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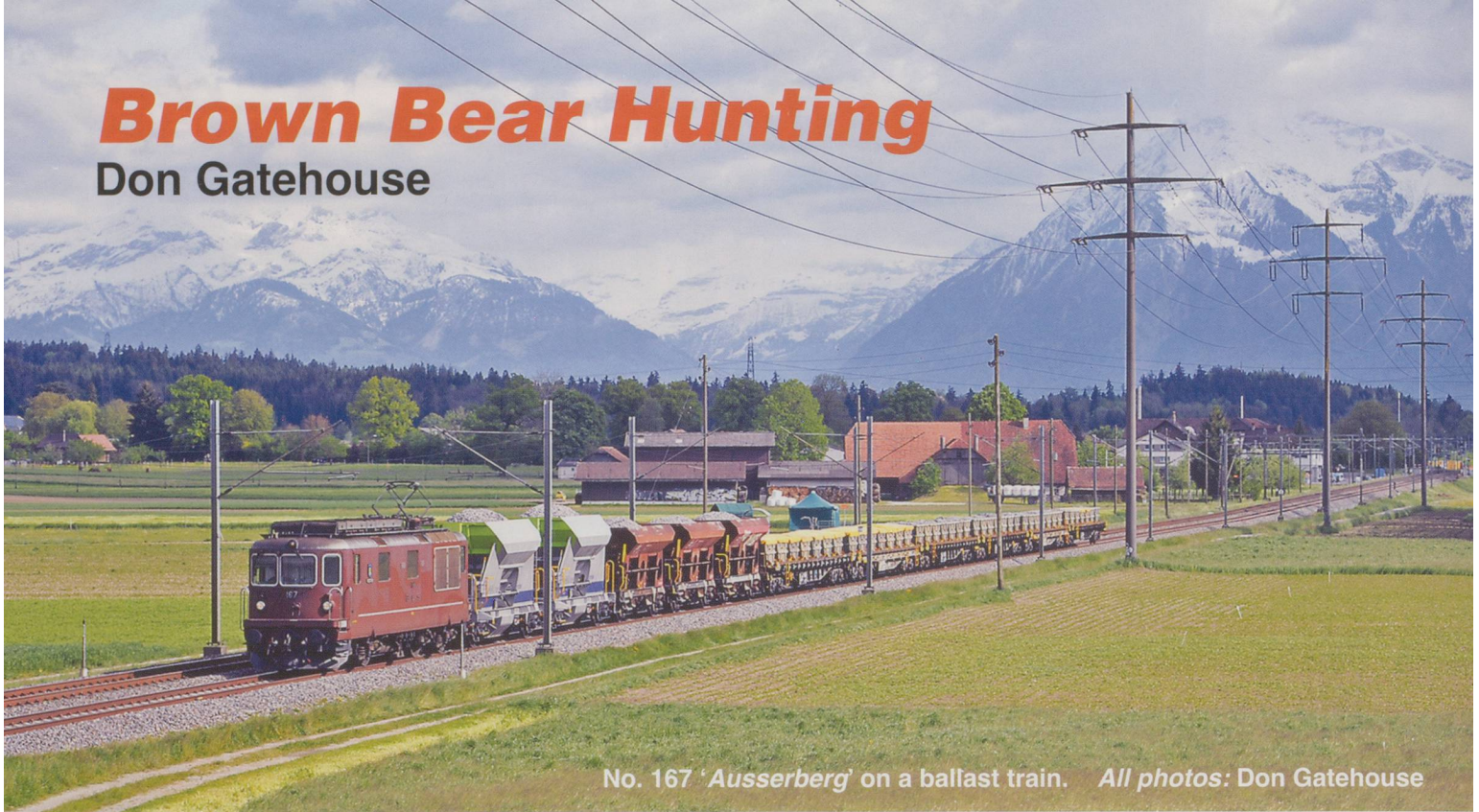
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Brown Bear Hunting

Don Gatehouse



No. 167 'Ausserberg' on a ballast train. All photos: Don Gatehouse

The BLS Class Re 4/4 (Class Re 425) standard electric locomotives were once seen on a whole range of both passenger and freight services. Built in batches by SLM and BBC between 1964 and 1983 the class of 35 were numbered 161 to 195, finished in a unique brown livery with chrome trimmings and all were named. The 'Brown Bears' or 'Browns' have developed quite a following over the years, but their progressive displacement from regular passenger diagrams has saddened a good many enthusiasts, who would seek out any opportunity either to travel behind a member of the class or simply view one in operation. By the end of 2013, the Kandersteg-Goppenstein and Kandersteg-Iselle push-pull vehicle shuttles provided the sole remaining regular passenger carrying work. For the really dedicated followers without a vehicle, you can actually hire a bicycle to enable a journey to be taken!

