



## *Damascene, a beautiful Utility pigeon*

*And of course Ben Kocken, secretary of the Damascene Breeders' Club, is the best person to visit, to learn more about this breed.*

Text and photos: Aviculture Europe

Summertime means busy days for the editors of Aviculture Europe, visiting all sorts of Breeders' Club Days and Young Bird shows. Today, 21<sup>st</sup> of June, we promised to visit Ben Kocken in Helmond as he was expecting a French breeder who was interested in buying some of his Damascene, and 'our presence' was needed to interpret. The Frenchman earlier visited the Avicorni Show, but in vain, as at that time no Damascene were for sale. It was a bright and sunny day and although the mileage recorder showed 500 km, this turned out to be a very pleasant visit, certainly worth the effort. Ben Kocken is a top breeder, keeping several interesting pigeon breeds, of which some are the absolute top of Europe. Last season he won 13 times 'Excellent' – 97 points with his Thuringian Swallow and Damascene, in the Netherlands as well as abroad, of which 9 times in Germany.

*Below: Young Damascene, photo by Ben Kocken.*





**Left: Halfway down the garden there is an aviary with exotic birds, like this Silver-eared Mesia (*Leiothrix argentauris*).**

**Photo: Ben Kocken.**



**Right: Another species in Ben's aviary: the White-rumped shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*) This is a male with young.**

**Photo: Ben Kocken.**

At the front side of the beautiful garden there is a kennel with a frightful looking German Shepherd dog and like always, it could sense that I am not very much 'at ease' with dogs and acted likewise.... Halfway down the garden there is a aviary with exotic birds, like Silver-eared Mesia, Pekin robin (Chinese nightingale), White-rumped shama, Black-naped Oriole, European Oriole and nightingale, finches and of course: the Song Thrush. In the back of the garden is the nice pigeon loft, where the pigeons can free fly to their content all day long.

To 'prepare' for this visit I studied some of the older Year books of the Fancy Pigeon Club 'Het Zuiden' and in the booklet of 1989 I read that in September 1988, two of the Club members said 'I do' and these members were Ben Kocken and Ilse van Kollenburg! So two pigeon lovers bonded together 'for better and for worse'; Ilse breeding Vienne longfaced Tumbler in those days. In the booklet of 1993 I read that the Club members visited the loft of Ben in May 1992, and were very impressed by the free flying Damascene. Already in 1992 his Damascene were very good quality and watching the birds was a feast for the eye.

This year the breeding season had a slow start. Early spring there were many infertile eggs; something we also heard from other fanciers. When the production finally got going, the Damascene began to suffer from trichomoniasis, at least it looked like that, but it turned out to be the Herpes virus. Round day 9 or 10, all young Damascene became out of sorts, having a sort of membrane in the throat. An older fancier passed on a tip, as it turned out a perfect remedy, although it was too late then for the first young. The tip was to use some Halamid disinfectant in the drinking water. Note: this is a disinfectant for the

loft! The dose was simple; just dip the tip of your wet finger in the Halamid powder and then rinse it in the drinking water. (Please do read the instructions by the manufacturer, the product can cause irritations!)



**Left: This is the pair that would leave today for Nancy, with the French Damascene fancier.**

The French fancier Dominique Nisi and his wife arrived nicely in time and Ben showed him the pigeons that he had selected for him. Excellent birds; one male that was awarded with various prizes of honour in Nuremberg 2006 and Avicorni 2007. Plus a couple of young birds; one was bought by Ben at the Club Show and the other one was awarded Outstanding / 96 points at the Avicorni Show in 2007.

**Right: Ben (left) showing the trophy that he won at the 2004 VDT Show in Nuremberg. His Damascene hen was "Deutsche Champion" and Best Utility Pigeon in Show. Dominique Nisi, the French fancier from Nancy is standing in the right.**



**Left:**  
His Thuringian Swallows and Damascene can fly free as much as they like. It is important that they are put on the landing board from very young age, so that they can get familiar with the surroundings. According to Ben they will get lost when you train them to fly free at a later stage, especially Thuringian Swallows. If you let them free just like that, the unfamiliar view will frighten them and they will take off in a straight line, never to return.

