

The Black Alpine Pig in Extensive Mountain Farming Systems



Background and aim

Mountain farming in Alpine regions faces increasing pressure from land abandonment, vegetation encroachment and economic constraints. Robust, locally adapted livestock breeds can contribute to sustainable grassland management and diversified farm income. This practice-based pilot project evaluates the potential of the Black Alpine Pig (Schwarzes Alpenschwein, SAS) as a multifunctional livestock breed in extensive mountain farming systems.

Historical distribution

In the past, each region had its own variety of pig (there was no classification of breeds at that time). In 1827, naturalist Johann Rudolf Steinmüller divided these varieties into two main types: the numerous, heavy lowland types (pink in colour) and the various smaller mountain pigs, which were highly agile in the mountains thanks to shorter backs and longer legs. He grouped the latter under the umbrella term 'black Alpine pigs', as most of the animals were black.



Documented distribution according to Steinmüller and Staffe: **red**: Alpine pigs, **blue**: Burgundy pigs

Historical Sources

- Andereg Felix, 1898: *Illustriertes Lehrbuch für die gesamte Schweizerische Alpwirtschaft*
- Cassella P., Cassella O. 1880: *Manuale pratico per lo allevamento del maiale*
- Jaritz Günter, Salzburg 2014: *Seltene Nutztier der Alpen - 7000 Jahre geprägte Kulturlandschaft*
- Mascheroni Ettore, Torino 1927: *Zootecnia speciale, III. Suini*
- Nehring Alfred, Berlin 1886, *Katalog der Säugetiere*, p. 57-59
- Staffe Adolf, 1913: *Verbreitung des schwarzen Landschweines der südl. Ostalpen*
- Steinmüller Johann Rudolf: *Naturgeschichte des gemeinen Schweines und der verschiedenen Racen der Schweiz; Neue Alpina*, 1827
- Sturzenegger Robert, 1917, *Dissertation "Die Schweinezeit der Schweiz"*

Breed characteristics and management

The Black Alpine Pig is the traditional Alpine breed that has been re-established out of three relict populations found in remote Italian valleys on the Swiss border. It is distributed again in the alpine regions of Italy, Switzerland and Austria. To preserve its adaptive traits, animals are exclusively kept in mountain areas (in Switzerland from mountain zone 1 onwards). Key characteristics include long legs and a compact body, enabling excellent mobility in steep terrain, dark skin pigmentation reducing the risk of sunburn, and high cold tolerance with active behaviour even in snowy conditions. The breed is well suited for extensive free-range and alpine grazing systems.



Ecological contribution

Adapted over centuries to harsh mountain environments, the Alpine Pig contributes to ecological grassland management. In extensive outdoor systems, animals support the maintenance of open alpine pastures, help reduce vegetation encroachment, can assist in the control of problematic plant species such as bracken fern. The breed complements conventional ruminant grazing and enhances biodiversity-oriented land use.



Fattening, meat quality and marketing

Fattening starts only after full growth is reached at approximately 10–11 months of age, with slaughter at 14–16 months. Slow growth and alpine forage result in firm, compact meat with pronounced flavour and high culinary quality. Marketing is supported by a Europe-wide protected trademark, allowing premium positioning and short value chains.

Conclusions

When appropriately managed and marketed, the Black Alpine Pig provides high-quality culinary products and ecological benefits, offering an attractive additional income opportunity for extensive mountain farming systems.



EU-wide protected trademark

