

Weekend



# GRAM

WEDNESDAY, July 2, 2010

Volume 103, Number 78

• LaGrange • Lingle • Prairie Center • Torrington • Veteran • Yoder



Allen Hunter releases a flock of homing pigeons early Thursday morning just outside of Torrington. The local man raises and races the birds against competition nationwide.

## Homing pigeons go up, up and

# AWAY

**By John Miller**

*Staff writer/photographer*

All types of birds, from parakeets to cockatiels, have been valued as pets for thousands of years.

But one Torrington resident has taken his fascination with homing pigeons to a competitive level.

"I was 14 when I flew my first race," Allen Hunter

said in recollecting the start of his racing career. "Years ago, my dad raised pigeons and we found some in a building that was being torn down, took the young ones and hand-raised them. After that I was kind of hooked on 'em."

Hunter, who owns

See AWAY, page A9



# Up: Homing pigeons go

From page A1

Heartland Embroidery with his wife Deb, owns about 150 pigeons. He has been training, caring for and racing them competitively for more than 40 years. In 1986, his birds placed first, second, third, fifth and seventh overall in the nation.

He recently drove a boxful of pigeons to the Iowa-Nebraska state line for a workout, releasing them to fly home 450 miles to their loft in Torrington.

"I left when they did. It took me about eight hours to drive home," Hunter said. "I was home about 20 minutes and here come the first couple, droppin' out of the clouds. The fastest race that I've clocked mine at is about 1,400

feet per minute. And they will go faster."

Homing pigeons have been a staple of military folklore dating back to before the armies commandeered by Attila the Hun, who used them to transport enemy positions back to army strategists.

Hunter attributes their innate ability to find their way home in any weather conditions to genetics and 5,000 years of breeding and training, not to mention a healthy dose of survival instinct.

"I've found if a pigeon lives over 10 years it's also one of my very best racers," Hunter said. "Intelligence and racing are just survival. It's got to be intertwined in them. Pigeons have a tough life out there. There are power lines,

hawks. There's not much roaming in Wyoming that doesn't eat pigeon. So they have to be smart."

Racing pigeons are much larger than regular pigeons — about twice the size. A 500-mile flight takes a lot out of the birds, and Hunter said they generally lose about one-third of their body weight during a race. It takes about two days for them to recuperate and put their weight back on.

Attaching a bar coded or time stamped sealed capsule to their leg records the bird's race times. Once they arrive at their destination they are coded or stamped again and secured in a locked drop box. The drop boxes are brought to the bird owner's next meeting, and

the locked boxes are unsealed and the bird's time calculated.

Hunter is just one of many pigeon trainers across the country. While he hauls 150 birds to a competition, bigger clubs from cities like Chicago have custom-made semis that haul two or three thousand birds. He said the most he's ever seen released at once was 10,000 pigeons.

"It just darkens the sky," he said.

As a breeder, Hunter is always looking out for winners among his brood.

"I do the same things that the horse breeders do: breed your best to your best," Hunter said. "I look at their race records, pair 'em up. Certain birds show a real tenacity for flying in bad weather,

windy conditions, and living in Wyoming that kinda puts 'em at the top of the pay scale."

But Hunter doesn't regard his hobby as a business. There is still plenty of the wide-eyed wonder he felt when he had his first pigeons as a child.

"I've clocked 'em on days that I had to sit in the pickup, the weather was so bad," Hunter said. "It's rainy and windy and cold and you're sittin' there thinkin', 'I'm not gonna see a bird today, they're not gonna make it home in this.' Then pretty soon here comes one droppin' out of the clouds, and to me it's always been amazing that they can do that. Even after all these years of watching 'em do it hundreds of times it's still exciting."