



SWISS PIGEON BREEDS

By: Mick Bassett

With the growing interest of the Swiss Breeds I thought the time might have come for a glance at this fascinating Group of Pigeons.

To start with there are 24 different Breeds, split into three main groupings. All the breeds and groupings are named after the District or 'Canton' of origin; that is equivalent to a small 'County' in English.

*They are the **Berne, Lucerne and Thurgauer** Groupings, plus seven Breeds that 'stand alone': The **Aargauer Whitetail, Eichbüler, Poster, Self Swiss, St. Gallen, Wiggertaler and Zurich Whitetail**. Only one Breed has true 'Muffs': the **Aargauer Whitetail**. One - the **Berne Half Beak** - is unlike the others in that Grouping. All have a distinctive Charm of their own.*

*The **Berners, Thurgauers, Self Swiss, Wiggertaler and St. Gallen** are all active, very elegant pigeons, with slim necks, dainty heads with high foreheads and fine beaks. (Except the **Berne Halfbeak, more of that later!**)*

*The **Eichbühler** is unlike most other Breeds of Pigeon with its famous 'lizard' head!*

*The **Poster** (named after its 'homing' ability!) with its flat top and angular head is maybe reminiscent of some of the more uncommon flying breeds from Europe's border areas. The **Zurich Whitetail** is unlike any of the others for form and is nearer to the overall 'Field Pigeon' type. The **Berne Halfbeak**, compared to all the others is Big! An old breed, resuscitated in the middle of the 1800's with a couple of name changes along the way; 'Turkish Pigeon' and 'Griss' and then lastly 'Halfbeak' due to its darker lower beak colouration, still sporting the distinctive high peak-crest common to most of the Swiss Breeds.*

*The **Lucerne** is the 'Pixie' of the Groupings. With its unusual shaped head, high peak crest, large dark eyes and grouched legs, it almost reminds you of some drawing out of a children's fairy tale book. It even has a temperament to match! More docile and 'laid back' than the others, although still an excellent flyer. It is the only Group of Pigeons I have ever looked after that actively 'scratches' in the bedding like a tiny Bantam or Quail, inherited I imagine from its searching in the Field for food; something that all the Older Swiss Breeds were specially adapted for. One Breed, the **Berne Gugger**, (translated: cuckoo) is recognised as probably the Oldest of the Swiss Breeds, dating back to the 1500's.*

All the Swiss Breeds are good flyers and the dainty and active Berners, Thurgauers, Wiggertaler, Self Swiss, and St. Gallen don't like to be closely confined for too long; they 'mope' and look generally depressed after a while!

If free-flying isn't an option (and for most these days it definitely isn't an option!) then at least good flights/aviaries and plenty of fresh air is especially needed for these Breeds. But no Pigeon looks its best confined to lofts with non-existent or tiny aviaries; as long as they have perching/nesting space, then the flight is far more important than the loft size.

I certainly don't advocate NOT keeping pigeons if you cannot free-fly, because for 90% of pigeon Keepers it is near impossible, but with the Swiss Breeds, bred for so many generations to 'field and forage', flight size is more important than with some other Breeds.

SWISS PIGEONS FROM A TO Z



The Aargauer Whitetail

Bred in the Canton of Aargau in the Middle of the 1900's from Zurich Whitetails, Swiss Peak-Crested and Saxon Whitetails.



This is the only truly 'Muffed' Breed in the Swiss Group and belongs to none of the Sub-Groups, although has a superficial resemblance to the Berners and Thurgauers in shape and size - which is barely medium - and with its dainty head, high peak-crest and lively disposition. Its distinctive muffs should not be more than medium length, well rounded and 'plate' form. It comes in a variety of colours. The tail is white except for the under-tail coverts, which are coloured.

THE BERNERS

This Sub-Group has six members, all as their name suggests, bred in the Canton of Bern, all clean-legged and peak-crested. It includes what is probably the oldest recognised Swiss Breed, the Gugger (Cuckoo), and one that definitely does not resemble any other 'Swiss' except for the peak-crest: the Berne Half-Beak.

Although in many cases bearing superficial resemblances they are separate Breeds due to there 'make-up' and not normally 'crossed'. This is true for all the other Breeds of the 'Swiss Type'.



Berne Gugger

No German census figures for this ancient Swiss Breed that dates from the 1500's. The name means 'Cuckoo' in dialect, and describes the Colour. The Gugger follows the form associated with the Swiss Self, being elegant with very clean lines, a high rounded forehead and high sharp edged peak-crest, dark brown eyes and medium narrow beak. The legs are unfeathered. It comes in one colour only, Blue, with Black Chequered wing shields, either with a white tail or coloured tail. The markings are unusual and of ancient origin; best described as a 'modified' Blue Grizzle that gives the impression of the European migrant cuckoo species.

