

Into the “Lion’s Den” or

(Kapama Adventures and the 2015 Million Dollar Pigeon Race)

Ah, retirement. Well it’s not always what it’s cracked up to be but it has its benefits, like being able to cast caution to the wind and just do something serendipitous with your spouse, something completely off the wall, like dipping into your retirement savings and booking a once-in-a-lifetime experience in South Africa, the once forbidden “Dark Continent.” Well that’s just what Judy and I did. We combined our passion for travel with our interest in pigeon racing and booked a trip to the 2015 South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race that included a 4-day safari package.

Serendipity was actually really quite well planned as we made the decision to attend the Million Dollar in late summer, 2014. This was our third year as entrants in the race and our good friend and shipper of most American birds to the race, Frank McLaughlin, had a race/safari package on his web page that intrigued us. Frank is a top-notch flyer in his own right and for many years has made it his personal mission to get more American fanciers involved in the race. A few years back he made a personal tour of the U.S. and Canada extolling the virtues of entering the most difficult pigeon race in the world and has since built up quite a clientele of fanciers who ship their birds to the race with him. In fact he’s become so proficient at coordinating, collecting and successfully shipping large numbers of American pigeons to the race (This year it was almost 900!) that the organizers of the Million Dollar asked him to write down his methods of shipment and present them at the meeting of all the exporters this year.

So lured by the siren call of lions in the bush (Judy loves cats and this was her opportunity to see some really big kitties.), we took the plunge and on Friday, January 16, boarded a plane for an eleven hour flight into London, Heathrow. Then it was a five hour layover, and another eleven hour flight into Johannesburg, South Africa, home of the great emancipator Nelson Mandela, to experience a real African safari and attend this year’s Million Dollar race with Frank and his lovely wife Robin. We left on January 16th but with the time differences we didn’t land until January 18th for the race which was scheduled later that week on January 24th! Whoa! My head’s still spinning.

As I said, this was our third year in the race and we usually entered only one team of three birds so we did the same this year. Early losses were heavy and by the time the first loft list was posted in October, only 4,698 birds made it through quarantine. Frank had done such a good job preparing and shipping American pigeons that the U.S. came through with an almost 90% success rate, while the survival rate for all other countries was about 64%. At the end of training, in late January, slightly fewer than 2,500 birds remained. So when we boarded that plane for the first leg of our journey, we were feeling very fortunate that two birds flying under

the banner of “Garys Landing,” were going to the “Big Dance.” Frank is not only a great flyer but a terrific breeder, as well, and 15 of his birds would be entered into the baskets for the final, so hopes for a successful race were high all around.

But a four day safari awaited us before we would ever see a pigeon and we were anxious to get it started. Would we find the lion’s den? Would we see the majestic males with their flowing manes, or the lioness queen of the pride with her cubs? Time would tell. After those two flights of just over eleven hours each and a layover, we met up with Frank and Robin on Monday, January 18, at Emperor’s Palace in Johannesburg, South Africa. The “Palace” is just that, an enormous Las Vegas style hotel and casino that we were both booked into for the first night.

Frank uses African Olive Travel Concepts for the packages he offers American fanciers going to the Million Dollar. His contact there is Deirdre Kallmeyer. Deirdre is a great gal and has worked with Frank for years to offer travelers a first-rate experience and this year was no exception. For the safari, Deidre booked us into the Kapama Private Game Reserve close to Kruger National Park. It’s a reserve covering 13000 hectares or slightly more than 50 square miles and it sports over 500 miles of roads through the “bush.” So after a hearty breakfast and some time to talk pigeons, we climbed into a hotel shuttle and headed back to Tambo International Airport for the 45 minute flight to Kapama.

As soon as we stepped off the plane we knew we weren’t in Kansas anymore, Toto. An Indiana Jones Ride type of Toyota Jeep wheeled up to collect us and our luggage. It was driven by our guide for the next four days, a 25 year old native named Angie who we found to be, not only friendly and outgoing but, incredibly knowledgeable and accommodating. Over the rest of the week she and her trusty tracker, “Lot,” would plunge us deep into the bush in quest of spotting the “Big 5,” the lion, leopard, elephant, rhinoceros and buffalo, among other wild animals that enjoy the protection from poachers of reserve life.

