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Formosa Land of Poor Odds for the Mikado and Swinhoe

by Francis Billie

The island of Taiwan (Formosa) is about three hundred miles long and one hundred miles wide. Rising almost from the shores is a continuous chain of mountains running north and south. The highest peak reaches 13,113 feet in elevation and many other peaks are over 8,000 feet high. Many parts of these rugged mountains are covered with thick forests and a dense undergrowth of bamboo and rhododendrons. Some areas are so steep and rugged as to be almost impassable for people so they are still rather isolated.

This small mountainous island off the coast of China is home to three pheasants, two of which are endangered — the Mikado (*Syrnaticus mikado*) and Swinhoe's pheasant (*Lophura swinhoei*). The Swinhoe inhabits the lower ranges of the mountains, around 3,500 feet, while the Mikado generally stays between 6,000 feet and 10,000 feet. Because of this difference in accessibility the Swinhoe was discovered first, in 1862, and the Mikado was unknown until 1906 when a Mr. Goodfellow spotted two mikado tail feathers used as ornamentation by a mountain aborigine.

The Swinhoe has the particular honor of standing somewhere between the Kalij and Firebacked pheasants and combines into one species, characteristics of both. Indeed, Dr. Jean Delacour has placed the entire Kalij group together with the Firebacks and Bulwer's Watted Pheasant into one all-encompassing genus, the *Lophura*.

Although not much is known of the Swinhoe's habits in the wild (probably the first ones ever seen in the wild by a European were observed in 1967 by Philip Wayre) they are not very difficult aviary birds. They are undoubtedly monogamous in the wild state although at times, it is felt, a male may take two

females. In captivity two hens are habitually allotted to one male for the purpose of protecting the hens from the male and also because the male is most likely to fertilize the eggs of both hens. Even when kept in pairs the male is not normally vicious although there are enough exceptions to that rule to warrant a large, heavily planted aviary so the hen can take cover if the cock becomes too aggressive.

Swinhoe's have the advantage of being early breeders. The male will begin to display on the warm days of February and early March. He indulges in the usual wing-whirring of the genus but has some additional oddities in his repertoire. The facial skin becomes swollen and brilliant red and the top of the comb rises like horns on each side of the bird's head. The excited cock will bow down, make two or three enormous leaps, rush up to the front of the hen and with a flourish will flatten out laterally, spreading his tail, lowering his wings and expanding all his plumage to present as grand and gorgeous a spectacle as he is able. The hen invariably darts away unimpressed.

Despite the hen's apparent non-chalance, eggs begin to appear about mid March. Six to ten eggs form an average clutch and the incubation period is twenty-five days. The chicks are active and hardy if kept scrupulously dry and clean. Any good brand of gamebird crumbles form the mainstay diet of the Swinhoe's and a moderate amount of greens should be fed.

Swinhoe's pheasants do best in large, well planted aviaries that have a well constructed shelter they can use during bad weather. They nest on the ground, usually in a darkish sheltered corner, but prefer to roost on perches a few feet above the ground.

In 1964 the Taiwan authorities declared that the Swinhoe's pheasant was in danger

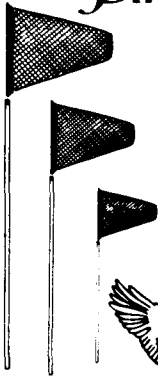


Mikado Pheasant, *Syrmaticus mikado*



Swinhoe's Pheasant, *Lophura swinhoii*

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of extinction in its mountain home. Fortunately, the birds have done well in captivity and there seems to be a self-sustaining population in aviaries in Europe and America. In 1967 thirty birds were taken to Taiwan where nine pairs were set up in aviaries and the remainder were released into an appropriate wilderness area.

Unfortunately, the Swinhoe's pheasant is on the verge of extinction in its natural habitat. Fortunately it is a fine aviary bird that has proven adaptable and prolific in captivity. There are enough Swinhoe's in collections all over the world that with careful husbandry the species should continue indefinitely.

The story of the Mikado pheasant is not a great deal different from that of the Swinhoe's. The Mikado inhabits a rougher, steeper, and higher portion of the mountains of Taiwan so it is naturally a less familiar bird. It resembles other high-altitude pheasants in several ways including its food, its heavy, thick-necked appearance, and its slow, deliberate actions. It also has rather thin tarsi and much longer toes than any other pheasant of similar size. This may be an adaptation to its environment of cliffs, precipices, and rocky ledges where a "toe hold" would be a definite asset towards survival.

After its discovery in 1906 various people set out to collect examples of the Mikado. By 1907 Lord Rothschild described the species using the skin of an adult male. The early studies placed the Mikado in a taxonomic position intermediate between the *Phasianus* and the *Syrmaticus* and it was given the generic designation *Calophasis* (from Greek meaning "beautiful pheasant"). Later studies and more complete anatomical investigations showed that the Mikado was closer to the genus *Syrmaticus* and it was placed therein by Beebe in 1922 and by Delacour in 1951.

Six years after he discovered the new pheasant Mr. Goodfellow set out to capture some live specimens. Surprisingly enough he succeeded in trapping eleven birds, eight males and three females and got them to England alive.

