

THE ESCAMPADISSA PIGEON (I)

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Photos: Pedro J Bento and Martí Ballester Martorell

Introduction

To talk about the pigeons of Escampadissa is to talk about many things; about urbanity, and what it is to be Mediterranean. Urbanity and Mediterranean-ness that converge in Palma, *Ciutat de Mallorca*; as it is in the roofs and skies of this city where you most sense the power and at the same time the magnificence, of their flight that make it unmistakable. But to be fair, it should be said that it was not exclusively in this town that the breed was cultivated, there were some groups of "Esbart Rollers" in other towns, small and large, such as Lluçmajor, Inca, Manacor, Felanitx, Maó, Ciutadella ...

For those who do not know, "escampadissa" means a scattering, because this breed when flying does not form kits, individuals ascending apart from others. Talking about a flock of this breed would be antithesis misnomer as it is foremost a solo flyer.

Origin

The key to the origins of this breed lies in commerce, namely trade. Mallorca was said to be insular, but it was far from isolated. From the 15th to the 17th century, the Balearic Islands were a vital hub, a clearing house, for trade between the Middle East and Europe...

Let us go back to the Mallorca of 1450. Mallorca is just out of a bloody civil war in which the rural and working classes took up arms against the ruling

classes of the city and the rural oligarchy, re-emerging with all the difficulties of the economic depression suffered during the Early Middle Ages. An economic recovery would not occur until the second half of the fifteenth century. In the Mallorca of that time, a third of the population is foreign, and 80 per cent of them merchants – merchants whose wealth bought them arms and great palaces, giving them the social standing to mingle with the old aristocracy. But what has this to do with pigeons?





It is possible that the size and scope of the livestock trade in the 16th century was responsible for the arrival of the pigeons of the Escampadissa – and other breeds. As the historian and breeder, Jaume Monserrat i Riera, in his book *Els coloms mallorquins de pinta i d'esbart*, notes that there was an important sea trade to and from the islands at this time, as did Abul Fazl (1590), in India, J. Cortes (1613), and Francis Willughby(1676), in England.

Growing rich by this trade, the nobles and merchants built large pigeon lofts and cultivated this breed, which became a symbol of power. The large flocks raised in these pigeons lofts gave them honour and prestige well into the twentieth century. The greater the number of birds in a loft, the greater was the honour and the dignity of the family.

For this reason, the Escampadissa pigeon was often referred to as *colom del senyors* or "the pigeon of the aristocracy". Some examples are the Despuig Family, the loft that was in Casal Balaguer or Ca'n Vives Oneill, Ca'n Barceló.

We do know that the loft located in Ca'l marquès del Reguer or Ca'n Balaguer, owned by musician Josep Balaguer i Vallès – a great fan of this breed as were other members of the Balaguer family – could be raised by a lift and was popularly known as "*sa gàbia blava*" (the blue cage).



Over time, honour and greatness of families would cease to be the goal. The hobby was present in all social strata and people had the number of pigeons they could afford. Among the less exalted were more cultivated pigeons such as the pigeon of pinta, d'esbart or the current Catalanian tumbler. This was not a widespread phenomenon.



