

The English Carrier—King of Pigeons

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Promoting pigeons can be fairly routine business when talking to level-headed adults. It can be pretty exasperating when confronted by bird-haters. However, Pigeon PR becomes a whole different ballgame when the neighborhood kids stop by to “check out” our loft.

“Is that one a boy or a girl” seems to be the favorite query of four and five-year-olds.

“What is that bird doing on that other bird’s back?” asks an inquisitive seven-year-old. (I try to keep a straight



Photos by Steve Holden

A pair of English carriers in the author's loft.

A white English carrier overlooks his domain.



This black English carrier hen displays the large cere and wattle so highly prized by breeders.



face while explaining to Josh that the birds aren't fighting.)

Finally, a more noticing kid will spot our Carrier pigeons and the real fun begins.

"Why are those birds wearing muzzles?"

Already I know that the child finds this unusual bird anything but attractive. Does it bother me? How could it! Those enormous, walnut-shaped wattles do look more than a little like a muzzle. Still the question inspires me to plunge headfirst into my tribute to the Carrier—King of Pigeons. It goes something like this:

What's In a Name?

The English Carrier, at one point in history, actually did what its name implies. It carried messages. Now that doesn't mean that the carrier is the same breed as the homer (also a feathered messenger). Rather, the carrier is believed to have evolved from a now extinct variety known as the Horseman. The Horseman originated in Persia and was used as a messenger for many years. Although this breed was held in high esteem, it was no match for its larger, more powerful descendant.



These English carriers show why they're called "head birds."

exhibition pigeon.

Exactly when the carrier made its debut in America is not quite certain, although a New York Pigeon Show, held in 1879 and covered by *Harper's Weekly*, makes mention of the breed. The artwork done by Henry Stull indicates only a slight change in the Carrier standard over the years. Although Stull's illustration depicts eleven varieties in their entirety, only the carrier and another ancient breed, the Barb, are drawn as "head" birds. This is due to the fact that these breeds are not noted for their ornate feathering, but for unique facial features. Of course the most prominent feature of the Carrier is the enormous mound of flesh surrounding his beak. This flesh-colored wattle is not as large as the ones found in earlier specimens, and the shape has become somewhat more rounded. Yet the presence of this structure, more than any other single feature, denotes the quality of the bird. Another important earmark of the English Carrier is its eye cere, which, when ideal, should equal the size of a quarter. Both the wattle and eye cere look like they have been lightly coated with a white powder. Ugly? Maybe to some. Never to the enthusiast! The Carrier's individuality is the essence of its beauty.

It isn't difficult to imagine these large birds once delivering messages and flying great distances to perform such a task, for the body of a Carrier is lean and muscular. Carriers are tall, ranging from 17½ to 18½ inches from beak to tail, and weighing in the neighborhood of

twenty to twenty-three ounces. They are bred in a myriad of colors including black, white, blue-bar, red, yellow, dun and pied. (Pied birds are a colored bird with white markings often in the head area or scattered throughout the plumage.) It has been suggested that the Carrier shows best when fully developed. Authorities argue this point, of course. But certainly by three years of age the bird has developed to its fullest extent in those all important show characteristics—wattle and eye cere. In addition, judges survey color quality; good, erect carriage and whether or not the long beak closes properly.

At about this juncture in my description and tribute to the Carrier pigeon, I suddenly notice I'm alone. The neighbor kid has probably been lured home by lunch or the bleeps and blips of some video game cartridge. "Oh well, you can't win them all," I say winking at the noble creature perched above my head. "At least you know you're king." To the bird with the muzzle, that's all that really matters.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: In a recent article submitted to the American Pigeon Journal by Frank Barrachina it was stated that the ancient Horseman pigeon has reemerged. Mr. Barrachina sites a fancier, Jimmy Dollier of Scotland, as one prominent breeder. It is interesting to note, however, that the modern standard and the pictures of Mr. Dollier's birds bare no resemblance to the English Carrier as we know it. ●



Color variation on an English carrier.

The carrier reached great popularity with breeders in England where it really had its commencement. British fanciers ranked the breed among the most popular in the 1700s although over the years the bird surrendered its reputation as a flyer to become a highly prized