**Right: Ben Kocken in his loft. The ceiling is just high enough for Ben, who is almost 2 m. (over 6.4 feet) tall. Here he is putting some youngsters at the landing board, to let them get familiar with the surroundings. As you can see, the loft has adequate ventilation by means of the roof tiles (photo above) and the open construction of the ceiling (photo right).**





**Left:**  
**A superb adult Damascene cock.**

Ben Kocken uses 7 pairs of Damascene to breed, and he is breeding them together with the Thuringian Swallows in the same loft. He experienced that the Thuringian Swallows, being rather shy by nature, became less shy and jumpy since they are kept and bred together with the Damascene. And of course it helps that Ben is often around in the loft. He always tries to let the parents raise two young. In fact all couples are also used as foster parents, because eggs as well as young are changed mutually between the Damascene and Thuringian Swallows. Both breeds do not

yield to each other. Only the Damascene are a bit more hot-blooded.

**Right: An adult cock, showing a very good head filling.**

The breed standard is always under discussion. Ben told me, that the checkered Damascene already existed in Germany in 1995, but the then board members of the Damascene Breeders' Club would not support the recognition of this variety. The checkered birds that came to Holland were recognised in 2004 and the colour variety was added in the Dutch Pigeon Standard, so they can be admired at the Shows here. In the mean time, after a change of board members in the Breeders' Club, the checkered Damascene is now recognised in Germany too. Ben also told me that breeders in Germany often try to outcross with other breeds to become a more vigorous Damascene; these fanciers do not even flinch from using the American Show Racer for that!



**Left: A fine young Damascene female; in the photo she is a bit startled and ready to fly. The feathering in the neck is nice and tight and the back covering is perfect. The wing bars will surely improve during time.**



**Right: Young Damascene, almost ready for the Show.**





Left: The cabinet is crammed with prizes and the many German 'Ehrenbänder' (banners) won at the German Shows almost hide the view at the trophies.

Right: For many years Ben has been feeding his birds with a homing pigeon feed mixture.



It is not a surprise that the kids from this marriage between pigeon lovers are also interested in pigeons. For instance the 15 years old son Maikel is very active in the sport, still being a junior member but participating at the shows with his own Damascene. In this part of the Netherlands the pigeon fancy is still very popular; it is the same as in other countries, in and around the cities that have many large industrial areas. These industrial plants and estates are typical surroundings for a

flourishing pigeon fancy. We also read that the people from Helmond were nick-named 'cat slappers'; tradition tells that the poor inhabitants ate cats... well, when keeping birds, cats can be a nuisance. Please excuse me, this was all in the past!



Left and right: Young birds, already showing much quality. The colour and bars will be perfect; even the type, the beak form and eye ceres are very promising. The fuller head is still to come, but this will surely happen in due time.



For more info on the Damascene:

Damascener Club Nederland  
 B. Kocken  
 Noord Parallelweg 32  
 5707 AX Helmond  
<http://www.damascener.nl>



## History

Indisputable the Damascene is an ancient breed and several ornithologists have described the breed in the past. The descriptions were not always alike; sometimes dark eyes were mentioned or a cream coloured feathering. One even called this breed a white variety of the Barb. Apart from that the breed was also called Mohammed and surrounded with certain mystery. It was not before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after having imported the breed from Turkey, that these pigeons were entered at an English show under the name Damascene. Even the Dutch pigeon specialist and writer of pigeon books, Mr. C.A.M. Spruijt, would not commit himself concerning the Damascene, and in his famous book: "Onze duivenrassen in woord en beeld" (Our pigeon breeds in word and pictures) published in 1955, not a word is written about the Damascene. In Levy, the black pigmentation of the skin is mentioned as a breed characteristic. Still today there is confusion in which group this pigeon should be classified. In the Netherlands it is considered a Utility pigeon, however, often is mentioned that high demands are made for the (ice)colour, so in fact it should be a colour pigeon. In Pigeon books and magazines, the Germans often describe the breed as a dewlap pigeon, thus highlighting one specific part of the breed and linking it to other dewlap breeds at the same time.

For more information, you could also contact the German Specialty Club for the Damascene:

**Damascener Club Deutschland, founded in 1973**

**President: Günther Resh. Internet <http://www.damascener-club.de/>**

*The below information has been derived from the lecture held on the 23<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> May 2008 in Beek (NL) for the Dutch Fancy Pigeon Judges Congress.*

*Text: Meindert Hauber and Ben Kocken, drawing by: Jan de Jong*

## Dutch Damascene Standard

1 = Head: Oval round, widely and egg shaped seen from above.