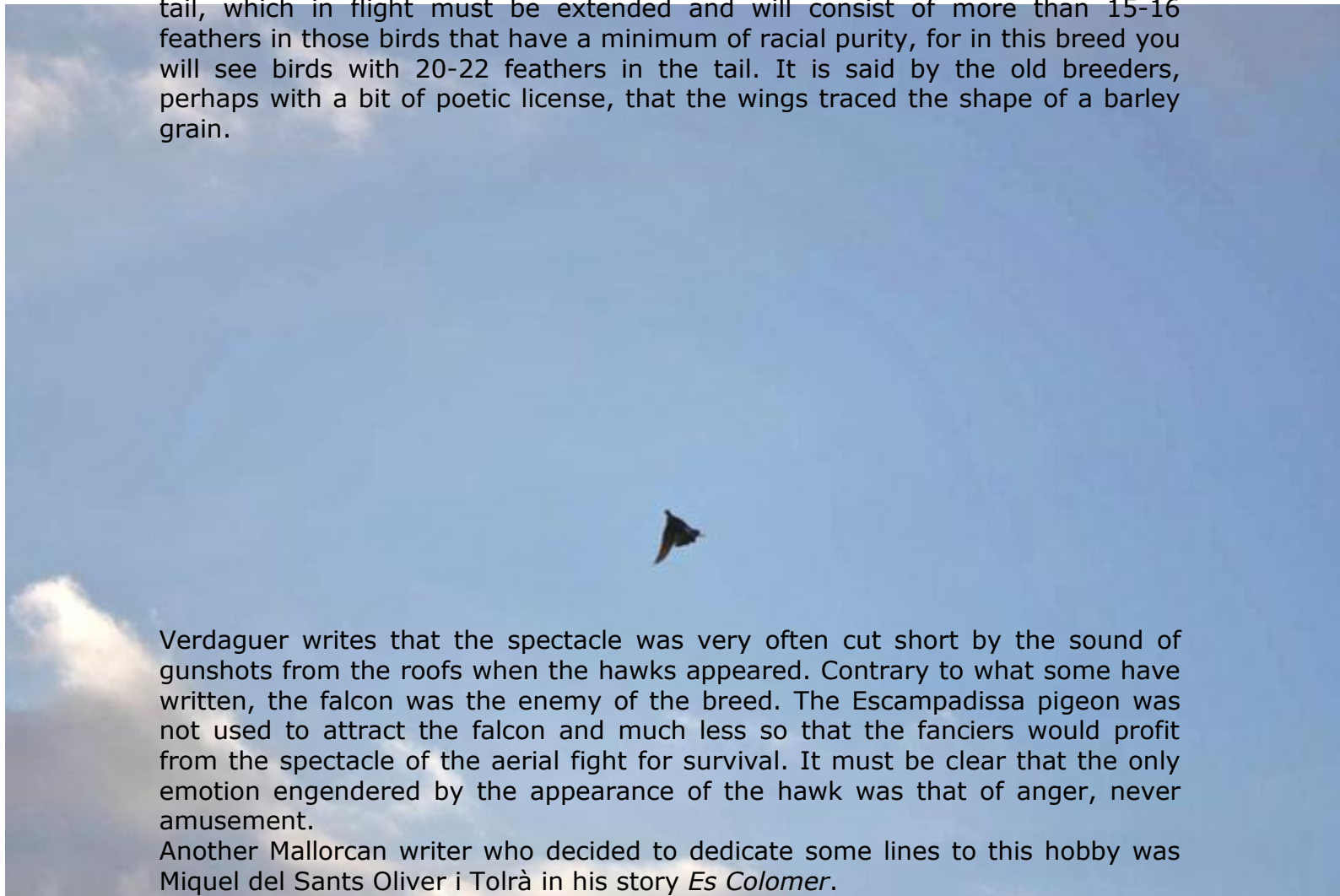
Màrius Verdaguer i Travessi (1885–1963) in his work *La ciudad desvanecida* (The Faded City) devotes two chapters, "Els coloms i el falcó" (The pigeons and the falcon) and "El darrer colomí del sitjar" (The last pigeon of Can Sitjar) to describe the spectacle, the flight of the Escampadissa pigeon.

Verdaguer wrote that at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, it was the custom to release the pigeons at noon, as it was then the workers left the factories and workshops to go to eat, and escape from their grim reality through the flight of these birds. This custom was so entrenched in Palma that it paralysed the city. "It is half-past-two in the afternoon and in the boulevards of Palma everybody looks at the sky, the workers in the factories go out into the street and in the midst of this commotion



the pigeons are scattered in the sky, making the *gra d'ordi* and climbing up until some are imperceptible to the eye of any human being”.

If we filmed an Escampadissa pigeon in full flight and shone a strobe light on it, we could observe in detail each of the movements and the path made by the feathers. What Escampadissers, breeders, call the *fer el gra d'ordi* describes the most distal feather tips of both wings seeming to be touched by the flow of the tail, which in flight must be extended and will consist of more than 15-16 feathers in those birds that have a minimum of racial purity, for in this breed you will see birds with 20-22 feathers in the tail. It is said by the old breeders, perhaps with a bit of poetic license, that the wings traced the shape of a barley grain.



Verdaguer writes that the spectacle was very often cut short by the sound of gunshots from the roofs when the hawks appeared. Contrary to what some have written, the falcon was the enemy of the breed. The Escampadissa pigeon was not used to attract the falcon and much less so that the fanciers would profit from the spectacle of the aerial fight for survival. It must be clear that the only emotion engendered by the appearance of the hawk was that of anger, never amusement.

Another Mallorcan writer who decided to dedicate some lines to this hobby was Miquel del Sants Oliver i Tolrà in his story *Es Colomer*.

This hobby persisted in robust health until the twenties, when the messenger pigeon was introduced and enjoyed protection and promotion of the state represented by the military. 1936, the date on which the Spanish Civil War began and divided completely Spanish society – signalled the almost total decline of this hobby in Palma City. At the end of the war some *palomares* (pigeon lofts) survived, but were no longer as abundant as they had been. In the post-war years, Palma City Council, with the aim of turning the city into a more civilised and healthy place, introduced measures to regulate the possession of domestic birds in the urban areas. In the beginning, pigeon lofts were unaffected, since keeping birds in the balconies and on low floors only was prohibited, but in the end rooftops were affected and consequently pigeon lofts.

