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Photographer Ricardo Cases captures Spain's pigeon breeders and their feathered friends



The all-male pursuit dates back to the late-18th century and Cases documented the sport for his book, *Paloma al Aire* ("Dove Into the Air")

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Along the east coast of Spain, small but dedicated groups of men can be found taking part in pigeon-racing; dating back to the late-18th century, colombicultura remains a popular rural pastime. And before the races begin, the breeders paint their birds in bright colours, so they are identifiable throughout the race.

The men track their pigeons from the ground, urging them on and rescuing them should they come into trouble. The 80 or so cock pigeons hone in on the sole hen pigeon released, competing for her attention. The winner is the bird that spends the most time closest to the female within a two-hour period. The race is about persistence and reproductive instinct. It's incredibly macho.

Born in Orihuela along Spain's south-east coast, Ricardo Cases grew up around this all-male pursuit. Now 43 and living about two hours north, in Valencia, he documented the sport between 2008 and 2011 for a book, *Paloma al Aire* ("Dove Into the Air"), in which he captures the nature of the breeders as well as their feathered friends. "This is a story about Spaniards," he says, "about humans who play with nature for a sport associated with courtship."

The man pictured above is stooping to avoid affecting the competition – similarly, Cases tries not to dictate what happens in his work: "I like the way photography can suggest meanings that go beyond the very intention of the author."

As the intro to the book adds: "Without pigeon-fanciers being fully aware of it, their activity puts into play elements such as sex, flight, competition, hopes, triumph or failure." In these rustic scenes, metaphors take flight.

'Paloma al Aire', is available from dalpine.com, priced €25. For more: ricardocases.es