Kapama is incredible. Four lodge-style housing complexes grace the grounds, each with similar facilities that included a gym, spa, pools, bar, and cozy sitting areas for just reading a good book or chatting with friends. We were staying in “River Lodge,” with its beautiful thatched roof buildings all connected by winding brick paths through the picturesque bush. Here the friendly Nyala and pesky monkeys often greeted our strolls through the compound.

Angie filled us in on how each day was laid out on the way from the airport. It began with a 5 AM wake -up call, followed by coffee, tea, juices, and pastries and fruit in the common eating areas. We learned the very first morning not to leave our plates unprotected as the resident monkeys waste no time in snatching food, especially fruit, from your plate if you leave the table for even a moment. Actually they were quite the hit with guests and would seemingly pose for pictures while they munched on your breakfast.

By 6 AM we were loaded into the jeeps and headed off onto one of the myriads of roads that crisscross the reserve, hoping to see wild game. Right off the bat Angie headed us into herds of impala down this road and lanky giraffes on another road, zebras racing across yet a different road. It was suspenseful and exhilarating at the same time as the animals are wild but they don't usually run from the jeeps, thus affording us ample opportunities for picture taking. After a couple of hours Angie stopped the jeep in a clearing and Lot set up a small table with coffee and tea and small pastries. The routine here was women to one side of the road and men to the other to take care of those bathroom needs behind whichever bush you favored. Then we took some time to refresh ourselves with drinks and food and talk about what we had seen that morning before setting off again, down yet another road, in search of one of the Big 5.

By 9 AM we were back at the compound to enjoy a full breakfast served up by staff chefs who would make your favorite omelet to go with the array of pancakes, waffles, fruits, pastries, cereals, and meats arranged buffet style. The rest of the morning was free for lounging, exercising, napping, or visiting the curio shop and then it was time for lunch at 1 PM. At 4 PM "High Tea" was served followed by the evening safari for another four hours or so. The evening safari usually ended around 7:30 PM. Once back, guests freshened up and returned to a five star dinner by candlelight in the common eating area where the guide joined us to relive the day's events. Do the math. That's five meals a day plus two snacks!

And wouldn't you know it, the very first evening's safari Angie got the call from one of the other guides that they had stumbled upon a leopard finishing off its dinner of fresh impala. The leopard is the rarest of the Big 5 to spot on safari so Angie wasted no time in getting us to the kill site. The light was fading and we were on a different part of the reserve but she put it in high gear and raced towards the location. It was almost dark when Lot signaled with his right hand and Angie veered off the road right into the thickest part of the bush. We were four wheeling big time now and everyone was cautioned to hold on and watch the branches overhead and alongside the jeep. Several times Lot called for us to stop while he broke off branches and guided Angie along sheer drop offs. And at one such stop we heard the most eerie roar piercing the darkness as the leopard, apparently annoyed with flashing cameras recording his evening repast, had headed off into the thick undercover.

Angie and Lot quickly conferred in the native language trying to guess which way to go to intercept the wandering cat and as luck would have it, we emerged right on the edge of a dry riverbed where the leopard had settled down in the tall grass to sleep off its over indulgence. For one, I was content to use the zoom on our new camera to snap a few pictures of the huge feline but Angie had another idea in mind. She put the jeep in low gear and headed over the edge of the embankment and down into the riverbed, pulling up alongside the dozing beast so we could get the best shots possible. Click, click, click and then it was up the other side, wheels

spinning, dirt flying, and engine smoking but we eventually made our way up and out. Then it was whoops and high fives all around on the way back and an even greater appreciation for our guide and tracker who had obviously resolved that we were going to see that leopard one way or the other.