2 = Eyes: Sparkling dark red.

3 = Eye ceres: Fine of texture, two rows, dark blue plum like.

4 = Beak: Middle size and fairly thick.

5 = Throat: full, with a small gullet or dewlap.

6 = Neck: Middle length and powerful.

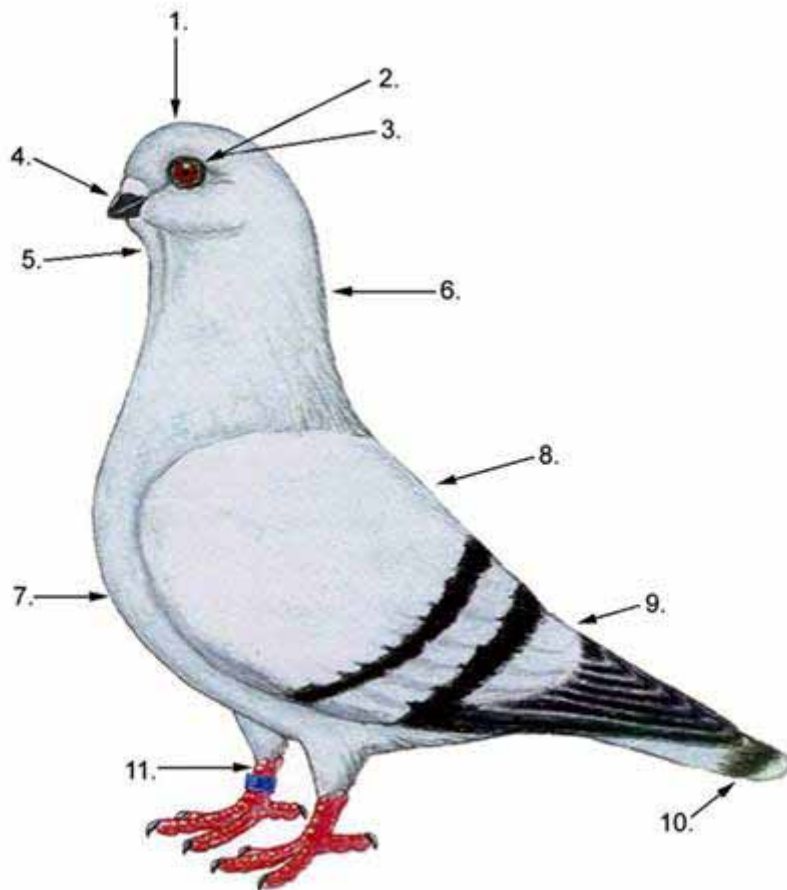
7 = Breast: Broad, full and round.

8 = Back: Broad slightly descending.

9 = Wings: Powerful, broad and not too long.

10 = Tail: Not too long.

11 = Legs: Middle length, widely placed and unfeathered/clean legged.

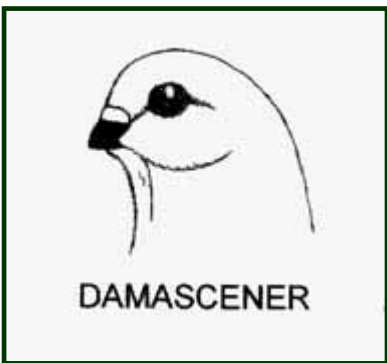


**General.** Breeding these birds is a great responsibility. The heritage of 3.000 years Damascene history must be handled very carefully.

**Medium size.** Some birds are too small, but they might have the right proportions. The striving towards bigger birds can result in a bigger, also clumsy bird. For a good size we can compare the size of a racing homer, on the understanding that the Damascene looks smaller by the shorter legs, neck and tail. You should be able to recognise a good flying bird in a Damascene. Larger birds, especially females can be of great value for the breeding programme.

**Type.** Compact and somewhat low in stand, which means expressing power, but not clumsy and especially not too long in the back. The body must give a short impression, supported by a broad and wide breast, a short powerful neck and legs of middle length. Seen from above, the pigeon should look broad in shoulders, supported by a broad forwards extended breast. Not wanted are the long types; in those cases either the back or the tail is too long.

