

Alterations of EEG power in flying pigeons reflect reference to navigation-relevant landmarks such as crossings and roads

Vyssotski AL (1), Dell'Ariceia G (1),
Dell'Omo G (1), Wolfer DP (1,2), Lipp HP (1);
(1) University of Zurich, Institute of Anatomy, Zürich, Switzerland
(2) ETH Zurich, Department of Biology, Zürich, Switzerland

Analysis of electroencephalograms is widely used in humans and animals for evaluating the type and localization of brain activation, the effects of external sensory stimulation, or the irrelevance of specific stimuli used. It has been shown that pigeons sometimes follow large roads and use landmarks as turning points during their homeward journey (Curr Biol 14: 1239-1249, 2004). The goal of current study was to investigate possible changes in electrical brain activity associated with flying over typical ground features.

Additionally, we compared EEG of birds traveling in a flock with birds flying singly. We tested the hypothesis that birds flying in a flock should pay less attention to topographical landmarks, with the exception, perhaps, of the leading bird. Finally, in order to compare the influence of topographical landmarks on EEG, we released the birds in a featureless landscape, i.e. from a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean sea, to force them to fly half their home journey over sea surface, and the other half - over land.

To record EEG in the flying pigeons an ultra-light (2g) four-channel EEG/single-unit recorder ("Neurologger") has been developed (www.vyssotski.ch/neurologger2). The EEG recorded the electric brain activity from the cortex in each of the two hemispheres. The possibility of recording the EEG in a flying bird has been already shown (J Neurophysiol 95:1263-1273, 2006). In addition to the Neurologger the pigeons were also equipped with a small GPS data logger which recorded the precise position of animal during its journey (www.newbehavior.com, for the last versions see also www.technosmart.eu).

The data recorded by the Neurologger revealed that the brain areas monitored by the electrodes were activated when the birds crossed roads and road junctions. As expected, pigeons flying in flocks appeared to pay less attention to ground features than when flying singly. However, this tendency was quite weak and not statistically significant because of high variability in data. A significant difference between single and flock flights was observed only at two points: near the release site and near the home loft. At these places a typical increase of brain activity was observed only in flocks. This, perhaps, might reflect some strength in social interactions at the moment when pigeon form a flock and some excitement/competition on arrival. As expected, when flying over the sea pigeons had reduced brain activity compared to when flying over the land. .

Supp. NCCR Neural Plasticity and Repair, Swiss NF