

# Pheasants

## a beginner's guide to husbandry

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Including peacocks and jungle-fowl, there are 48 species of pheasants. All but one are Asian, the exception being the Congo peacock, *Afropavo congensis*, which is from Central Africa. Given the time allowed, I will attempt to lead you in the general direction of propagation for this group of birds. It is a very general direction because requirements vary greatly within this group. Some do well left alone in pairs or trios and others may not be housed together requiring artificial insemination for any success in breeding.

Pheasants do well in large enclosures (200 square feet plus), but each individual must build to fit his space and species' needs. As pheasants are not chewers, it is possible to build lasting aviaries out of wood framing. Netting may be wire or polythene/nylon. If heavier metal wire is used, it should not be stretched tight as some species have strong emergency flight response and loose wire may help prevent injury should they hit it on the wing. In addition, wire type will vary according to the predators (raccoons, coyotes, dogs, cats, etc.) and pests (sparrows, starlings, rodents, etc.) present in your area making either stronger netting or wire with smaller openings necessary. Cement footings are also desirable to help eliminate pest and predator problems.

The amount and type of shelter necessary will vary depending on your geographical location and the species kept. In the warmer climates, protection from rain and sun is usually sufficient, however, in the colder climates, a completely enclosed area is preferable and a heat source may be necessary for the tropical species. Most people's conception of pheasants has them flightless but they do fly and most species will perch off the ground, so perches high up in the shelters will give them further protection from the elements.

Perches should be large, at least four inches in diameter. Pheasants prefer a covered or secluded spot for nesting. This can be provided with a nest box, lean-to or brush pile of eucalyptus or conifer branches.

If you are planning to build a complex of aviaries for pheasants, double wire is not necessary as with psittacines but a sight barrier about 24 inches high will help to eliminate

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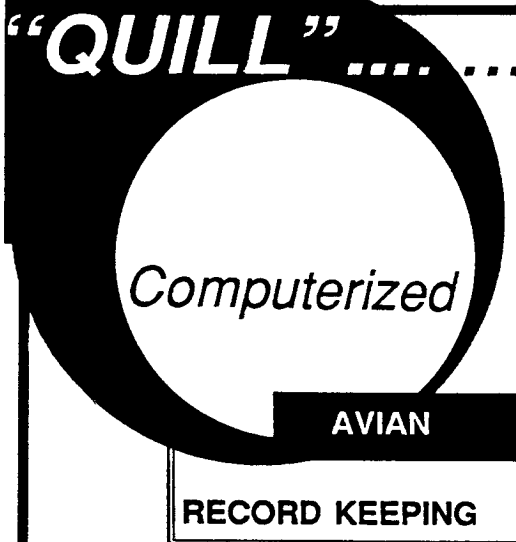
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spacing and aggressive behavior among males. Enclosures constructed in an area with good drainage will do well with grass or planted ground cover for floors. A thick layer (six inches or more) of coarse sand is preferable if water is a problem.

Planted aviaries are always more pleasing to look at and more natural for the birds, however, some pheasants are highly destructive. Monals and eared pheasants are diggers and will damage the root systems of plants if they are not protected. A pile of rocks can look natural and at the same time protect roots from the birds. You should also keep in mind that some plants are toxic to birds. Trees, strong bamboo and heavy grasses can be established before introducing the birds into the aviary. Vines can be started outside the aviary and grown over the netting. Once birds are in the aviary, plants can be introduced in pots to test them. Birds, like people, are particular. They will eat some plants and not others and what one eats another will not. You just have to get the right combination of plant and bird so don't give up.

Some species will do quite well feeding on the prepared diets available today. Maintenance crumbles and breeder crumbles are available from several manufacturers. The breeder crumbles have a higher protein and lower carbohydrate content for conditioning of stock. Other species require a more varied diet. Approximately 50 percent of their diet should be fruits, vegetables, live food, etc. Birds should be switched gradually in early to mid-February to a breeder crumble. Greens can be offered — grass clippings, lettuce, chickweed, chard or alfalfa. Make sure that they are pesticide free.

Fresh feed and water should be supplied daily in clean receptacles. Even dry crumbles should be given in daily amounts. This helps to eliminate possible contamination by rodents and dry crumbles that have gotten wet are a good place for disease to grow.