The remainder of the week went the same way, we spotted game every day and eventually we found each of the Big 5 as well as many, many more animals, even a gecko. It was on the next to last day that we encountered herds of elephants. One big bull wasn't too keen to share the road and kept veering in on us until we backed up far enough for him to pass, unperturbed by those tiny humans in that toy jeep. And then we got really excited because that evening we found four male lions just bedding down by a small pond. Was the den close by? Time was running out for us to find it and then, "Eureka!" It was the final morning of our safari and we rounded a bend in the road and there, lying on an embankment, was the queen herself, a lioness with her beautiful cubs sunning themselves under the brilliant South African sky. We had found the den, the lioness and the cubs. That just made the whole safari for Judy. She got to see all the big kitties in their natural habitat. What an experience.

But soon it was hugs and goodbyes to Angie and Lot and then back on the plane for the short trip to Johannesburg. Along the way I struggled to make the mental adjustments from wild animals to an animal of another kind, the incredible racing pigeon. And by the time we landed nothing but pigeons filled my mind as the excitement surrounding the 2015 South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race hit me full force. We were about to encounter a den of another kind, only this one was the habitat of some of the biggest lions in the pigeon racing sport, Klass, Koopman, Hooymans, Klemens, Herbots, Norman, Paul Smith, Lloyd and Kelly, Oberholster and Ganus to name just a few. It was going to be another incredible adventure.

Our schedule at Kapama had us arriving back in "Joburg" shortly after the basketing festivities had already begun on Thursday, so Frank arranged for the shuttle to take us directly to Linbro Park so we could help out with shipping. The lofts are situated on the property of Zandy Myer, the long-time Director of the race who tragically passed away last year. Linbro Park is an area across the street from the lofts with a large meeting facility ironically called the, "Elephant Hall." It was here that rows of wire crates teeming with anxious pigeons met our eyes as we entered the large hall. It was a whirlwind of activity. Three different lines were set up where handlers moved the birds from station to station on the way to the final baskets.

Two workers, wearing the iconic brilliant blue pants and yellow shirts that you see on the race's web page, lifted the crates onto a small table where a staff member retrieved a bird. Then he took the blue tape off the bird's identity band that had kept its identity secret up until this time. The bird would then have its original band read by a handler to another staff member at a computer while its leg was held over a sensor. Once the band was authenticated, matched to

its owner and scanned, its wing received a stamp and the band was taped over once again. The final step was to place the bird in a basket with eighteen other racers. The basket was then sealed and loaded onto the conveyor for transport to the release point. It was mega security with no opportunity to tamper with the birds or the final results.

Frank and Judy and I jumped right into the activity. Frank and I handled birds and Judy stamped wings. I was excited to handle some of the best pigeons in the world but also nervous that one might escape my sweaty hands as the building's large door to the outside was open for workers to come and go. So on several occasions I stopped to wet my hands with water to wash off the bloom and insure a good grip on what might be the race winner.

My first two pigeons were from Germany and they were small to medium in size. This was going to be an educational experience for me as I had been hoping to get a better understanding of just what kind of pigeons the different countries were sending to this race. Mostly blues and blue checkers filled the crates but there were a number of non-blue colored birds like whites, white flights, blacks, and even reds that had outlasted more than two-thousand other trainees to reach the final stage and be basketed for the race of their lives. My next two birds were from Kuwait and Germany, the German bird being small again but the Kuwaiti bird much larger in size.

Then I got an American bird and not only American but a California bird. It was one of Steve Sterchi's birds and it was small like those of the Germans. Then another Californian bird, this time it was one of Alex Bieche's two entrants and it was also on the small size. A couple of Mike Ganus birds followed, also on the small to medium size and then another American pigeon but this one I couldn't identify. This bird had a wound to its chest that was healing well but I summoned the veterinarian anyway. Dr. Martinus Hartman had been very busy that morning, moving from line to line looking at every questionable entry to insure it was ready for the rigors of the race ahead. And in this case it wasn't, so the doctor had the bird removed to a crate for further examination and it eventually became one of about 10 that were withdrawn from the race for various health issues. It took several hours but finally all the birds were basketed. Hope against hope I never did get to handle one of my own entries but I'm pretty sure I heard one of my band numbers read in another line and that was just plain cool.

