ARE WE IGNORING THE CANARY IN THE COAL MINE?

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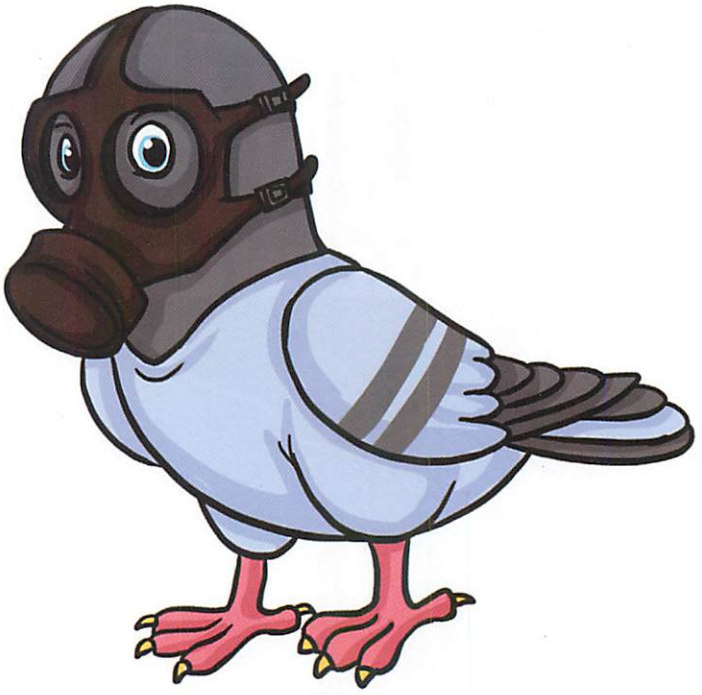

Although there is not one single reason for poor race returns or smash races, perhaps we often overlook one of the potential contributors.

I recently went to my local post office to ship a couple of pigeons to a friend. While standing in line in the lobby I detected a strong gas odor that began to bring on a headache after only a few minutes of breathing it. When it was my turn at the counter I asked if they were running some kind of gas heater in the back. I was told that the odor was the Postal Express truck behind the building which arrives and idles as it loads/unloads for about 5 minutes. The plume of diesel fumes, created even in this short time, was finding its way into the building. Although I personally would be out of there within a few minutes, I felt obligated to mention to the clerk how unhealthy it was for them to be continually inhaling those fumes. The clerk casually responded that he was aware and that they are constantly reminding the driver not to leave the truck idling while loading/unloading.

Within a short period of breathing low levels of the diesel exhaust fumes I was noticing the negative effects in my well being. Due to body weight and other physiology, humans are often more tolerant of gas fumes (particularly carbon monoxide) than birds are. This brought my thinking to what our birds may be being exposed to in the course of getting them to a race liberation. There have been reports of race liberations where all the birds just circle for long periods unable to orient. There have also been reports where race birds are liberated with groups of seemingly confused birds immediately landing on a nearby structure instead of flying away.

When racing pigeons are trucked or trailered for hundreds of miles, what is the flow of the truck exhaust fumes with regard to its penetration around and into the ventilation vents of where our birds are stored? Perhaps worse yet, when a truck sits idle on a morning with heavy air and minimal wind movement, are we creating a surrounding plume of toxic poison fumes that our birds are sitting in prior to their release?

When the race transport vehicle arrives at the liberation point hours before the birds are to be released on a cold morning, it is understandable that the driver would want to keep the vehicle engine/heater running, perhaps unaware of this creating a large invisible plume of toxic exhaust fumes around and behind the vehicle.

We are familiar with the caged canary birds that miners would carry down into the tunnels with them. If dangerous gases such as carbon monoxide collected in the mine, the gases would kill the canary before killing the miners, thus

providing a warning to exit the tunnels immediately. The gas fumes affect the birds at much lower amounts than humans. And for this reason, as responsible handlers of birds, we should be taking extra measures to ensure that we are not inadvertently poisoning our birds prior to liberation.

Some of the dangerous substances found in diesel exhaust include particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, volatile organic compounds, and other hazardous gases.

Short term exposure to diesel fume emissions can cause headache, disorientation, dizziness, and irritation of the eye, nose and throat.

Prolonged diesel fume emissions exposure can increase the risk of long term heart and lung disease as well as lung cancer. (source: www.osha.gov)

Carbon monoxide poisoning is a potentially fatal condition caused by inhalation of carbon monoxide gas which competes with oxygen for binding with hemoglobin and thus interferes with the transportation of oxygen and carbon dioxide by the blood (also called carboxyhemoglobinemia). In other words, when we breathe carbon monoxide into our lungs, it binds to our red blood cells that normally carry oxygen and in turn prevents oxygen from ever again binding to that blood cell. The carbon monoxide bonds so tightly with the red blood cell that it renders them useless for future oxygen transport in your body. It can take days or even weeks for your body to re-manufacture/replace these disabled red blood cells for use to carry oxygen again.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT

Until we have electric vehicles for routine use available, here are some suggestions to assist in protecting our valuable bird cargo from exhaust fume toxicity.

1) Route exhaust pipes to the extreme rear of the vehicle or trailer that contains the birds.

2) Do not sit and idle the vehicle within the vicinity of where the birds are stored.

3) If going to sit idle with the truck engine running, then disconnect the trailer and re-position truck at a good distance away downwind from the birds.

4) Pay attention to wind direction and always keep the stored birds upwind of fumes.

5) Most importantly, communicate this to the race liberators and truck drivers whom we are entrusting our race birds with, so that they are aware of this toxic fume danger to both themselves and the birds.