**Stance.** Middle high as showed by middle high neck and legs. When the neck and legs get too long, the stance is accordingly too high. Equally when the bird carries his breast too high. The stance is almost horizontal, that is the underline starting below the breast to the beginning of the tail is pure horizontal. The tail should be carried somewhat descending, but must remain free from the ground. The backline starting at the shoulders is descending forming one line with the tail.



**Flattened top skull and square head shape**



**Too much filling in the back of the head**

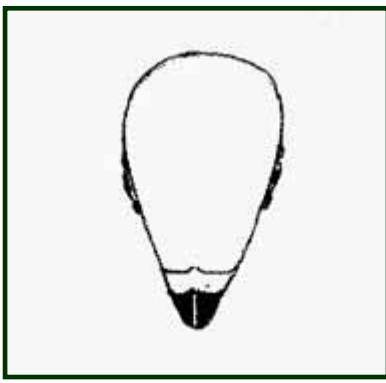
**Head.** Rather large and wide in conformity with the strong neck. The head seen from above must start behind the beak getting broader at the back of the head, egg-shaped. A big head impresses. Seen as from the side, firmly lined in an oval round form. The beak forms a (not too high) hook with the front of the head. The highest point of the head is just before the eye, from where the head reaches the neck in a somewhat gently but slowly rounded bow (without any flattening or hooks). Flat and angular head shapes are very dominant in breeding and therefore not recommended for breeding. This head faults can already be seen in very young birds, so early selection is possible. Judging of the head must always take place in the show pen, because when judging this in the hand, the skull generally becomes a bit flatter above the eyes. The birds which have the correct head shape even when taken in the hand are the very best birds. The front of the head must be broad, also in the hens. Seen from the front side, the head shape in prolongation of the beak line must not have a strong inclination. However extremely heavy heads are not desired, and there is a clear difference between adult and young birds, males and females.

**Head too small and neck too thin. Head too large, eye ceres too rough and pale.**



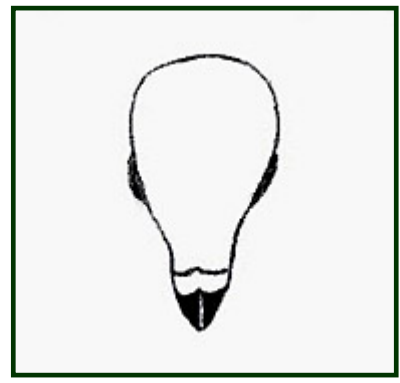
**Too thin beak and no gullet/dewlap.**





Left: DAMASCENE Standard

Right: Narrow head and shows inclination



Above: Head study of a winning Damascene, with all typical breed characteristics clearly shown. Photo: Ben Kocken.

**Eyes.** Must be sparkling dark red, a less colour is always a fault. The only consideration is for a small yellow circle around the pupil. When this yellow circle is broad and/or the rest of the eye colour is not sparkling dark red, then this is a serious fault. A brown eye is strongly dominant in breeding and selection is the only way. A misshaped (not round) pupil is regularly seen; this is not wanted. In general: when an eye is not sparkling, the bird can't have the high awards.

**Eye-ceres.** They must consist of two rows and always fine in texture. Young birds may not show the two rows right away, but it should be present. As known, wattles and eye ceres become always more developed at increasing age. At two years and older, the double eye cere must be present, but not too rough. As for the right colour, blue-black (plum-like) is wanted. With young pigeons it is still nice dark, with some older birds the eye-ceres becomes lighter, but a good bird keeps its dark eye cere. In preparing for the show, an over-amount of (white pigeon) powder on the eye ceres can be removed gently with a cotton swab with some skin oil i.e.



**Beak.** The black and the head are wanted with an obtuse angle. It is middle length and middle strength. The beak line goes through the middle of the eye.

**Throat and dewlap.** In the Dutch standard this is described "full with small dewlap", which is a bit double, because with a gullet/dewlap, the throat is always full. The dewlap must be clearly visible though, taking the bird in the hand and have it bend over, will show this more clearly. Pronounced large dewlaps are not wanted. The small dewlap must be kept as typical breed mark, something which has been neglected in the past years. Now breeding experience has taught us that the dewlaps are less pronounced in full rounded heads, of course there are exceptions to that rule. Pointed and angular heads in general have the best dewlaps.