With the birds loaded onto the conveyor and heading out to the release point, we collected our luggage and jumped into a shuttle for the short drive to the city and the check-in procedure at our respective hotels. Frank and Robin were at the Hyatt Regency where all the race festivities would take place and Judy and I chose the Crown Plaza just two blocks away. It had been a long and tiring day so both couples had a quick dinner and retired early.

The next day, Friday, we were slated for a tour of Johannesburg and some shopping. Frank was busy with a meeting and Robin had taken the tour before, so Judy and I got a personal tour with our guide Linda. Linda is a guy. He explained that Americans pronounce his name like that of a girl but in African it sounded more like, "Leenda." In any event he was a very personable and well-versed guide and gave us a great tour. We began in the more affluent neighborhoods, stopping at Nelson Mandela's enormous, gated, and electrified compound that now belongs to the Mandela family. Linda explained that Mandela at first refused to take possession of the mansion bestowed upon him by the government after his release from prison but eventually relented. It was a stark contrast to a visit later in the day to his first small brick home of about 700 square feet. A small museum now, it still has the bullet holes in the walls bearing witness to the hatred he encountered for his early resistance to apartheid (The government's official policy of separation of the races that began in 1948).

Then we worked our way down into the heart of Johannesburg while Linda discussed the economy in post-apartheid South Africa and especially the impact gold and diamond mining has had on the country. Eventually we made our way to Soweto, an urban area that began as a black township under apartheid as the city's white government increasingly leaned to removal of all black South Africans from the city and into urban compounds of their own, mostly devoid of government provided utilities that plague the communities even today. And we stopped at the large Mandela Museum to view the history of apartheid and the role Mandela played in ending the policy that kept white and black South Africans separated for almost half a century.

While the township is still populated by the poorest South Africans, it boasts an incredible love of Nelson Mandela that is reflected in the various forms of art produced by residents and sold along the streets. Pictures, sculptures, paintings, carvings, you name it and the locals have engraved the memory of Nelson Mandela in every art form imaginable. They also produce some of the best African art for souvenirs anyone could hope to purchase. Here is where Judy and I wanted to shop and it was a great experience. Colorful and energetic on the outside, the locals are also hard-working, kind and sincere and we found them wonderful people to spend the day with, even the street mimes and entertainers hoping for a tip. Linda also took us to a popular outdoor restaurant to sample local cuisine, especially lamb. It was a great day of sightseeing, shopping and interacting with another culture that made us realize how, in some ways, we may be different but ultimately were all the same. The human spirit is as alive and vibrant in South Africa as anywhere else we've visited in our travels.

After returning to the hotel, Judy and I took some time to freshen up and then it was into one of the ballrooms at the Hyatt for the welcome ceremonies. That was really exciting. Here we were sitting around large tables with entrants from thirty-six or more other countries all hoping to claim victory in Saturday's race. But beyond that it made me realize that I was part of a sport

that is really enormous in scope, a worldwide fraternity that transcends cultural differences. It was very comforting.

Festivities began with Emcee Keith Lindsay welcoming everyone to this year's race. He had prepared these really funny slides of pigeons and pigeon people as part of his program and they got everyone laughing and feeling more comfortable, which I'm sure was his intention. Then he called all the exporters up on stage to receive gifts and a well-deserved round of applause for their outstanding efforts shipping birds for the race from their respective countries. Frank took his rightful place among the honorees and the American contingent hooted and shouted as his name was announced. Staff members were honored next for their tremendous contribution in organizing this year's race, training the birds, and putting together all the festivities for the race weekend. The Directors were Michael Holt, Pieter Saayman, Marion Branford, and Joan-e Holt and the Loft Management was led by Corrie, Andre and Dave. It became obvious early on that the entire crew took their commitment seriously and they went above and beyond to ensure a successful race for the birds and a great experience for attendees.