The description goes so:

Ground colour Blue, the wing shields with even black chequering. From the tip of the peak-crest, sweeping down the sides of the neck and increasing in width meeting like a collar in the mid-throat area should be a band of fine white flecking (the cuckoo marking). On the forehead, starting at the beak-cere, is a white snip or forehead spot; the blue ground colour covers most of the face and forms a 'Bib' under the lower beak. The depth of the bib should be no lower than the tip of the bird's beak when pressed onto the throat. The White Tail variant has the tail and under-tail coverts White. Altogether an attractive and unusual colouration.



Berne Half-Beak (Halbschnäbler)

No Census Figures.



This is the 'Big one' of the Swiss Breeds! It comes as a surprise when seeing a display of Swiss breeds to see this relative 'Giant' amongst them!

Its History reaches back to the Turkish annexation of Switzerland and surrounding Countries, in-fact one of its old names was 'Turkish Pigeon' and another early name was 'Griss'.



The breed was 'resurrected' in the Middle of the 1800's. The Breed gets its name now from its beak colour difference; upper pale, lower beak black or at least pigmented (or horn colour in Reds).

Like many Swiss breeds it has a high, almost 'curling' peak-crest, after that forget everything else you have read about 'Swiss' breeds! It's large and powerful (size 9 ring). The head has a distinct rounded forehead but very 'Wild' Pigeon shape. The eyes are orange/red surrounded by a well developed intensive red eye-cere. The beak is strong and pale or wax colour upper beak, with a pigmented lower beak, ideally Blackish for Black birds. The beak cere is neat and not overdeveloped.

The colouring of this breed is also unusual. It comes in black or red BUT only in a type of Overall Pied or Grizzle effect, apart from the head, which is Solid Colour with a white forehead snip or spot, which must not be too large.

The description is so:

The neck, breast, belly and wing shield evenly 'Pied'; this is in the form of solid white feathers or flecking, the flights (primaries) and tail having a 'Branding' or burnt effect. The secondaries can be Pied or 'Branded'; that is a basically white feather with the colour 'washed' through the webbing, darker at the edges.

The breed's legs are described as 'Very powerful' and as such, it takes a size 9 foot ring.



Berne Lark (Lerche)

In Germany 7 Breeders with 48 breeding pairs, probably more than in Switzerland! Bred in the Canton of Bern in the 1600's and elegant field pigeon shape with the distinct peak-crest associated with this Swiss Type.

One colour only: Lark-Marked.

The ground colour is a pale grey without any bluish or reddish tone. The wings, flights and tail slightly darker, the neck with a greenish sheen, the breast a bright, rich, gold/yellow (ochre).

The 'Collar' marking from the upper breast to the belly and reaching the sides of the neck, without sharp division but blending in softly with the ground colour.

The wing shields and back are covered with

even and distinct triangular black 'Chequering' - properly called 'Larking' - clearly visible from the grey ground colour; the larking has a 'brownish' sheen. The head colour should be an even grey colour without any 'rusty' shading.

Berne Tigerhead (Rieselkopf) more properly meaning 'Flecked' or sprinkled).

7 Breeders in Germany. This breed is NOT easy to get the markings right! The shape is 'Swiss' and elegant, the colour only in Black (and that's hard enough!) with the head hopefully evenly covered with a white flecking. The eyes are dark and the beak is black, quite a contrast!

This flecking should not reach into the crest but forms a curving head marking from the inside of the peak-crest to the throat, 2 cm below the lower beak, ideally 50x50% but it is recognised that less white in young birds is desirable (see Lucerne notes for this colour).



Berne Mirror-Tail (Spiegelschwanz)

As of 2002 only 1 breeder in Germany, shame, as this breeds marking is very unusual and unique to only a few breeds in its purest form.

Bred in the 1700's in the Canton of Berne, again typical 'Swiss' type, only in Blue, described as an even and bright, light, pale Blue; the neck with a greenish sheen, the back a paler blue, the flights and tail a slightly darker shade of blue, the wings without bars or chequering. The tail is blue with a black tail bar with a narrow blue tip to the tail; the inner band of the black tail bar is a distinct pure white broad bar, every feather having a large oval white marking either side of the feather shaft, the so-called 'Mirror' effect. The two outer tail feathers are normally much paler or almost white, but still with the black bar.

