



Ray Sexton with a *Saurus* crane.

AFA Visits . . .

The Aviaries of Ray Sexton

Payson, Arizona

by Jerry Jennings
Fallbrook, California

While visiting the royal zoo in Katmandu, Nepal in 1970, I was awed by the incredible beauty of the Golden Pheasant, a species I had never seen previously and could hardly believe was real. Needless to say, it was an experience contributing to my interest in aviculture, and not surprisingly the Golden Pheasant is the species that kindled a similar flame in Ray Sexton, a pheasant breeder nonpareil.

Ray Sexton's initial brush with aviculture occurred in 1964, when he acquired a "dome" shaped incubator from Sears Roebuck and a gift of two quail eggs. The instructions accompanying the incubator were followed, but the eggs proved infertile. Additional quail eggs were located through a local newspaper advertisement, however, these also proved a disappointment.

Not one to give up, Ray encountered his first Golden Pheasant and shortly thereafter obtained some of their eggs. These eggs produced viable offspring and Ray was hooked. The young birds matured and began producing their own eggs, and before long Ray had so many Golden, he

hardly knew what to do. The birds were easily sold and the income realized was enough to permit the acquisition of a number of rarer species. As time would have it, Ray's collection has come to boast one of the rarest and most interesting arrays of pheasant species in North America. These include nearly all the peacock pheasants including the very rare Rothschild's, Malayan, and Bronze Tail. He has representatives of the Brown Eared, Blue Eared, and two forms of the White Eared: the Szechuan and the Tibetan *drouyni*. The extraordinary tragopans are represented by the Cabot's, Satyr and Temminck's. Bornean and Delacour's Fireback Cheer, Crawford's Kalij, Lady Amherst, and Golden Pheasants round out the collection.

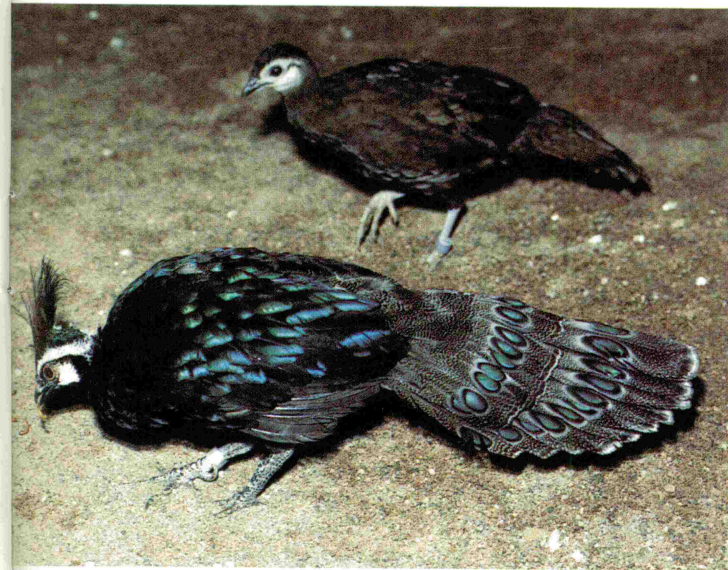
While pheasants are the main focus of Ray's avicultural interest, he has been adding other interesting species to the farm. Several pairs of Saurus and Stanley Cranes can be observed regally strutting their stuff. He recently acquired some Tibetan Snow Cocks, a large member of the partridge family, a couple pairs of Brush Turkeys, which incubate their eggs in



Malayan peacock pheasant. Male displaying to the hen.



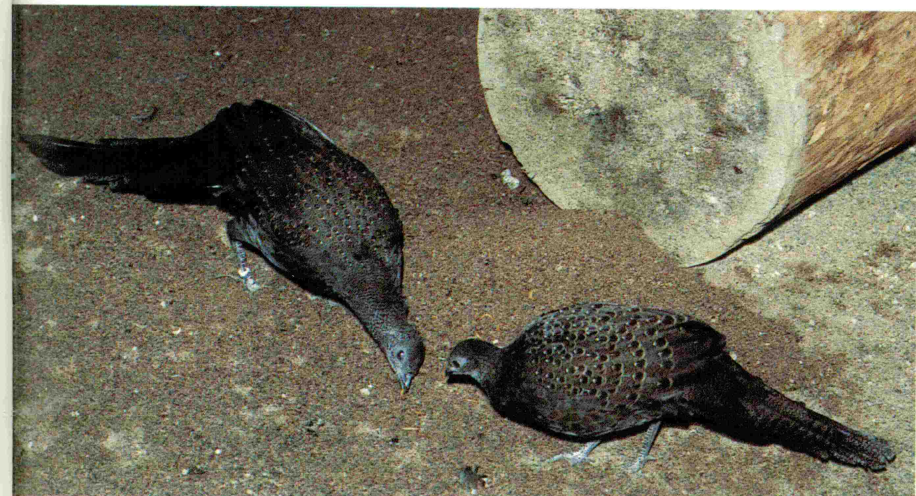
Group of Blue-eared pheasants.



