



KEEPING PHEASANTS

AS A HOBBY

Text and photos:
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Photo above: Siamese Fireback pheasant male (*Lophura diardi*).

ORIGIN AND LIFESTYLE OF THE WILD PHEASANT

Pheasants are wild gallinaceous birds all originating in Asia. One exception is the Congo peacock from Africa. (The pheasants also include game fowl and peacocks.)

Each species has its own characteristics and life habits. There are species that live in tropical rain forests, but there are species that live in the mountains, on cold plains. This is something to take in account when housing our pheasants (with or without a night coop, with or without heating).

Most species live in and around the mountains with a woodland vegetation, where they can find lots of berries, greens and seeds. It is of utmost importance to first consider the habits and living conditions of the species you want to keep. Only with proper housing will these beautiful birds show to their fullest, and reproduce.

PHEASANTS IN AVIARIES

In the past there were some "pheasant farms" which mainly bred the common pheasant (also known as ring-neck pheasant). The birds on these farms were bred for sport hunting. They were released en masse in the autumn in the fields and other areas to be shot for the sport. Some escaped from the hunters and that is why today we can see wild pheasants roam our fields and woods. These pheasants have also succeeded in reproducing themselves, even though they are not native birds.

The birds are also kept for their colourful feathers. Each year I see Prince Carnival walk again with the beautiful feathers of the Reeves's Pheasant at his cocked hat.

Most fans, however, keep pheasants because they are attracted by these special and very beautiful birds. If properly cared for, you can enjoy your pheasants for 10 to sometimes even 20 years.

THE HOUSING

I myself believe that your pheasants will only show to full advantage when kept in a fenced plot or a confined and 'safe' part of your garden, or in an aviary



covered with nettings. They are sometimes kept free ranging together with chickens, but then they have to be pinioned or at least wing-clipped. I have never been successful with it; they almost always find a way to escape. When choosing the species that we want to keep, we must observe if they can only be kept in a closed aviary, or also in an open aviary.

Left: Silver pheasant (*Lophura nycthemera*)

An open or closed aviary

An open aviary is a fenced plot or aviary without a coop. However, it is always necessary to create a place to keep the food dry and to provide your birds with a safe shelter to sleep off the wind and rain.

A closed aviary has a large and roofed coop, which could be heated in winter if necessary. When you wish to keep tropical species you must provide them with a larger coop, where you make sure the temperature remains above 5 degrees.

Which demands does the aviary have to meet?

You have to offer to the birds adequate shelter and shade in the pens by means of bushes and other natural cover. If several aviaries are side by side, it is worth boarding the sides so that the roosters cannot see each other all day long. You have to create an opportunity to take a sand bath at a sunny place in the run. Also, make sure that you use strong, welded wire fencing around the aviary, to prevent them escaping and also to keep out predators.

Which species can be kept together in the aviary

For most pheasant species, you can only put together but one couple. With 2 couples, even if they are other pheasant breeds, it almost always goes wrong. Sometimes you can - if there is enough space - put them together with other birds like doves, quails, sparrows and other songbirds. Sometimes parakeets are kept together with pheasants. Usually this will not be a problem.

PURCHASE OF STOCK

Often it is advised to start with 'simple' species. My opinion is that there is no simple species. (But there are cheaper or easy to grow species.) All pheasants are wild birds and need a lot of attention from their owner.

What to look for when buying
First you must know which kind you like best. Do not be tempted by the beautiful appearance of the bird, but look for the suitable bird (species) for you. Some species are very fiery and not everyone will appreciate that. Once you have made the decision which species you want and when the accommodation is ready, you can go and buy.



**Right: Swinhoe pheasant.
(*Lophura swinhoei*)**

Where to you buy from

Buy from a serious breeder and preferably unrelated birds.

Buy only pure-bred birds (very important!). There is a lot of rubbish for sale, so take care.

Buy only healthy birds. Look at the general condition; are the toes straight, isn't it missing a toe? Isn't it too thin, is the plumage clean and does it have a smooth, healthy skin? Are its eyes bright and is the throat clean?

I always look at the wing feathers too. Stripes indicate a defect or disease during the growth or the moult of these feathers. Do ask what the problem was.

Buy only ringed birds. Each serious breeder rings his birds.

Buy from enthusiast breeders, e.g. Aviornis members, and ask for the bloodlines. Get help from experienced breeders or buy or order your birds at a known Pheasantry. There you can see many varieties, with often the parent birds present and they have only pure-bred birds. Also you will be welcome with your questions and for assistance afterwards, thus these are the best addresses to purchase your pheasants.

Also the serious breeders will guarantee that you buy a pair. They often have tested their birds by means of feather DNA tests and will help you buy unrelated pairs.



Finally, ask whether you can take some food home with you for the first week so you can gradually change to your own food. Usually you do not even have to ask that.

**Left: Lady Amherst
pheasant, male.
(*Chrysolophus amherstiae*)**

Right: Head study of a Blue Eared pheasant, male. (*Crossoptilon auritum*).