Note* there is a Wild Pigeon from the Himalayas with the same tail marking. Crosses have been affected without replicating the Marking; they revert back to 'Normal' pigeon! But it is possible, due to many breeds originating in Asia and travelling the trade routes, that in the very distant past, that particular species was responsible for the 'Mirror' Tail in our Domestic Pigeons, but so long ago that genetically they are now 'Strangers'.



Above: Berne whitetail, blue white barred.

Berne White-Tail (Weißschwanz)

As of 2002 Census, 6 German Breeders. Another Breed from the 1700's, mainly from the Canton of Bern. 'Swiss' Type and in quite a few colours! Many with White Bars or Chequering, Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, Blue, Dilute Blue. (The Brown and Black with White Cheq' can also have 'Finching'; white tipping to the flight feathers.)



Right: Berne whitetail, blue grizzle.

The tail is white, the under-tail coverts (in a 'V' formation) are coloured. Above, the white of the tail carries to the lower back with a distinct and even division between the colour and white.



Above: Eichbüler, blue barless.

EICHBÜLER

This is one of the 'Individual' Swiss Breeds, very distinctive, with its famous 'lizard' shaped head. A powerful, long cast pigeon with 'trouser' legs (Bare toes). It comes in limited colours and markings: Blue, 'Dilute Blue', 'Meal' coloured (Akin to the Nuremberg Lark 'Mehlicht') Mealy and Cream; all with or without wing bars or chequering.

Right: Eichbüler, blue checker.



THE LUCERNE'S

This 'Sub-Group' from the Canton of Lucern, has seven Members, this time all following a distinctive overall Pattern for Size, Form and Furnishings. As mentioned before, these are the Pixie's of the Swiss Pigeon Breeds,



slightly larger in 'mass' than the Berners, a rounder more 'curved' pigeon but still with an elegance of posture, all with trousered legs, described as 'Full trousered' as the short, broad feathering can flow onto the toes, as long as the nails are clear of feathering.

The Lucerne Group of Breeds was formed by crossing Swiss Breeds with Owls, retaining some of the 'Owl' body form and stance but developing a very unique and very attractive head shape, completing the picture with a shapely peak-crest and groused legs. The head is the most distinctive feature of this Group: a high peak-crest, large, full dark eyes set in an unusually shaped head that is a full, gently curving line from the beak tip rising to the peak of the crest, without any flatness or break in the outline.

With its barely medium length, broad based beak, it is an excellent parent.

Temperament: when given the attention can be very confiding and tame. It is also an excellent flyer and does need a good flight/aviary where 'free-fly' is not an option, as it can tend to get a bit 'overweight' without sufficient exercise!

The 7 Breeds in the Lucerne Group each have their separate Standard.

Starting with the most popular:

Above: Lucerne Gold Collar, blue barless.

Right: Lucerne Gold Collar, blue barred.



Left: Luzerne Self, white.



The Lucerne Gold Collar

The Gold Collar with 183 Breeders in Germany, rates as THE most popular of the Lucerne Group, with good exchange of birds both ways, between Germany and Switzerland. It comes in Chequer, Bar and Barless, all three markings being bred from the grounding of the breed in the 1800's in the Canton of Luzern. The ground colour is described as a pale 'meal' colour as in wholemeal flour, with a slight greyish tint; the tail and flight feathers a darker shade.

There should be no bluish tone to the ground colour.

All three markings have a darkish tail bar with a pale tip to the tail. The two outer tail feathers have a pale webbing. The 'collar' on the breast forms a broad half moon shape, from mid-throat to the breast bone, and should be a bright, deep golden-yellow (Bright as in candescent, not pale). The rich collar colour should be without a sharp dividing line but should be softly suffused into the ground colour.

Right: Luzerne Self, Grizzle laced.

The sheen to the neck should be silvery; a definite green sheen is a fault. The basic colour of this breed handles on the same genetic colour as the Coburger Lark and other 'Lark' Breeds, but carried to one of its palest forms. (The Swiss Thurgauer mealy and the Swiss Berne Lark also). The Barless tends to have the paler ground colour. The Barred has more pigment and is important regarding the maintenance of the deep collar colour in the barless birds. The Chequer, as with other breeds of this colour range, tends to have a darker ground colour and is not the first choice for the maintenance of the correct collar tone in the other two markings, due to the difficulty of breeding back to the desired pale ground colour again. In common with all breeds of this colour, the hens do tend to have a slightly darkened ground colour tone; this is least noticeable in the barless birds.



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Left: Luzerne Self, dilute blue Grizzle.

Lucerne Self

With its own Standard but following the same basic body pattern as the rest of the Lucerne Group, this is the second most popular of the Lucerne's with 113 breeders in Germany.