Since the start of the new millennium there have been numerous re-organisations and other key changes that have impacted on the workload of this unique fleet of locomotives. They range from the redistribution of roles between SBB and BLS, which was fully implemented in 2004, the delivery of Class Re 485 and Re 486

Bombardier TRAXX locomotives for BLS Cargo transit operations, and the opening of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel (LBT). Added to this, the recession in Europe clearly impacted on alp-transit freight and the demand for BLS Cargo traction, overall. The 'Browns' were clearly representative of the 'Old Guard' with much of their former front line work now allocated to the new generation. During my various visits to Switzerland I have always made a point of checking where and when I could best view a BLS 'Brown' at work, and it is pleasing to note that 2014 produced a noticeable positive change in their use on freight activities both far and wide. OK, I could simply sit at Spiez station and wait for examples to pass me by, but where is the adventure and challenge in that, I ask?


With Swiss domestic wagonload freight in the hands of SBB Cargo, you have to look to trainload operations and transit international freight services to provide the best opportunities. So, eyes down and look in for some notable examples. The two principal transit routes from Basel, either via Olten for the Lötschbergbahn to Domodossola, or via Brugg (AG), Rotkreuz and the Gotthardbahn to Chiasso, provide the more frequent



sightings. While most intermodal workings will employ the more modern versions of Bombardier TRAXX locomotives in their various guises, HUPAC do use BLS Cargo for certain shuttle services and that in turn provides regular work for pairs of 'Browns' at the business end. The group of regular HUPAC intermodal shuttles that operate between Rotterdam and Novara would still use Class 425 traction during 2014 for the journey through Switzerland. Several international logistics companies also employ BLS Cargo for their rail transit requirements, Ambrogio, LKW Walter and Northegger Transport, being three such established trainload operators. Automotive traffic has increased since 2013 and shipments to/from Italy will bring regular work on each transit route with trainloads of both cars (e.g. Fiat, Citroën, Ford) and vans (Citroën, Fiat), as well as the associated movement of return empty carriers. All this work will produce regular sightings of 'Browns' but BLS Re 465 locomotives will also feature on some services.

Other Lötschbergbahn sightings have included the trainload movement of white containers of refined sugar from France to Italy for Crystal Union Group and the return empties, as well as the occasional movement of steel coil between Germany and Italy. On the Gotthardbahn there is the train of distinctive white GCA milk tank-tainers used between Bettembourg, Luxembourg and Lodi, Italy each week. In addition, the export of steel wire in open wagons from Emmenbrücke, near Luzern via the Gotthard to Lecco Maggianico, Italy has been regular 'Brown' work during 2014. This latter freight train is routed via Luzern station, with the train 'topped and tailed' until it reaches Erstfeld, from where the locomotives are coupled to work as a pair up the north ramp, with banking assistance. On the domestic front, BLS 'Browns' have been seen as far afield as St Gallen, Genève and Chur on freight duties. The oil refinery at Cornaux used to provide regular work for the BLS 425s, but the bulk of the trainload petroleum operations are now handled by SBB Cargo. That said, block tank trains operating from and to Basel still provide sightings, be it the movement of fuel oil, motor fuel or kerosene, for example. During 2014, a BLS 'Brown' was to be found stabled at Chavornay each weekday morning. This was the locomotive for the RailCare AG Heineken Beer container service linking West Switzerland to Oensingen and onward to Felsberg via Chur. Alas, its revised afternoon

departure time did produce a frustratingly late evening arrival at the Graubünden destination than was previously the case, especially if you wished to catch it on camera.

So, there have been plenty of opportunities to sight a 'Brown' on a good variety of day-to-day work during 2014 - and without the need to hire a bicycle! Long may it continue and good hunting to all who give it a try. Also, if any SRS member requires more detailed information, the author can be contacted via the Members' Online Forum. 



1. No. 186 'Leissigen' with a Kandersteg shuttle.
2. No. 192 'Spiez' & 179 'Stadt Bern' on Intermodal duties.
3. New Fiat vans behind No. 181 'Interlaken' & No. 175 'Gampel'.
4. Steel wire from Emmenbrücke at Giubiasco.
5. Tanks of Kerosene pass Pratteln behind 167 & 174 'Frutigen'.
6. No. 168 'Baltschieder' near Ependes on the RailCare service.