FEEDING

There are three ways:

1. Various food available all day.

2. Pellets are available all day, and in the evening mixed grains and other treats are provided.

3. Measured or Selective feeding. If possible, this my favorite. Each morning I feed them a proprietary brand of Pheasant pellets until they eat no more. Then in the Evening, again pellets, plus Turtle dove mix and any little 'Extra's, e.g.

Meal worms etc. As soon as the first birds walk towards the drinking pots, or they become picky, then they have had enough and I stop feeding. The advantage in this system is that they don't get fat easily, are less picky and are more active during the day. This also gives the opportunity to observe them more closely and if they get sick or there is something wrong with them, you will notice this more quickly. Another advantage is that they become more Tame and confiding. This obviously increases the pleasure of keeping them and enhances possible breeding success.



Left: Common Pheasant male.

Pheasants also need greens. I grow my own lettuce and other leafy vegetables and carrots (to be grated). Also young nettle leaves will keep the pheasants healthy.

Grit and other mineral substances are another daily need. I use pigeon minerals red and white mixed.

I also enrich the feed regularly alternating with liver, garlic oil, wheat germ oil or sometimes with Roosvicee ®. I mix this sticky liquid with the grains and next I sprinkle some yeast over the sticky mass. This way I avoid crooked

breastbones and the pheasants get a beautiful sheen at their plumage.

Instead of yeast, also drugs or vitamins could be administered in this way.

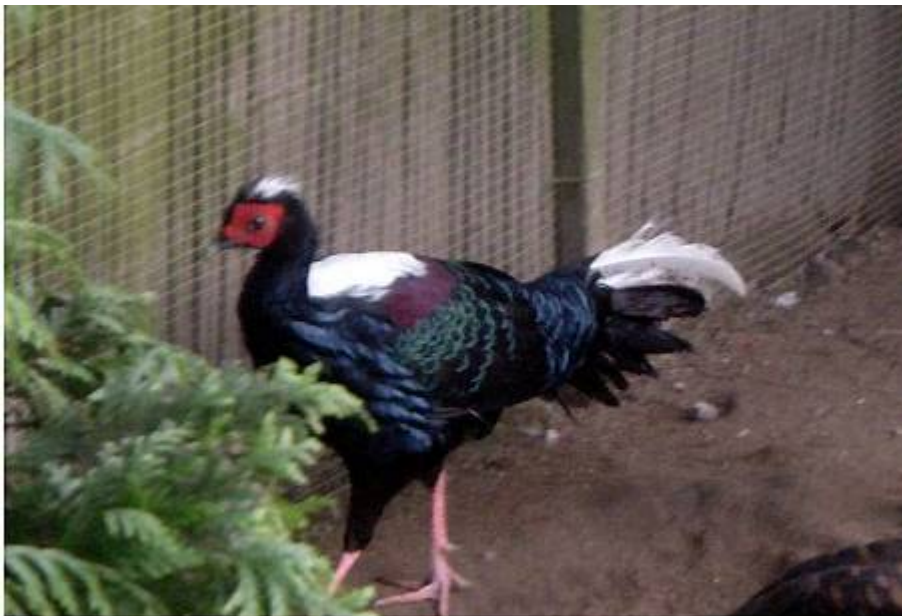
With the feeding of the pheasants we must bear in mind that they aren't chickens. Chickens' needs are very different than pheasants'. You had better buy special pellets of a known brand for ornamental poultry. These feeds are specially developed for ornamental pheasants and contribute to maximum development.

There are several different feeds for different ages, as starter pellets and then grower pellets for 3 to 4 weeks old until adulthood. Some brands even provide specialties like breeder pellets or pellets that ensure a perfect moulting process,

which creates optimal and glossing feathers. Never buy too much food at once. Food can also go bad or attract rats and mice.

Make sure that you do not buy pheasants feed intended for pheasants to fatten quickly!

Furthermore, I give them some chickens and (turtle) doves grain, this is primarily as an extra treat and to tame them.



Left: Swinhoe pheasant, male. (Lophura swinhoei)

DISEASES

The three points of main interest:

1. Prevention (the most important)
2. Recognition
3. Treatment.

Many diseases can be prevented through management and environmental measures.

What can you do?

Provide healthy and fresh food.

Provide clean water from a clean drinking pot.

Ensure good hygiene.

Ensure that there are no other potentially sick birds.

Ensure that the pens are not overcrowded.

Have the droppings checked from time to time for coccidiosis and worms.

Regularly take time to observe your animals.

How do we recognize a sick bird?

Always look at the droppings. If they are too watery and smelly, something is wrong. Healthy birds are active and alert, the eyes are bright and clear, the feathers are shiny, smooth and in order. A sick bird is less active, retracts its neck close to its body and has an unkempt appearance, they will hide, have pale combs and wattles, or have respiratory problems, including swollen sinuses and frequent sneezing. Also keep an open eye for scaly legs, lice and mites that cause anemia.

Right: Head study of a Common (Ring-neck) pheasant male.

Treatment

Get help from a vet who specializes in (ornamental) poultry. If your bird is treated by yourself, without consulting a vet, be sure of what you do. There are



many mistakes made by assuming that what is good for a chicken, is also good for a pheasant.