It comes in the following recognised colours:

White, Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, Blue with or without a black bar. Dilute Blue with or without a dark bar. Mealy and Cream with or without a bar. Dilute Blue Cheq., Mealy Cheq. and Cream cheq. Also Black, Dun, Brown, Khaki, Red and Yellow; all with white wing shield 'Lacing' (Gesäumt).

All colours should be rich and even; the 'gloss' colours (Black, Red, Yellow etc.) with an intense sheen. With the 'Laced' the flights and tail feathers also have a fine white lacing to the edges.

Right: Luzerne Self, Yellow, Checker.





Lucerne Copper Collar

Only 24 Breeders of this colour in Germany.

The ground colour is much darker than the Gold Collar, described as even bright blue, the tail and flights darker, the neck with a violet-green sheen. Again, Barless, Bar and Chequer. The Collar is of a copper brown/red colour, the tail with a dark bar with a paler tail tip in all three markings, with the outer two tail feathers with a paler webbing to the feather.

This is not a Breed to even attempt to 'cross' with the Gold collars, due to the vast difference in ground colour and markings.

Left: Lucerne Copper Collar, blue checker.

Below: Lucerne Copper Collar, blue blackbar.



Lucerne Tigerhead (Rieselkopf)

At the last count, only two breeders in Germany! NOT an easy breed to get the colour/markings correct! A black bird (ideally intense colour with good sheen) that has a 'Tigered' head marking to 2 cm. below the lower beak. It is recognised that allowing for exhibiting young birds with just slightly 'less' than the desired amount of white flecking is desirable, as this always increases with age! This breed also comes with 'wing rose' markings, as an addition to the Rieselkopf marking; this is a cluster of a few white feathers, 5 to 10 in number on and around each wing butt. Again not a good idea to pair two birds with the 'Rose' marking together. In-fact a good Self Black that excels in type and ground colour, when paired to a Rieselkopf or an over-marked bird, will greatly assist the maintenance of this rare breed.

'Like to like' breeding rarely works! Ideally matching two dissimilar birds usually produces a greater percentage of the correct 'Rieselkopf' birds.



Below: Lucerne Tigerhead



Lucerne Elmer

This is for colour/markings genetically akin to the Saxon 'Moon' Pigeons and comes in the same colours, Brown and Yellow. Basically a milk white ground colour with a 'crescent moon' marking across the lower throat/ upper part of the breast, with bars of the same colour.



Lucerne Shield

Bred in the 1900's from Swiss Pigeons and Owl breeds. Lucerner 'Type' with white ground colour and coloured shield markings, white flights, in Black, Red, Yellow, Blue and their dilutes, in Barless, Barred or Chequer.

Left: Lucerne Shield, red.

Lucerne White-tail

Basically a coloured pigeon with white tail feathers, in Black, Red, Yellow, Brown and Blue/Dilute Blue. The under-tail coverts however must be coloured. Markings allowed with Bars, Barless, Chequer and also White laced and Chequered wing markings.

POSTER

Bred in the Central Areas in the Middle of the 1800's from an old 'Homer' Breed. Its excellent orienteering earned it the name of 'Poster' (= Post Pigeon). A good medium sized pigeon with quite a high stance. The head has a distinct flat top and almost straight line from in front of the eyes to the beak-tip. The neck should also be an almost vertically straight line from the back of the head. Colours are Black, White, Blue, Dilute Blue, Mealy and Cream. 'Dom' Red and Yellow; these have darker flecked feathers, like a 'Grizzle' pattern.

Right: Poster blue grizzle.



**Left: Poster red checker.
Below: Poster red dark checker.**





ST. GALLEN WING PIGEON

Bred in 1970 in St. Gallen from Swiss Peak-Crest and German Wing Pigeons.

Well built, longish cast Pigeon with more typical 'Field pigeon' form than other Swiss breeds, but with the same elegant head form and posture of the ancestral 'Swiss Self' Breed. Clean-legged with peak-crest, white ground colour, fully coloured wings and a forehead spot or 'snip'. It comes in Red, Black, Yellow and Blue and their Dilutes, also in White bar and Cheque markings.

Left: St Gallen wing pigeon, black.

SWISS SELF

Another 'stand alone' Breed, possibly as old as the Berne Gugger?

Bred throughout Switzerland, the parent of the Berne/Thurgauer 'Type', peak-crest, clean legged and as its name suggests, Self Coloured in a wide variety of colours, including 'Ice' colour.

SWISS THURGAUER GROUP

Five in this Group and these all follow the ancestral 'shape' of the Swiss 'Self' breed; all elegant, clean-legged and all with peak-crest.

