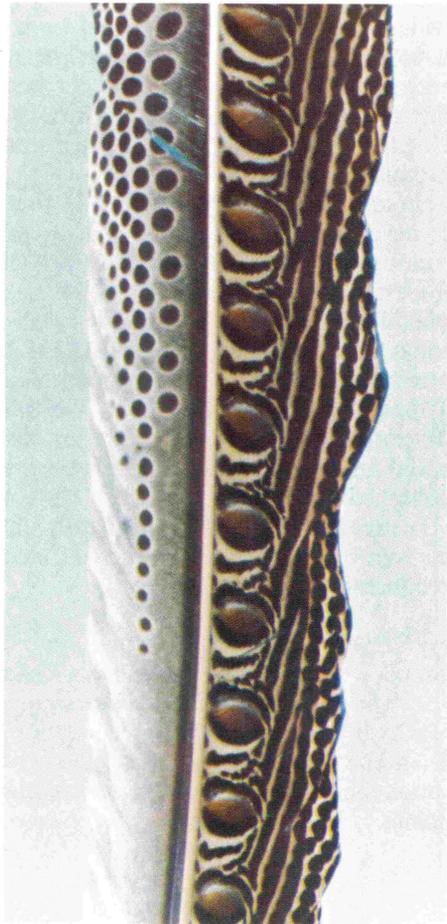


# Malay Great Argus

by Francis Billie



Close-up feather details of the Argus Pheasant.

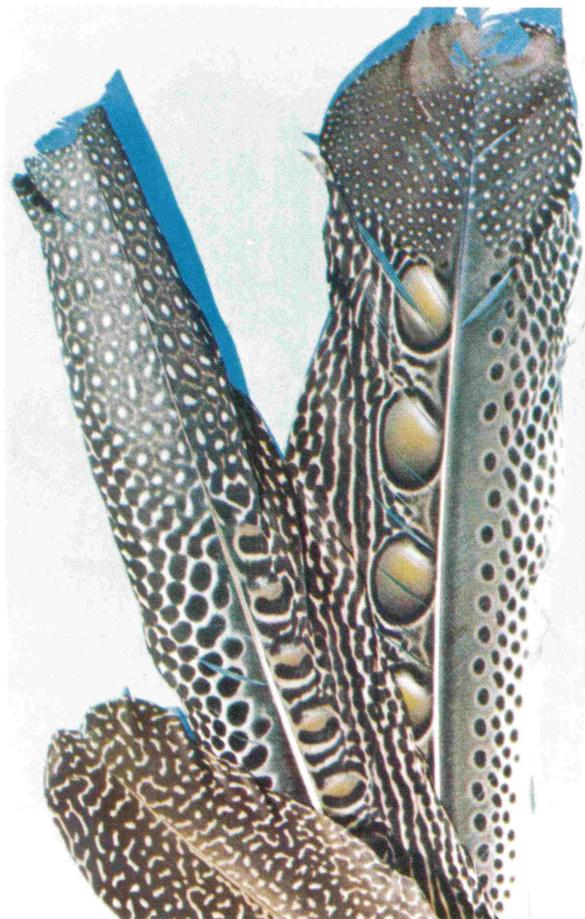
The Argus Pheasant is at times one of the most ornamental members of the entire Pheasant Family. Adult males can measure six to seven feet from the tip of the beak to the tip of the tail, although most of this length is taken up by their tail feathers. In coloration the Argus is rather dull and plain, it is only during its marvelous courtship display that it manifests its great beauty and elaborate markings.

There are two genera of Argus each containing two subspecies. In the genus *Rehinartia* there is Rheinart's Crested



Argus Pheasant, male

photos by Francis Billie



Argus Pheasant, hen

Argus, (*Rheinartia ocellata ocellata*), found in Vietnam and parts of Laos, and the Malay Crested Argus (*Rheinartia ocellata nigrescens*) a rare, little known bird found in various parts of the Malay Peninsula. At present, the status of the bird in Vietnam is unknown, but the Malayan subspecies has been observed in the wild state during a recent expedition in the area.