For the welcome dinner, Frank had arranged a table with fellow Americans Chad Compton and his girlfriend Annmarie Houser, as well as two of Frank's South African friends Martin and Hein Beneke. It was a fun group. Chad is a game warden in Illinois and Annmarie is an animal care inspector for the government in Illinois. Chad and his partner Doug Harms, flying under the team name Gray Fox Harms, had already won Hotspot Car Race number 3 with their bird, "Gray Fury." So we were hoping for that good luck to rub off on the rest of us around the table as well. Martin is a professional auctioneer and would serve as the auctioneer for the post-race auction of the top hundred birds. Hein is a Vodacom licensee/distributor and used car dealer. Frank is a pigeon importer/breeder and is the U.S. Coordinator for the Million Dollar Race and Robin is a high school nurse. Add into the mix that Judy and I are retired teachers and you can see it was an eclectic group assembled around our table. We immediately hit it off and wiled away the hours eating great food and enjoying stimulating conversation as we got to know one another. Pigeons this and pigeons that dominated the friendly banter and at night's end we all had a deeper appreciation for the wide range of professions and interest that bring pigeon people together. Race day was still a day away but I'm sure we all retired that evening with visions of our bird being the one that landed first and all alone at the finish line running through our heads. It was going to be exciting.

And then it was race day. Gulp! To say it was rather nerve-raking is sheer understatement. Everyone gathered in one of the ballrooms where vendors had set up displays and large screens were in place with cameras trained on the finish line at the lofts. Judy and I bought shirts and hats with the Million Dollar logo on them and we changed into the T-shirts and found our table

from the night before. Hein had brought a large South African flag to drape on the table and several other tables had flags from other countries. My hands were getting sweaty.

Once everyone was seated, a buffet was served as we waited for the birds and the organizers had a treat in store for us. They had filmed both the basketing and the race release for our entertainment. The basketing had moments of time lapse photography where it appeared everyone was scurrying about. It was quite comical and we strained to see ourselves in the shots and did, or imagined we did. The release also had some time-lapse scenes as the workers busied themselves with preparations for the release. But it also had been set to music that climbed in tempo as the sun rose. Then the music stopped and all was quiet as the cameras focused on the basket doors of the conveyor. With almost heart – stopping effect the music rang out as the doors dropped and the birds burst forward from their confines into the morning sky above. As you can imagine the ballroom erupted with cheers and shouts at the spectacle of more than two thousand pigeons exploding out of the crates and climbing into the heavens attempting to orient. Briefly circling the conveyor, they quickly locked onto their position and disappeared into the rays of sunlight that illuminated the way home, 324 miles away. God that was dramatic. If you haven't seen it yet you need to check the web page at, samdpr.com and find the link.

Time moves so slowly when anticipation rules the day. With lunch over each table settled into quiet conversation punctuated with predictions of the birds' arrival time. The video of the release indicated a relatively clear and calm morning but as the race progressed the weather took a turn for the worse that no one could have predicted. Organizers did their best to keep the audience abreast of the latest weather reports that were now showing increasing cloud cover, headwinds, and possible showers as an unforeseen thunderstorm made its way into the birds' path. By two o'clock murmuring could be heard at the various tables about the birds already being on the wing eight hours and the storm gathering strength. Would there be any day birds?

At the lofts, staff members manning the cameras desperately searched the skies for any signs of the racers and got quite the laugh when they zoomed in on a large bird that landed on the loft, only to see it was a black starling, once it came into focus. Doves on a pole and black birds cutting through the camera's angle of view only increased the tension in the room. Then a bird landed on the adjacent building and the cameras zoomed in. It was a race bird! You could hear a pin drop in the room as eyes strained to make out details of the ring. But it still had the blue tape covering its identity band and once it trapped in, organizers announced it was a late trainer that didn't make it home in time to be entered into the race. Are you kidding me? If your heart wasn't pounding before, it was now!