The birds hung on and a few young were raised but all of the imported Mikados died before the species was firmly established in captivity. No more Mikados were imported until the 1920s. This second shipment of Mikados included a few wild-caught birds and some that had been aviary raised in Japan by Japanese aviculturists who raised a fair number of them. From that time in 1920 or 1921 the Mikado has been in European aviaries and, dating from a little later, in American aviaries.

Although the Mikado has done extremely well in adapting itself to lower altitudes, artificial diet, and various other aviary living conditions, it has never become really abundant. The captive population in Europe and America has always been rather small but enough Mikados are raised each year so the species holds its own and even increases by a few. In 1950 a census taken in the United States showed only twenty-five Mikados in American aviaries and over half of them were males. Fortunately, a renewed interest and better husbandry techniques have prevailed so that now there are many more Mikados than there were in 1950. In fact, in 1969 one hundred and forty young Mikados were raised at the Pheasant Trust in England.

As the captive population gains in strength and numbers, the wild population is declining steadily. It may become extinct unless the Taiwan government takes steps to create and maintain one or two wildlife reserves in the high mountains where the Mikado still exists in a few rugged inaccessible areas.

In captivity the Mikado requires much the same care as the other pheasants including large, well planted aviaries that are well drained. A damp floor is very hazardous to young pheasants of any sort. The Mikado seems to be adversely affected by dampness more than other pheasants. The natural habitat of the Mikado is a damp, rainy, misty mountain covered with timber and a thick undergrowth of dwarf bamboo. One would think the bird wouldn't mind dampness but as recently as twelve years ago (1967) Mr. Philip Wayre was informed by native workers in Taiwan that the Mikado builds a nest two or three feet above the ground. To test this theory, in 1969, Mr. Wayre, at the Pheasant Trust, provided two pairs of Mikados with nest boxes three feet above ground in addition to their usual nesting cover. Both hens chose the elevated box which suggests that the Mikados, even in a wet environment, prefer to remain dry.

A second hazard that Mikado keepers run into is the seasonal viciousness displayed by the male. The cock will go along with his mate in great harmony and peacefulness for many months and will then suddenly change his attitude for a short while. During this period the hen is in mortal danger. It is at this time, usually spring and summer, that breeders lose their hens. The only practical way to overcome this difficulty is to have large pens with plenty of room for the birds. In the pens there should be several large piles of dense brush, preferably some sort of evergreen, into which the hen can retreat. The brush must be thick enough so the hen

can bury herself well out of reach of the cock. As the male's moods are not positively predictable, the brush cover should be kept in the pens all year around, not just at breeding season.

If your mikados are not lost to dampness or aggressiveness they should be fed the standard commercial gamebird crumbles or pellets but they must also have an *abundant* supply of greens. They need more greens than perhaps any pheasant except maybe the tragopans. Good clean greens (lettuce, cloves, finely chopped grass etc., etc.) are a daily necessity for Mikados if they are to be healthy, happy, and prolific. Although some Mikados have been raised on the standard feed without greens, they are the exception and the addition of greens will greatly enhance a breeding program.

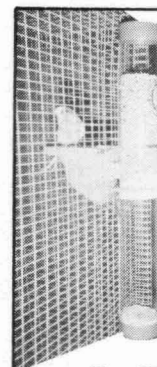
There doesn't seem to be any fixed rule regarding setting up breeding stock. Some breeders use one cock with one hen. Others run two or three hens with each male. All of these combinations seem to work. Of course, the more birds to a pen the larger the pen must be. Each bird should have a least 100 square feet. The shelter portion of the pen should be large and dry and should have lots of roosts and should contain plenty of dry brush and other cover. When pheasants are put into

pens they should all be introduced at the same time to help prevent territorial fighting. If a second hen is put into a pen already containing a pair she runs considerable risk of being killed. Even the original female can be guilty of extreme aggression.

Mikado hens begin laying during March and produce extremely large eggs that are nearly white. The clutches are rather small, averaging about seven eggs. The hens will often lay two or three clutches per season. The incubation period is about twenty-seven days in length. The rearing techniques for young Mikados are about the same as for most other pheasants with perhaps the addition of extra greens as has been mentioned. Mikados are rather hardy and if they have decent shelters don't seem to mind the cold.

On the island of Taiwan there are three native species of pheasants, the Formosan Ring-neck (*P. c. formosanus*), the Swinhoe (*L. swinhoei*) and the Mikado (*S. mikado*). Of the three, two are endangered — the Swinhoe and the Mikado. The future of these two birds is dependent upon captive breeding. Luckily, they are both wonderful aviary birds. They are beautiful, not too difficult to maintain and breed, are quiet and will live together in peace and harmony given suitable condi-

tions. Aviculturists have a huge responsibility with regard to these species but most of the difficulties have already been worked out. All that is needed now is the dedication of a larger number of aviculturists and the future of these very fine birds is assured. No doubt many members of the A.F.A. and other readers of this magazine will respond.



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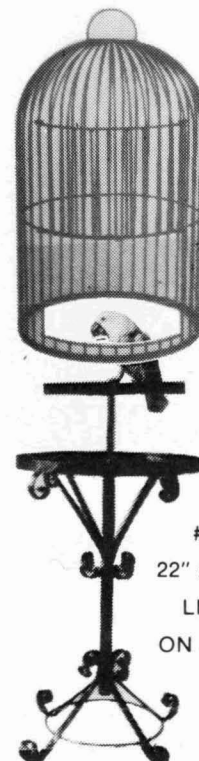


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