, pigeons in tow. By 6, the nine men were ready to begin a sort of pigeon assembly line to consolidate all their pigeons into four large crates.

Stephenson’s pigeons were the first to be registered, so he stayed out of the assembly line—the pigeon owner isn’t allowed to register his own pigeons, to prevent cheating.

A member would pick up a pigeon, scan it into the system, then deposit it into one of the large crates. And so on, until all 17 of Stephenson’s pigeons were safely stowed.

"Hi, babies," Stephenson said, peering over the crates at his pigeons.

Then it was on to the other members’ pigeons, until eventually each crate held 20 or 21 pigeons. Then the members played a giant game of Jenga to fit the four crates into the back of Stephenson’s Toyota Tacoma.

It was his turn to drive the birds to Louisville that night, where they’d join pigeons from Northern Kentucky and Louisville. The club pays one person to drive the birds to the release point, where the birds will begin flying on Saturday morning.

At 7:45 on Saturday morning, the pigeons were released along I-65, near the Ardendale, Alabama, exit. If all went according to plan, Stephenson’s 17 pigeons would arrive back at his loft sometime that afternoon—hopefully early enough to win the race for him.

On Saturday afternoon, Stephenson’s multiple interests were again colliding.

He was keeping up with other races around the country and waiting for his birds to come home, but he also had to help some Kentucky Kernel photographers with their entries for the College Photographer of the Year awards. So he invited several over for a "Kernel bureau."

His eyes would flicker from a laptop screen in front of him to the loft visible through the window. At 1:30, he moved the bureau outside so he could better see any returning pigeons.

It was a long time before he saw any. He said on Friday that he didn’t have a good feeling about this race, because it was the longest of the season so far and it was extremely hot. He figured his pigeons would take a rest along the way instead of coming straight home.

Stephenson sat in his backyard staring at the sky for about 45 minutes, and still no birds. Finally he turned his attention to a laptop again, looking at a student’s photos.

"Here they come! Here they are!" he yelled shortly before 3 p.m., jumping up and running to the loft. Two pigeons had flown into the backyard but had settled on a power line or on top of the loft. The pigeons have to enter the loft and cross a pad to register that they’ve finished the race. Stephenson whistled and encouraged the birds until they entered the loft.

UK professor David Stephenson reaches for one of his racing pigeons on Sept. 20, 2019, at Kastle Loft in Lexington, Kentucky.

They clocked in at 2:53:06 and 2:53:07. As of now, the two pigeons are known only as 67 and 25—his pigeons normally earn their names, Stephenson said. But this was at least the second race that 67 had flown well in, so he might be on his way to a name instead of a number.

After checking on the birds—"They stopped; they got muddy feet"—Stephenson calculated their speed. They had flown 310 miles in seven hours and eight minutes, an average speed of 1,274 yards per minute.

The birds trickled in until Sunday morning, when the 13th bird arrived home. Three days after the race, four birds were still missing, but that doesn’t mean there’s no hope. Stephenson has had pigeons return home as long as six months after a race.

Stephenson’s pigeons didn’t win the race, though the results wouldn’t be official until the next meeting of the Lexington Racing Pigeon Club.

The fact that they come home is still one of Stephenson’s favorite things about pigeons. He said he likes that they’re affectionate, so they’re “fun to be around.”

“I admire how tough and beautiful they are at the same time—and smart,” he added. “Tough and beautiful and smart, all at the same time.”