Finally, a little after 3 PM, two birds appeared in the sky, made a short pass over the loft and settled down at the finish line just in front of the trap and sensors. The one closest to the sensor hesitated for a moment and the other one marched right in to become the winner of the 19th Annual South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race. The first bird was from Germany and the second from Kuwait. Two hours passed before the third bird arrived and trapped in only to be disqualified. It would be one of fifteen entrants in the top 300 paid positions disqualified for non-payment of the entry fee. One would be an American. In this case it was an Australian bird whose electronic ring had apparently not been working properly throughout the training so the owner really didn't know how it had been doing. So the week before the race the organizers gave him the option to enter the bird with a new electronic band or of placing it in the pool to be sold and taking a free entry fee for next year. He opted for the free entry fee, no one purchased it in the pool, and he lost a cool \$75,000 to the next bird in, another German entrant. The moral of this story is clear. If you can afford to send it, you need to pay to enter it.

From that point on birds arrived from every few minutes to a half hour apart but at day's end only 17 racers were safely in. Three Americans were included in the day-birds, "Horse-Reliable" from Nanez Family Syndicate was 4th, "Loretta" entered by Jim Norton was 10th, and "Penny" entered by the team of Walsh-Peterson was 11th. Needless to say it was a tense and perhaps sleepless night for the owners whose birds were out overnight, including me. But to the relief of everyone, the next morning birds started arriving as early as 5:42 AM, so several pigeons had been close by but were simply too tired to negotiate those last few miles in the growing darkness.

By the end of the second day slightly more than 800 pigeons had made it home. That meant the top 300 positions which receive cash prizes were in the books. The significant prize money is in the first ten positions, but the top 100 are auctioned off the next day, and usually for pretty good sums. American entrants can hold their heads high as they accounted for 14 pigeons in the top 100 with a total of 68 in the top 300 prizes! It was a job well done for team U.S.A. In our group, Frank managed to place three birds in the money at 125, 250, and 253 and Judy and I snuck one in with a 281 finish, so it was an exciting day for us.

Surprisingly, not too many of the big lions had much to roar about on race day. Jan Hooymans of the Netherlands, for example, placed 12 birds in the money, but none in the top ten. And he sent 55 to the race out of an original entry of 122! There were a few others who could boast they had 30 or more birds in the final race also but none of them placed a pigeon in the top ten either. No the real lions this day were the small team flyers. The winner only had two birds go to the final race, and the second place bird was the only one sent for that happy entrant. In all there were six others in the top ten with five or fewer birds in the basket on race day. Only 3rd, 4th, and 5th places came from teams of 8 or more birds. That should be encouraging for readers

who would like to enter the Million Dollar but can't afford a big team. You don't need one. So join us next year.

The next day was the auction of the first 100 pigeons to arrive home. Here again organizers had the best interest of the birds in mind when they announced that it would cost potential buyers two hundred Rand, that's about \$20 bucks, to handle the birds. The staff thought too many people stretching wings and peering down throats would only strain already tired, aching muscles. It was a good decision. I just wanted some pictures of the top birds and Chad and Frank helped me with that. Each of them paid the fee to handle the birds and we coordinated their looking at the wings, throats, breasts, etc. with my picture taking so they didn't tax the birds too much. Each would bring the bird to the railing that kept non-payees outside so I could snap photos.

The auction was a feeding frenzy for South African buyers as race birds are still not allowed to be exported out of Africa for fear they may carry diseases that could be transported to other countries. In fact, back in October it seemed the very future of the race itself was in doubt as the Department of Environmental Affairs in South Africa had included feral pigeons and rock doves on its latest list of invasive species. Had that determination held true, not only the race, but breeding and transport of pigeons would have been outlawed. Fortunately, race organizers immediately consulted legal professionals, as well as the Department of Environmental Affairs, and were successful in getting racing pigeons exempted from any restrictions. "The Regulation will not be enforced against racing pigeons and associated activities," the final report read.

