

# SOOTY OR CHECKER?

By Jan Lombard,  
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**Right:** Not a checker, but  
a barred bird, with a lot  
of sooty.

**Photo:** Mick Bassett.



While doing my practical examination as a judge, I was presented with a number of birds of the particular breed in question. I was tasked to place these birds in sequence from the winner to the last placed bird; and to comment on my reasons. This is often done to determine if the applicant judge can see the bigger picture, and is not distracted by minor faults. Sometimes judges tend to judge negatively and to look for minor faults, instead of looking for the overall picture of the bird that best match the breed standard. The evaluation was done by a senior judge as well as a specialist breed judge who were breeding, showing and winning with this particular breed for a number of years. I am deliberately not mentioning the year, nor any names, nor the breed, as it may be embarrassing to the senior judge of the day, as the bird that I am writing about ended up in the top-7. *(P.S. On South African Fancy Pigeon Association shows we have a Champion and six Reserve Champions selected from all breed winners. These are selected by the senior = all breed judge.)* If the reader manage to identify the breed, particular show or main judge, please keep it to yourself, as my purpose is not to embarrass anybody – rather that we should learn from it.



**Left:** Wing shield of a sooty  
blue silver bar pigeon.

**Photo:** Jan Lombard.

The particular breed was from the colour pigeon group, where a lot of points are allocated for correct colour (20) and markings (15). As the show schedule does not provide for checkers, the bird was entered under "any other standard colour". It is interesting to note that the breed standard list 5 standard colours, without any

mention made of any other standard colours. The show schedule further provides for brown, which is not found in this breed. The latest (2010) American NPA book of standards allow for the AOC class in this breed, and is written in such a way that almost everything can be entered. Maybe the show schedule should have provided a class for AOC and not for AOSC. A lot has been written about this AOC class in a lot of breeds. Some, including myself, argue that this class should not be abused to enter "Any Odd Colour" and that it is only intended for recognized colours that do not appear in the show schedule, but for which the breed standard in question makes provision. One can argue that this class may be used for new developments – i.e. recognized colours and patterns in other breeds, but the winner should not win best of breed - based on shape, station, type and condition only. Birds of recognised colours, but with colour faults should not be entered as AOC, with the aim of not being penalised for the faults. A colour fault stays a colour fault, and should be penalised as such, especially for breeds that fall within the colour pigeon group, regardless of the class that it is entered into. A bird entered in the AOC class should not get full scores for colour, simply because the judge do not have a standard to judge the colour against. This is even more true when birds entered into other classes get penalised for their colour faults. If a blue bar bird with one incorrect coloured toenail can win best of breed if entered as "mismarked" and the same bird cannot win the blue bar class on the same day (on account of its toe nail colour), something is seriously wrong with our logic.



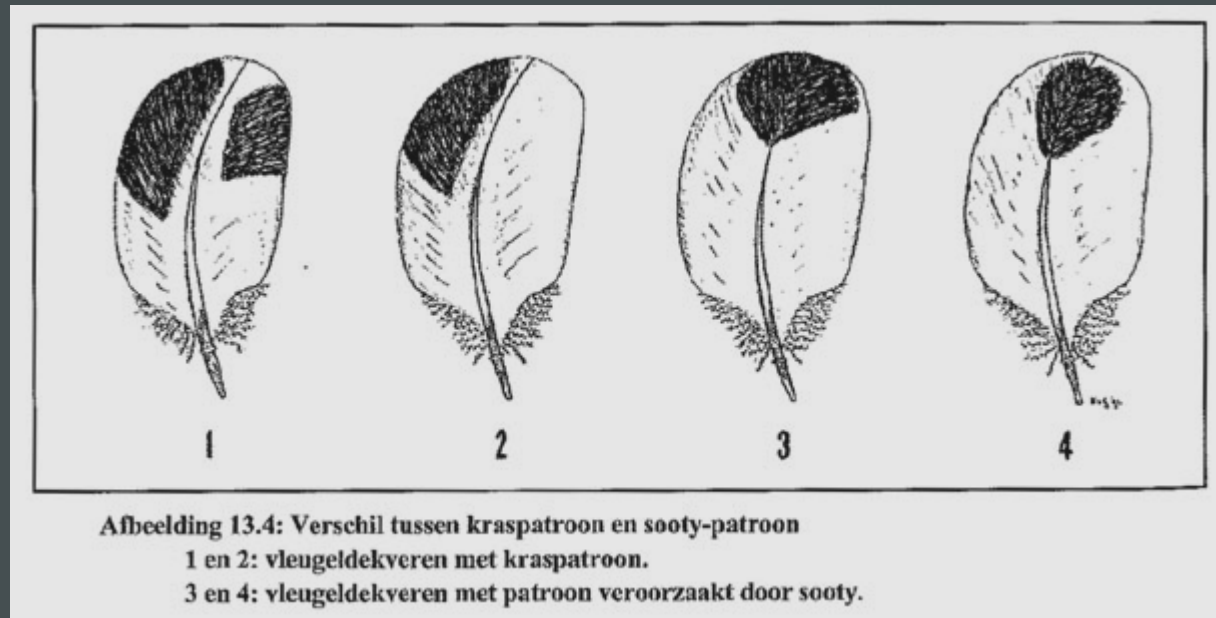
**Left: A sooty Marchenero Cropper. In this breed, sooty is a recognised colour variety (in Spain).  
Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