I myself do test the droppings regularly for worms and coccidiosis and if necessary, I treat them, without the intervention of a vet, with the medicines I buy at the vet's. In any case that I find something that I cannot explain, I go to the vet. It is always cheaper than waiting until it is too late!

Things which I do myself include suturing wounds (if not too big); splinting a broken leg; checking the droppings, the plumage, the skin and sometimes the beak.

BREEDING AND REARING

The breeding season is the best time of year for the pheasant keeper. It is important that the keeper has made sure that his pheasants are in super shape, which already begins in late summer, ensuring that all go through the moulting process and acquired the breeding plumage; they are full of energy but certainly not too fat. Give the breeding pairs time to get used to each other and to get accustomed to the pen or aviary where we want to breed them. If this is all achieved, then the breeder can enjoy the calling and courting of his birds that are then at their best.

There is nothing as beautiful and pleasant as having a pheasant with chicks in your aviary and – according to some experts - these chicks will be better accustomed to the natural pheasant's behaviour.



Above and right: Natural breeding.



Below, right: Chicks from the incubator.

Unfortunately, natural breeding doesn't always give good results. This can have many reasons, e.g. the environment is not quiet enough, the climate does not cooperate, etc. The pheasants can also be too young or not in good shape. To breed a sufficient number of chicks, we can collect the eggs and put them under a broody hen, for example, a Silky or Wyandotte bantam, or we incubate the eggs in an incubator. You need to make sure that the eggs are not too old and preferably marked, so you know exactly



from which pair the egg (and the chick) is. Never clean the hatching eggs with water, to prevent damage to the shell membrane (cuticle) and the egg pores. The cuticle plays an important role in the total defense mechanism of hatching eggs against the penetration of pathogens.



Above: Silver Pheasant (*Lophura nycthemera*).

Right: Head study of a Caucasus pheasant-type male.

For enthusiasts who want use chickens for breeding pheasants, I want to point out that also the pheasant chicks are not comparable to chicken chicks. They are and will stay shy, which is of course of vital importance with wild birds. They often walk away from the broody. They will be able to fly very quickly and can easily get lost. If I use a broody chicken hen, I put her in a run where the pheasant chicks cannot escape from. This is important because otherwise you will lose birds to a certain number to predators, or because the chicks cannot find their 'foster-mother', as they walked or flew too far away from her.



The pheasants that I have hatched in the incubator, I will have to rear artificially. I leave the chicks in the outcome tray for the first hours until they are completely dry and stand well on their legs. Then already the first selection begins. Chicks that are not well and show severe abnormalities are culled immediately. The remaining chicks are moved to a brooder where I can provide a good temperature by means of various brooder heaters. Here they stay for three weeks and are fed with starter pellets for ornamental poultry or game birds), to which I add some grains, ground with an old coffee grinder, some egg food and some 'universal' food.

I slowly reduce the temperature and when the chicks are 3 weeks old and have enough feathers, they are moved to another coop. In my case this is a loft. Here I have a heat lamp for piglets and many straw and sand on the floor so they can nicely hide, take a sand bath and can have a lot of exercise. In order to avoid squabbling, I blacken the cage slightly. In this loft they remain until they no longer lose the leg rings. Once they are so far that the rings firmly stuck, they go out into the young birds' run. Here they can grow till maturity and they stay here till I pair them and house them, or move them to other breeders.

Twice per month I check the manure of the young pheasants for worms and coccidiosis using a microscope. I only treat them if necessary.

PHEASANT SPECIES

There are several types of pheasant species and the most well-known are the Ruffed Pheasants: the Golden and Lady Amherst pheasant. Furthermore, the Long-tailed pheasants, as the Reeve's Pheasant and Common Pheasant. Then there are the Gallopheasants, as Swinhoe's pheasant and the silver pheasant, etc.

If you want to start with pheasants, join a club. A very good club is Aviornis. This association has its own approved leg-ring service where you can purchase the right leg rings at an agreeable price. There is also a lot of knowledge between the members, which they will happily share with new members.

Due to import stop, several pheasant species are getting rare. Also the crossing in-between various species has had a negative effect, the pure lines of some species being (almost) no longer available. To prevent the loss of these species and to keep them pure, the World Pheasant Association (WPA) initiated a special breeding program for a number of species. Young pheasants are mutually exchanged amongst the members and hopefully, this way, these species will not be lost.

THE CONSERVATION PROGRAM

The P5000 project is initiated under the wings of Aviornis. It concerns the purity of the Golden pheasant and Lady Amherst pheasant, which is very bad. Fortunately, and maybe just in time, a number of birds were collected, which because of their origin have a reasonable chance to be pure. Both parents and offspring are carefully recorded in a database to maintain and maximize genetic variation. The offspring of these ruffed pheasants are ringed with special ring numbers from the 5000 series and are divided among the participating members. These members see to it that there will remain enough pure pheasants. (The pure Lady Amherst pheasants are very rare or perhaps even no longer found in Europe.) So try to only keep purebred birds.

Enjoy your pheasants!

Below: Bornean Crested Fireback (*Lophura ignita nobilis*).