Whew! We're good for another year. But this inability to export race pigeons and get them into the U.S. is just plain crazy. A person infected with Ebola can fly right into Texas and terrorists on a "no fly" watch list can saunter right into the good old U.S.A. But a well-bred pigeon with no sign of disease and with all its vaccinations up to snuff can't get a spot in a crate sitting in the cargo hole of a jet to the U.S. or any other country. Whatever happened to common sense? Crazy!

And what of the thousands of pigeons from prior races trapped in South Africa? For one, I wanted to see my bird from the 2012 race so I made arrangements with the loft staff to bring it to the basketing. It was great to handle "Jabez" again and snap a few pictures. Truth be told it was a little worse for wear from being in a flight pen all this time and not able to exercise but it looked in good health. The loft staff is obviously taking care of those birds that are stuck here. I wanted to sneak it out right then but hopefully this nonsense regarding export will be resolved this year and it will get to come home. Fingers crossed.

Today, foreigners who wish to purchase a bird at the Million Dollar need to have South African friends that will keep and perhaps breed the bird for them. Frank said this was the main issue

discussed in the exporters meeting, and that the organizers would be working hard to change the restrictions or find another venue for the race. Until then the race will continue as it has. What that meant on this day was that South African buyers would have a feeding frenzy. And sales were brisk but failed to reach some of the stratospheric prices the winning birds have brought in the past. For example, the first place bird, Sanjay 1, only fetched \$6,050. The second bird in, Robben Island, had actually landed closer to the timing sensor but it hesitated to step in. But it had also been in the top 100 training finishes something like ten times or so, and it brought a better price at \$17,286. I think everyone was waiting for Lot#13 and thought it would account for the highest figure. This bird, Al-Juwaisari 1 from Kuwait, had won Hot Spot Car Race #1 and now claimed the Zandy Meyer Memorial Car, a brand new Mercedes SLK convertible as well. It did sell for more than the first bird but less than the second at \$12,965.

It was a tense, exhausting morning so we didn't stay for the entire auction. I had taken pictures of most of the top ten birds and of Brad Hoggan's (77) and Steve Sterchi's (96) prize winners. Both of these gentlemen had purchased advertisement space in the California State Racing Pigeon Newsletter that Judy and I serve as Publicity Directors for, so we wanted to get them a good look at their bird's post-race condition. When we got home I emailed both of them the pictures I had taken and they were quite pleased, and they should have been as they had sent super nice birds to the race.

Well it was over and wow, what a trip! Frank and Robin were catching a plane later that evening to return home to Hanson, Massachusetts and Chad and Annmarie were leaving late on the next day. Judy and I were also leaving the next evening and took the better part of the day finishing up our shopping and trying to calm down. I was already writing this article, at least in my mind. I would jot down thoughts in the weirdest places. After stepping out of the shower I'd grab the pen and paper I'd left on the bathroom sink and write a word, name, or sentence; in the hotel restaurant at breakfast with pen and pad next to my plate filled with eggs, bacon, potatoes and such, I'd think of a line or event; while shopping in the farmer's style market atop the parking garage (That's where all the bargains really were.), I'd yank the crumpled paper from my rear pocket and capture the thought I just had. I guess that's how most writers do it, jot it down when they think of it or it's probably gone forever.

Well how do you sum up the trip of a life time? For sure we had seen the lion's den. We'll never forget that lioness regally sitting with her cubs along an embankment in Kapama. What beauty! What majesty! But in many ways the den of top flyers, the lions of the pigeon sport, was spookier. Who were we to approach their lair? What were we doing sitting at the table behind Alfons Klaas? Who were we to say hello to Gerard Koopman? What a great guy Gerard is. He walked right up to us and introduced himself and said good luck. In the end I think we can say the lions in both dens weren't as fierce as we first anticipated they might be. The Kapama lions

were almost docile, as long as we respected their privacy and took only pictures away from their den. And the lions at the Million Dollar were more friendly than aggressive. In truth they welcomed us into their den and hoped we'd have success on race day as well. No. No reason to fear. It was a great experience, an educational experience, a bonding experience, and one we hope to enjoy again one day. Maybe you'll join us.