The Thurgauers are slightly more refined in head than the typical Berne Pigeon.

Thurgauer Elmer

As off 2002 in German 9 Breeders.

A very old Thurgauer Breed, bred from crossing typical 'Swiss' peak-crest pigeons with Saxon 'Moon' or Crescent Pigeons.

The markings follow the Colour and Pattern of the Lucerne Elmer on the basic 'Swiss' type. Colours only Yellow and Brown Elmer. When this colour is reproduced on a typical Swiss Type bird it is very attractive, although not easy to breed to perfection with the clear and intense coloured 'moon' crescent marking across the chest and distinct wing bars contrasting against the creamy white body colour. Ring Size: 8 mm.



Right: Thurgauer Elmer.

Thurgauer Crescent (Mehlfarbige)

2002 figures, 13 Breeders in Germany.

A very old Swiss Breed from the Ober-Thurgau Region.

As its name indicates, this breed comes in the same genetic colour as the Nuremberg Lark (Mealy) but with the ochre yellow/gold colour restricted to the breast and lower throat, as in the Lucerne Gold Collar. I personally find this colour combination very attractive; the rich ochre colour and distinct bars and chequering on the very delicate, pale 'meal' ground colour with just the slightest hint of a silver cast has something almost ethereal to it. (There should never be any hint of a blue tone anywhere on the bird.) Ring Size: 8 mm.



Above: Thurgauer Monk, brown whitebarred.

Right: Thurgauer Monk, black white barred.



Left: Thurgauer Monk, blue whitebarred.



Right: Thurgauer Shield, ash redbarred.

The wing shield is coloured with 8 to 10 white flights (primaries). The many colours recognised should be rich and intensive, the Blacks,

Thurgauer Shield

One of the 'Popular Swiss' with 41 German Breeders. Another from the 1900's, bred from Swiss peak-crest and German shield marked pigeons.



Reds and Yellows especially so, with an intense sheen. Ring Size: 8 mm.

Left: Thurgauer Shield, black.



Right:
Thurgauer White Tail, blue blackbarred

Thurgauer White Tail

2002 Census, 12 German Breeders.

An old breed, bred for many hundred years in the Thurgauer Region.

Colours: Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, Blue, all also with White Bar or Chequering.



Left: Thurgauer White Tail, black.

Apart from slightly different 'moulding' to the head (the Thurgauers are just slightly more 'refined' in head than the Berners) the biggest difference between this breed and the Berne White Tail is that the Thurgauer has the tail AND the upper and the lower tail-

coverts White, so 'crossing' is just not feasible (or desirable!). This old breed also has a very distinct colour 'variant': the 'Cat Grey'; a ground colour of a mid-grey, overlaid with a Grizzle effect that has an overall attractive greenish sheen. Ring Size: 8 mm.

Now we come to the last two 'einzeltangers' or individual Breeds:

Wiggertaler Colour-Tail (right)

From the ancestral type bred in the middle of the 1900's from South German Moorheads,



South German Snips (Spot) and various other crosses. A White bird with a fully coloured tail, under-tail coverts included. It only comes in Black, Blue, Red and Yellow.

Zurich White-Tail (left)

Bred in the middle of the 1800's in the Canton of Zurich from feather footed Field Pigeons. This Breed is the most 'unlike' any of the other Swiss and most resembles



a 'normal' Field Pigeon type, although the head does have slightly more resemblance to the Swiss Type. The eyes are described as dark brown rather than dark. It is plain headed, and has fairly short, thickly trousered legs with the nails visible. The White Tail Marking is in the tail feathers only; the over and undertail coverts must be coloured. It comes in several colours including Brown. Markings are white bar, Chequer and Blues with Black Bar/Cheq., Dilute Blue with Dark Bar/Cheq.



Right: Zurich White-Tail blue barless.

To end with

Apart from the Swiss Cropper, that completes the array of Swiss Pigeon Breeds, all these breeds, especially the older breeds were historically very much 'Field and Forage' Pigeons, well adapted to free-flying and 'fielding' for a good proportion of their food. As such, all are active and not really suitable for small cramped conditions (No pigeon is, but these especially!) The Lucerne Group is perhaps the most docile but is inclined to 'overweight' if not allowed enough exercise! All are excellent breeders, brooding and feeding their young well, easily rearing 6 broods in a 'normal' breeding season of six months. Only one breed can be considered 'Large' but all are 'well covered' (Fleshed!), as 'Field Pigeons' traditionally were considered an essential food source where-ever kept. All these breeds have separate Standards and although some may look alike, indiscriminate 'crossing' is not encouraged.

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