The second genus is Argusianus which contains the Malay Great Argus (*Argusianus argus argus*) and the Bornean Great Argus (*Argusianus argus grayi*). These birds are found in the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Borneo. The Malay Argus is the only one that I have in my collection and it is the most impressive pheasant as far as plumage, pattern, and courtship display are concerned.

The Malay Argus male is five to six feet long of which four feet is tail. The bird has a black crown and a smallish crest, the nape and hind neck are covered with narrow blackish feathers, the body is predominately dark grayish brown dotted with black and buff. The long feathers of the upper wing coverts are a dark reddish-brown marked with pale grayish-red. The secondary wing feathers are the Argus' most notable feature. They are far longer than the primaries and are almost square-tipped; these feathers have a very intricate pattern that includes a chain of large and beautiful ocelli (eyes) each being a mixture of purplish-brown shading into green, yellow and gray tints. Each ocellus is encircled by black and buff and they are separated by buff areas marked with black. These large eyes or ocelli seem to produce a reflection but, in fact, do not as they have no metallic colors at all. The tail feathers are interesting also with the longest ones being black with shafts that are gray on the one side and reddish brown on the other. Both sides of the web are decorated with a white spot surrounded by a black edge. The hen Malay Argus has a more simple plumage in dark brown barred with chestnut and black. She has an area of naked skin on the neck and head, and a small crest. Her tail and wing feathers are quite large but still within a normal range.

The courtship of the Malay Great Argus is something to behold. I have had the pleasure of watching this display in my own collection. As the hen approaches the male, he drops his wings in a lateral display and goes past her. He then turns toward her, bows his head low and spreads his wings upward till the tips touch forming a huge funnel. The upper rather than the under side of the wings are visible to the hen and she can see the beautiful patterns of the rows of ocelli. His tail goes

back and forth and he vibrates his plumage so the ocelli appear to revolve. During this display the male's head is hidden from view.

It is interesting to note that the Argus display is not like that of the Peacock Pheasants in that the frontal display is not made with the tail feathers but is formed with the wings. It is also interesting that the Argus' very specialized secondary wing feathers are about twice as long as its primaries which is the reverse of what is true for the other pheasants. Argus don't reach breeding maturity until they are about three years old but the young Argus can usually be sexed since the unusually long secondaries of the males begin to show at an early age. The hens, of course, don't have the long secondaries. There is also some differences in markings as the young males acquire distinct patterns on the mantle and wings. The male Argus reaches sexual maturity at three years of age but his magnificent, ocellated wing secondaries will get longer and longer after each molt up to the age of six or seven years.

Breeding Argus in captivity is not necessarily easy but it is not too difficult either. When conditions are right the Argus will mate and the hen will lay a clutch of two eggs. If left alone she will incubate the eggs and raise the babies with no fuss. She is a good mother. If the eggs are taken for artificial incubation, she will lay two or three more clutches. Time of incubation is about twenty-five to twenty-seven days.

Food is no problem for the Argus Pheasants as they will eat almost everything. They like fruit, berries, seeds, and insects. I like to feed a good, commercial gamebird food, some meal worms, boiled egg, spanish peanuts — which my Argus dearly love — as well as fresh greens and some fruit.

*[Editor's note: At the time our Gamebird Editor, Francis Billie, wrote the above article, he had an interesting little house pet — a baby Malay Great Argus. One egg was laid very late in the year so Mr. Billie incubated it alone in a small incubator in the house. When the little fellow hatched, he adopted Francis and Erma as parents. The baby Argus is a precocious little fellow and by the age of a week old could fly up to roost on Francis' head. In fact, he tries to nestle down in Francis' hair as he would amongst his true mother's feathers. The chick will fly off his heady perch, tour the living room on foot and fly back atop Mr. Billie's head. I hope the rare young pheasant doesn't become addicted to television or become a tasty snack for the resident dachshunds. And, should you meet Mr. Billie in the near future, I hope you ignore the strange deposits sometimes seen in his hair. ed.]*

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