Back to my experience being passed out as a judge. I immediately took the top-7 bird in question out and told my appraisers that it is not a recognized colour in the breed. Before they could point it out to me, I told them that I was aware of the fact that the bird won best of breed, and also that the main judge included it in

the top-7, but that I was of the opinion that he made a mistake. I've asked the specialist breed judge to tell me what colour it was, on which he replied: "AOSC". I insisted that he tell me which colour, on which he answered a silver checker. I said that it was not a checker, but a barred bird, with a lot of sooty. I said that I will one day provide the proof and explanation, and that is what I'm trying to do with this article.

The "sooty" gene is good to have as a modifier in certain colours, but on a blue bar, or even on a mealy bar it plays havoc. That is the reason why some say that it is good to keep your colour separate – especially if you do not have a proper

knowledge of genetics. Sooty results in a dark spot in the middle of the feather. This dark spot covers the vane of the feather, and normally leaves light areas open all around it. Checker, a pattern gene, on the other side leaves the vane of the feather light coloured, with a dark area on the outer half of the feather, and sometimes on the inner half as well. Checker also leaves a V-shaped light coloured tip to the feather. It is clearly illustrated in the following sketch, p. 148 from "Genetica bij Duiven" by Hein van Grouw and Jan de Jong – ISBN 978-90-813589-1-0, where the first two feathers are checked and the last two (on the right) are sooty.



Axel Sell (Breeding and Inheritance in Pigeons – ISBN 3-88620-034-5) also states on p.29: "*Matings of bar and barless with checks or dark checks can also result in revealing some other genetic traits hidden under pattern, e.g. the factor "sooty" which resembles the check pattern*". On p. 125 Axel writes as follows: "*Sooty, being a recessive factor, causes dark areas in the wing shield feathers which may be mistaken for checks. They differ from checks, however, affecting the areas around the distal rachis of the coverts. Because sooty does not belong to the pattern series, it can appear in addition to bars, barless and checks.*"

**Right: A blue barred bird.  
 Photo: Mick Bassett.**

If you are ever in doubt whether a pigeon is a blue bar (with a lot of sooty) or a blue checker, just look at the centres of the feathers. The difference is best seen on cover feathers on the wing shield. If you breed barred or checkered birds of the colour pigeon breed, don't mate them to black birds.





**Right: This blue checker Pommerian Cropper shows a very intense check marking.**  
**Photo: Mick Bassett.**

On a barred bird in the colour pigeon group, where colour is very important, the judge should look for a clear wingshield without any signs of sooty. Sooty is definitely a colour fault on a barred bird, and should be judged accordingly. Sometimes a sooty blue bar may win its breed, simply because the other entries do not match up to it, and simply because the colour fault does not warrant the deduction of enough points to place this bird after the second placed bird, if the difference in quality is huge enough, but to have a bird from the colour pigeon group, that has a serious colour fault, ending up in the top-7 is a bit far-fetched – especially when colour accounts for 20% of the total points.



In my opinion it is only fair to expect that senior judges as well as judges of breeds where colour is important, know the difference between sooty and check. Hopefully this article has been of some help to you, as well as to breeders of these breeds.

**Right: Another blue barred checker bird. Is this a sooty, or should the checker marking just be more defined?**  
**Photo: Mick Bassett.**

*Note: Sooty on an Ash Red is called Strawberry.*