It is worth mentioning that this breed in some cases was used together with the Mallorcan pigeon, *Borino* or *Alicantí* – breeds to which crosses were made – to obtain the so-called “tres comes” (triganino) or Majorcan Esbart Roller, which should never be confused with the breed that concerns us here and showed divergent attitudes of flight. So over recent years this hobby has been developing mainly in the towns and rural areas. There is no longer a link between

sophisticated society and this breed. Some writers like José Carlos Llop say that there are many cities where inhabitants have this pigeon.

Morphological characteristics

In describing the breed we are concerned with, we must consider that it is a medium-sized which, because of its abundant, fluffy plumage often seems larger but weighs between 300–350 grams, varying in length from 33–35 cm, males being the longer. The somewhat docile character of some individuals along with the length of their body do not make for a striking display in shows – they are unlikely to confront.

In describing its phenotypical characteristics we will begin with:

- The head of this pigeon, as established by the standard approved by the European Entente in 1994, should be relatively narrow and flat at the top. The forehead is slightly curved at the top and descends gently sloping to the peak.
- The eyelid should be fine in all cases. In white or mostly white individuals will be a fleshy colouration and in individuals with darker colourings will be a greyish colour.



- The eyes will be alive and colouration will also depend on the colour of the plumage of the bird. In the white or mostly white colourations the eye will possess a black or *veça* colour. In contrast in the other colourations a white pearl eye or "*ull empedrat*" is seen. In no case will orange or red eye colourings be accepted. In the *porillats* and in the greys and *gavinos* (grizzle) we will see a very white pearl colouration. (Note by Thomas Hellmann: *Porillats* are the reds that moult out to white. Same as in English Show Tips and Danish Dark Branders.)

- The beak is medium and straight, neither thick nor long. In some individuals the upper beak will be slightly longer than the lower without representing large changes in the evaluation of the bird. The colour of the beak will depend on the colour of the bird, so the white colourations and the *porillats* will have a light-coloured beak. Conversely, in the blue and *rovellat* (brander bronze) colour, the beak will be dark. The beak is supplemented by two nasal caruncles [wattles] that should be fine, smooth and never overgrown or overly generous. Birds whose wattles are rough, brawny or coral-like at an early age should not be considered true to type. These traits may appear in birds of advanced age.
- An important ornament that we can find in some blue dominant male individuals is the *ganya*, (a small dewlap) which is an extension of the skin of the most proximal part of the beak to the most cranial part of the neck. This feature is found in other breeds such as the Valencian Figurita.
- The neck will be on average a little longer and thicker in males than in females. As far as possible, strains with erect and loose necks should be

avoided, as they impart an exaggeratedly vertical profile which should be avoided. In times of heat or when the bird is prostrate in the lofts or on roofs, it will adopt a posture more upright than usual without indicating a racial defect.



➤ The wings are an important element in the breed, as they will have a loose plumage which should remain close to the body. Usually, the wings should remain above the tail. A curiosity to highlight is that in some of the Individuals one of the two wings will have some tendency to lower below the tail. Both elbows should neither protrude from the bird's chest nor be disengaged from it. This means that on warm summer days these characteristics will be modified. The tail feathers will be slightly longer than in other races, a feature that contributes greatly to the majestic flight.

➤ The legs of this breed will be shorter, as are the toes. The colouration of the nails should be the same as that of the beak. Consequently we can say that their colouration depend on the feather colour of the bird. The legs will be slightly flexed when the bird is at rest. In mating we will see the fiery males stand on tiptoe during courtship.

➤ In reference to the tail we must mention that it is one of the most differentiating and idiosyncratic parts of the breed. It should be long, flat and wide. Individuals should be rigorously selected for tails with more than 17 feathers. Some birds will possess 24 or 25 feathers in the tail,



which in order to maintain the elegance of the bird and its flight should not present a physical dissociation with the body. In such cases we would observe excessively long birds dragging and dirtying the tail. During flight a properly constituted tail will be open and synchronized with the other elements involved in the spectacular richness of its flight. Pigeons with excessively long tails will not be able to hold it, and carry it as a dead weight or in "shrimp" or "artichoke" form.

In another instalment we will discuss the character, flight, colourations and patterns cultivated in this breed.



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This is a publication by the online magazine www.aviculture-europe.nl
English edition ISSN: 2352-2445

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