Palawan peacock pheasants, pair.



Pheasant pens. Corrugated sheet metal prevents fighting between close neighbors and provides a sense of privacy.



Rothschild's peacock pheasant. Ray Sexton has been successful with captive breeding of this very rare pair.



Argus pheasant pair.

Temminck's tragopan.



Saurus and Stanley crane pens.



Photos by Jerry Jennings, Fallbrook, CA.

a large mound of decaying debris, and a pair of Red-legged Seriamas, a large South American bird that delights zoo-goers, when performing in bird shows, their routine of "attack the lizard".

Over the years, Ray has gone through a number of incubators. In fact, a new one nearly every year, much like many people acquire a new

car annually. And Ray loves his incubators, so much so, that he keeps the machine right there in his bedroom. During summer thunderstorms there are frequent power outages and, when these occur at night, the "deafening silence" awakes Ray to the pending disaster in time to start up his portable incubator. He has even been known to go out to assist the line crews from the utility service in restoring power.

The incubator of current favor in Ray's operations is a Petersime Model 1, which has served him well. Occasionally, eggs will hatch a little prematurely, though. Ray has newly acquired a Grumbach incubator manufactured in Germany, which he uses as a hatcher.

Pheasants and other gamebirds are truly birds for all seasons, allowing them to adapt comfortably to a broad temperature range. That suits Ray well, as he lives in Payson, Arizona, a small rural community near the Mogollon Rim northeast of Phoenix at an elevation of 5,000 feet. Summers reach daytime temperatures of 98 degrees Fahrenheit (far cooler than Phoenix's 120-degree days) and winter nighttime lows of 10 to 15 degrees with an occasional low of zero degrees. Payson receives a dozen or more snow storms per season, depositing several inches to more than a foot of snow at a time. Nevertheless, the birds do quite well outdoors, with the exception that the peacock pheasants and the Argus are kept in heated buildings during the worst of the winter months.

Last winter, the snow was so heavy that several cages collapsed under the weight. Luckily, only one bird escaped, a male Cabot's Tragopan, which Ray naturally never expected to see again. Not so, as a few days later he heard it calling from a tree out of which he was able to coax the bird with an offering of its favorite food.

At one time, Ray thought of working with ratites and acquired some Emus. They were cute as youngsters and, as they grew, they became playful, stealing a hammer or tape measure from Ray's side when he worked on their pens. These tools were carried off to be stomped in the mud. This proved great entertainment until the birds reached adulthood, when they transferred their interest in tool stomping to Ray Sexton stomping. They were sent off to another collection shortly thereafter.

Ray's success as an aviculturist is

born of hard work and attention to detail. His pens are kept immaculately clean and many are planted in grass. The pens are spacious, offering lots of room for exercise and the diet provided the birds is sumptuous. Ray feeds Purina game bird feed along with peanuts, various grains, mealworms, and a salad mix of chopped lettuce, spinach, hard boiled eggs, apples, and cucumbers with vitamins added. While the salad is fed twice a week, the other dietary constituents are all part of the daily regimen. The birds always receive fresh water daily.

From the size of Ray's collection and the devotion to detail he demonstrates, it would appear that birds are his main activity. Wrong! It is his hobby. His business is as a plumbing and building contractor, which he pursues daily, building houses. His family also owns the Beeline Cafe in Payson, which he helps manage. The birds, though, are the only activity he really enjoys.

Ray believes very strongly in maintaining genetic diversity in his breeding stock and disapproves of breeders pairing closely related birds. Inbreeding spells long-term disaster for aviculture and must be avoided. Ray, therefore, seeks to work with stock as close to the F-1 level as possible, as they tend to produce stronger, more fecund offspring.

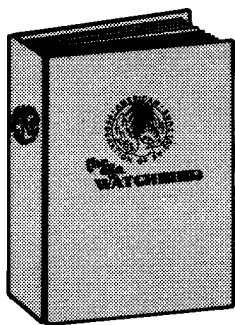
Ray is also bothered by the emphasis many people place on price tags. People often are concerned with how much something costs, yet feel if something is sold at a bargain, "something must be wrong". "Where are the people who do it for the love of birds?" he asks.

Born and raised in Payson, Ray lived in Phoenix for 20 years. Tired of the big city rat race, he returned to his roots, where he remains to this day with his lovely wife, Melody. They have two daughters, Raylene and Kimberly, and a son, Danny. Raylene just graduated from Arizona State University and Kimberly attends a bible college in Minnesota. Danny helps Ray in the construction business.

Ray ultimately dreams of going to Borneo and New Guinea, perhaps with a zoo collecting team, to observe pheasants in the wild and to experience the thrill of capturing his own birds. We hope he makes the journey.

Ray is a member of the American Pheasant and Waterfowl Society, the American Game Bird Federation, and a new member of the AFA. ●

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