**Neck.** Should be massive and not too long, full at the shoulders, slightly tapering to the head, but also there massive and as a result, giving an impression of some shortness. No backwards carried neck and not too long, which will give a strange effect on this breed.

**Breast.** This must be broad in proportion, with a sufficiently wide front, protruding before the wing butts and deep below the wing butts, showing a good rounded outline.

**Back.** Wide between the shoulders, showing a narrowing and descending line towards the tail. A problem of a broad breast and back is that the back is frequently lacking a good feather cover.

**Wings.** As mentioned in the standard; "the back well covered" is often a difficult question. With the bird's movements in the cage the back is frequently not totally covered by the wings anyway. An 'open back' of course is not correct and not touching wing tips are a fault, but give to the bird the opportunity to become at ease and adjust its feathers.

**Tail.** A narrow, strong folded tail is not wanted. However, the tail must give a tight and not really a broad impression. This breed generally has twelve tail feathers. The tail must be a prolongation from the back, carried in a straight, descending line without forming any arch and must stay free from the ground. The tail is approximately 2 cm longer than the end of the flight feathers of the wing.

**Legs.** They are wanted of medium length, but must give a short impression to be good. The upper part of the leg is almost not visible. Bristles or small feathers at the legs are not wanted.

**Feathering.** Tightly closed, which in fact means: well closed, without showing the under colour.

**Colour and marking.** The standard description for colour and drawing is easy to handle. The ice colour is very important and in good quality available. Still we often see birds that are too blue; with 'clouded' wing shields; with striking small brown edge at the head feathers and even with a reddish shade in the breast feathers. Also the head and neck are often too dark, which can be judged by pushing the head against the shoulders. Dark keel feathers and a dark feather nerve showing in the feathers of the lower back are no faults. A dark feather nerve showing (if not disturbing) is allowed. However, it is a fault when a dark colour shows behind the legs. The flights are desired as dark as possible, black is not possible and cannot be required. The bars must be well separated, preferably also on the back, and must be black. It is a sooty black colour though, caused by the always rich feather powdering. The bars must pass through and be broad. Broad ending of the second bar at the feather end is not wanted, same as a beginning of a third bar. A third bar is strongly inherited and does not contribute to colour intensity or such. The bars definitely should not become too small, what rather often occurs. The young birds have sometimes very light coloured bars, which can change in good black bars after the moult. At chequered pigeons the chequer pattern has to be equal and as black as possible. At the colour partitioning one speaks about a relation of 5/3, this means 5 parts of black against 3 parts ice colour on the wing shields, with an even drawing pattern over the whole shield. Beginning at the shoulders with a fine but clear marking, they increase in size over the shield and end in two sharp bars, separated by a narrow line in ice colour. It is strived preferably for triangular chequer pattern. Just the function of the contrast of the delicate light colour with the black design, the striking dark eye ceres and the sparkling dark red eyes makes this breed so particular! At the Dutch Union NBS Championship held at the Avicultura show in January 2004 the chequered Damascene was introduced for recognition, which was approved during the year 2004 by the standard committee.

In the American magazine "The Pigeon Fancier" Dr. Christian L. Otrakji from Coconut Grove Florida described his three weeks voyage to Lebanon in 1994. There he found Damascenes in three colours; the ice coloured barred (bhuz), the ice coloured chequered (umari) - both colours are recognised in the Netherlands - and the ice coloured red barred (bhuz ahmar).

**Right: Damascene with chequering, recognised in the Netherlands since 2004.**

In the last Club Magazine, the vice-president of the Specialty Club, Mr. Meindert Hauber, wrote an explanation about the correct chequer design. In his article he referred to the German standard of the Forelle Pigeon, stating that the right colour dividing at the wing shields is 5 parts black chequering against 3 parts ice colour, with an even drawing pattern over the whole shield. Starting from the shoulders with a fine, but sharp drawing, the size of the markings somewhat increasing over the shield and ending in two sharply marked bars, separated by a narrow line in ice colour. The chequering must consist of sharp triangles.



**Left:**  
This young female Damascene won 'Deutsche Champion' (Best Pigeon in Show) at the 2004 VDT show in Sinsheim (Germany)  
Photo: Avicultura and shown by Ben Kocken.