

# Smithsonian.com

SmartNews Keeping you current

## A Giant Flock of Pigeons Is Lighting up New York's Night Sky

**The show is meant to illustrate that pigeons aren't rats with wings**



Duke Riley's pigeons taking off for a performance of "Fly BY Night." (Screenshot via Vimeo)

By [Danny Lewis](#)  
smithsonian.com  
May 23, 2016

Every night at dusk for the next few weeks, even the most jaded New Yorkers may look up at the skies in wonder as a flock of pigeons takes flight. But these aren't just any old pigeons one might see scrounging on the street for scraps of pizza and discarded pretzels: these are trained to put on an astounding performance.

For nearly a year, artist Duke Riley has been working to train an enormous flock of about 2,000 pigeons of all different species to fly in formation for his new art piece, "Fly By Night." Now, on every weekend evening through mid-June thousands of his pigeons will take flight at dusk, each equipped with a tiny LED light attached to their talons in order to create a stellar light show, [Richard Hake reports for WNYC News](#).

"It will look like a constellation or tiny shooting stars the darker it gets," Riley tells Hake.

The pigeon fleet takes off each night from the deck of an old ship docked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. A decommissioned Baylander IX-514, the Vietnam-era ship was once a floating landing pad for Navy helicopters, but now it's home to Riley's feathered air force. During each performance, the pigeons are given basic directions by Riley and his assistant handlers, who wave big black flags to get the birds' attention. For the most part, though, the pigeons are allowed to chart their own paths through the darkening sky as their little lights streak past the stars like a flock of comets, [Andy Newman writes for the New York Times](#).

"Usually, people want their birds to fly in tight bundles," Riley tells Newman. "Some guys don't like it when one bird will fly off by itself. But I like that — some pigeons doing their own thing, acting of their own free will."

While the spectacle is something to be seen, it's not just about the lights. As [Riley tells Hyperallergic's Claire Voon](#), he staged the show as a way to demonstrate that pigeons are not rats with wings, an unfair stereotype the birds have been saddled with.

"People generally don't realize the important role they've played throughout history, as far as advancing our civilization and being a major form of communication — not just for the military sense but also in shaping how we receive news," Riley tells Voon.

For centuries, people kept pigeons as pets — and some people, like Riley, still do. Known as "fanciers," these pigeon-lovers often keep small flocks in rooftop coops. In fact, for decades many buildings in New York included pigeon coops. However, over the years they have fell out of fashion, and the few that remain are dwindling away. For Riley, "Fly By Night" is a way to pay tribute to this bygone facet of city life, Voon reports.

Staging the show was no small feat, either. Riley has put on pigeon-based performances in the past (such as 2013's "Trading With The Enemy," where he strapped Cuban cigars to pigeons and had them fly from Havana to Key West, flouting the Cuban Embargo), this was on a different scale. To put it on, he teamed up with Creative Time, a nonprofit organization that specializes in site-specific works, including the great sugar sphinx built by artist Cara Walker in the old Williamsburg Domino Sugar factory, as well as "Tribute in Light," twin beams of bright-white light that take the place of the fallen Twin Towers every year around September 11th, Newman reports.

"Fly By Night" is performed every weekend evening through June 12. While the show is free, tickets are needed for the best spot by the ship, which you can sign up for [through Creative Time here](#). But if you know another good spot nearby to watch the flapping light show from, you're free to flock there.

#### About Danny Lewis

Danny Lewis is a multimedia journalist working in print, radio, and illustration. He focuses on stories with a health/science bent and has reported some of his favorite pieces from the prow of a canoe. Danny is based in Brooklyn, NY.

|