Most pheasant breeders do not allow their birds to raise their own young. Both broody hens and incubators are used for the purpose of incubation. Many brands and types of incubators are available today. There are still air models and forced air models. They come with or without automatic turners. They range in price from less than one hundred dollars to several thousand dollars. Study before you buy. Check with

other breeders to see what they are using and if they are happy with it. If they aren't, why aren't they? Do not jump into a large, expensive model until you find out if pheasant breeding is for you. When you do make your selection, study it. Read the manual, get it set up and running properly before breeding season instead of waiting until you have the eggs in your hand. You should try to set it up in a room that is cool and maintains a fairly steady temperature.

If you choose to use broody hens, buy your stock from a breeder who uses them for this purpose. Not all hens will make good brooders. Raising these for a year or two would assist you in selecting the best to brood your pheasants. A good broody hen can be a reliable and acceptable alternative to an incubator and a lot less expensive. Changing their diet as you do the pheasants' as breeding season comes on will assist in shifting them onto the same cycle. Remember to quarantine these birds as you would others. Diseases they have will transfer directly to the chicks they raise.

The start of the breeding season is affected by diet, length of day, weather and the age of your stock. Once breeding season starts, hens will generally lay every other day. Eggs should be collected at least once a day and more often during warm weather. You can hold eggs in a cool, dry place for three to five days before placing them in the incubator or under a hen without affecting hatchability. They should be turned daily during this waiting period. Eggs from different species may be held and incubated together. Eggs can be candled at five to seven days to determine fertility. Infertile eggs should be removed.

Chicks can be left with broody hens upon hatching or moved to a brooder. If left with a broody hen, watch to make sure that they settle in and go to her for protection. Artificial brooders should be set at 100° and dropped one degree per day. Chicks should be able to get away from the heat source if they care to. Feed and water should be offered in very shallow bowls. Placing pebbles or marbles in a shallow water dish will help to prevent chicks from drowning.

Egg eating can sometimes be a problem. Usually it is the male that develops this habit. A covered nest site used by the hen and prompt col-

lection of the eggs will usually prevent him from getting the habit but, once acquired, it will probably never stop. Most pheasants lay every other day, so if you have a male with this problem, you should remove him on the egg laying days, replacing him on alternate days to fertilize the next egg.

This final section should apply to all of your birds, not just pheasants.

Study the species you are thinking of purchasing. Read about them. Talk to breeders about them. Root out all the information you can and study first.

Species should be selected according to your ability to house them and care for them, not your ability to purchase them.

Know the breeder or dealer you are buying from. If necessary, go to another party to get unrelated stock.

Buying young stock can cause delays in production but they usually will not be someone else's problems.

See before you buy, if possible.

New birds should always be quarantined. Thirty days is sufficient if no unusual behavior or disease problems have been found. During this quarantine period, send two fecal samples to a veterinarian or lab to be cultured and checked for parasites. If a problem is found, treat the problem and check again to be sure it has been resolved.

Get to know your birds as individuals. Changes in behavior and odd physical movements are often your first clue to health problems.

Find a good veterinarian you feel comfortable with and get to know him/her. Get a feeling for what he means when he says "bad" and let him know what you mean when you say "bad". Take him out to dinner.

If you think you have a problem, don't treat it out of hand, get a veterinarian to diagnose it and treat it according to his recommendation. It may seem less expensive to do it yourself, but one mistake could cost more than you could save on five years of vet bills.

Here are some of the species you might consider if you are getting started with pheasants: Golden, Lady Amherst's, Silver, Ringnecks, Reeves', Elliot's. These birds are usually readily available, not as expensive as the rarer types and are more tolerant of a variety of conditions as long as proper food and housing is provided.

In closing, I have this final recommendation. Study, prepare and then purchase. ●

Photos by George A. Allen III, Salt Lake City, Utah



Male Silver pheasant (*Lophura nycthemera*). Silvers are among the easiest ornamental pheasants to keep and breed.



This very attractive hen is an Elliot's pheasant (*Syrmaticus ellioti*). See outside back cover for photo of the handsome male.



Lady Amherst's pheasant (*Chrysolophus amherstiae*)

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