

= Jean Desbouvrie =

Jean Desbouvrie (c.1840 ? 47 ? ?) was a French amateur bird trainer who believed that swallows could be put to use for military communications . During the late 19th century Desbouvrie persuaded the government of France to conduct a study on the feasibility of using swallows as messengers . His early demonstrations showed that swallows could exhibit homing behavior and that when they did so they flew much faster than homing pigeons . Desbouvrie also succeeded in curbing the birds ' natural migratory behavior . After obtaining authorization from the government for follow @-@ up testing , Desbouvrie delayed and did not follow through with rigorous experimentation .

Desbouvrie received international attention in the press for two unrelated reasons : the bird experiments , and also for a proposal he made to the Paris Academy of Medicine . The Academy published his paper , which declared chronic alcoholism to be a serious public health problem and offered a solution in the form of a claimed cure for hangovers . Desbouvrie hypothesized that the consumption of food which contained an appropriate balance of fat and albumen would prevent hangovers from occurring . He sent the Academy a selection of homemade chocolates along with his manuscript , with assurances that he had tested the concoction extensively upon himself .

= = Youth = =

Jean Desbouvrie was raised in a village near Roubaix where he worked as a messenger for his father . During his youth he had an avid interest in birds and was determined to disprove general belief that swallows were impossible to tame , so from the age of eleven onward he robbed nests between his work deliveries . Over time he managed to get a dozen swallows to follow him . According to a report published in 1889 , " They would fly round his head and perch on his shoulders in the open street . "

= = Swallow training = =

Desbouvrie kept his swallows in a cage and trained them to fly in and out of the cage . Another challenge he overcame was the birds ' natural migratory behavior . Desbouvrie believed that swallows migrated southward because the supply of insects for them to feed upon dwindled in winter . Desbouvrie refused to make public disclosure of what he fed the birds in wintertime and regarded that as a trade secret . Later attempts to train homing behavior into migratory birds determined that the birds have no instinctive knowledge of where to fly when the season changes , so if the normal migratory pattern is disrupted during the first year of life the individual does not migrate afterward .

He spent over 30 years keeping birds and devoted two rooms of his house to swallows . One room housed a cage for the swallows . The other room was a training space with a balcony used for practice releases . He documented the age and health of each bird in a register , and marked each one by tying a colored silk to its leg . Red silk indicated a trained bird and blue silk indicated a partially trained bird . Trained swallows were allowed to roam outside their cages , while the others remained caged at all times . Untrained birds were sold as pets .

An 1889 report described a demonstration of Desbouvrie 's swallows :

Four of the little prisoners , the oldest not more than twenty days , were let loose . It was raining in torrents at the moment , a circumstance by no means favorable to the trial . The birds rose in the air , flew round the house several times , and then darted off into the country , disappearing into the country . Twenty @-@ five minutes after the youngest returned and perched on the balcony ; the other three did not come back before an hour . They all then entered the cage @-@ room , when Desbouvrie gave them some food , which they ate out of his hand .

= = Potential applications of swallow training = =

The 1955 book Bird Navigation describes efforts at training homing behavior in species other than

pigeons . Bird Navigation mentions Desbouvrie as an early experimenter , and also a passage from Pliny the Elder in which " Caecina of Volterra " (possibly Caecina Paetus) used painted swallows to report the colors of winning horses in a race . It is uncertain whether Desbouvrie was aware of the Pliny 's report .

Carrier pigeons had been a significant factor in communications during the Franco @-@ Prussian War of 1870 . An 1892 report in The American Magazine that discussed Desbouvrie 's efforts noted the importance of pigeons to that war : " Upon several occasions , indeed , the inhabitants of the beleaguered cities looked upon the successful flights of these birds as their only hope betwixt death and starvation . "

By the late 19th century Russia was training military falcons , possibly to carry messages or else to hunt the war pigeons . Swallows offered several advantages over pigeons if training could succeed . Swallows fly higher and faster , and are more difficult for marksmen to shoot or for birds of prey to intercept . Swallows are also able to feed during flight .

= = Government interest = =

As a demonstration , Desbouvrie brought an untamed swallow from the Roubaix area to Paris and released it . The bird returned to its home 258 kilometers away in 90 minutes . Desbouvrie promised that trained swallows would provide even better speeds . The governor of Lille oversaw testing near Roubaix and a military engineer named Captain Degouy was ordered to oversee a duplication of the Roubaix experiments .

Desbouvrie proposed two swallow aviaries at Montmartre and at Fort Mont @-@ Valérien . The Montmartre cote was scheduled to be constructed first , if Captain Degouy confirmed the results and recommended further training . A report from The Globe stated that Desbouvrie believed all his birds were too young for full testing and required additional training . The American Magazine noted that Desbouvrie did not breed his birds and obtained them all as nestlings , although he promised he could breed them easily if he wanted to do so . Over half a century later P.W. Brian stated in Bird Navigation that Desbouvrie " appeared to be unwilling to demonstrate them . "

The Globe published a favorable report of Desbouvrie 's efforts , although noting that further testing was needed . The Zoologist republished the Globe report with a note that Zoologist editors " have no faith in the idea that the experiment will succeed in his object . " The American Magazine dismissed the project with the statement , " The idea of engaging swallows in war is a pretty one , as , in future , all European wars will have to be conducted in ' swallow time ' ? when the warm winds blow from the sunny south . "

= = Academy of Medicine presentation = =

In 1888 the Bulletin de l 'academie de medicine (Bulletin of the Academy of Medicine) published a report that Desbouvrie had sent them a manuscript and requested verification of an invention he claimed to have made . He called it was a matter of public health to counter the effects of chronic alcoholism . According to the report , which was republished in English in summary form in the Medical Record and the Cincinnati Lancet @-@ clinic , Desbouvrie had attempted a preventive cure for hangovers . Desbouvrie asserted that the cure required eating albumen and fat in appropriate proportions one hour before alcohol consumption , and had invented a chocolate which he claimed contained both ingredients in an effective ratio . He provided samples to the Academy and assured its members he had tested the cure upon himself .