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No Ordinary Chicken . . . the Red Junglefowl

by Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California

In Delacour's *Pheasants of the World*, seventeen pages are devoted to the junglefowls and William Beebe's *Pheasants* contains fifteen pages on them, so you see, folks, that is no ordinary chicken on the front cover. It is a broody red junglehen. The red junglefowl is probably the single most important avian species in the history of man. Delacour lists four distinct species of junglefowls but maintains that all domestic breeds of poultry are descended from the red, *Gallus gallus*. The red junglefowl subspecies range from northwestern India through Assam, Burma, Malaya, east to Indo-China and the extreme south of China.

The wild junglefowl is an outstanding game bird, wary, cunning and strong, according to Delacour, and its flesh is excellent for the table. It has not much been considered as a game bird probably due to its close resemblance to domestic barnyard fowl. The ring-necked pheasants, on the other hand, have been established as game birds all across Europe and north America.

Junglefowls are inhabitants of warm countries in Asia and the Pacific. They live in small flocks or family groups most of the year with one cock keeping several hens. All male pheasants are protective and pugnacious being very inclined to do battle with an intruding cock. The junglefowl cocks are among the most violent and vicious of the pheasant genera and it is this trait that has produced the domestic fighting cocks that are so popular in many parts of the world. Even here in California many fighting birds are bought and sold at prices that would raise the eyebrows of any parrot breeder. Even though cock fighting is illegal here many fights occur and, regrettably, much money is wagered.

Junglefowls in captivity are easy to keep. Their constant need for scratching, however, demands rather large

aviaries as they will totally destroy the grass in smaller pens. At Cleres, France, Delacour was very successful keeping junglefowls in large enclosures along with other pheasants such as tragopans, monals, argus, and eared pheasants. The various species never objected to the junglefowl's presence and the junglefowl never interfered with the larger pheasants.

There is a distinct difference between the wild junglefowl and its domesticated descendants. The differences in appearance and behavior have been eloquently described by William Beebe who wrote, ". . . the pair of birds which arrived at the London Zoo in 1912 were almost the first real wild Junglefowl I have ever seen in captivity. Dignity was absent; the carriage was that of an untamable leopard; low-hung tail, slightly bent legs; heads low, always intent, listening, watching; almost never motionless, but winding in and out of the shrubbery, striving to put every leaf possible between themselves and the observer! To my mind, they fulfilled every ancestral requirement much more satisfactorily than the usual Junglefowl type. It would take more than one generation to tame them. They were wild as the pheasants of the Himalayas. Dignity and high-bred carriage they doubtless had, but it was reserved for their kind; for the combats and the courtships of their own haunts, not struttings and steppings while mankind looked on."

Unfortunately, at present, I don't see much interest in the various wild junglefowls. They are wonderful wild birds and deserve the close attention that many pheasant breeders are giving to the junglefowl's more exotic relatives. Let's hope this situation remedies itself and the various species of junglefowls take their rightful place in aviculture. ●

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