

Indian Blue Peafowl

King of Pheasants

by Marcus Martin
Pasadena, Texas

Ah, yes, the magnificent Indian Blue Peafowl, more commonly referred to as the peacock or peahen, is known to ornithologists as *Pavo cristatus*, a Latin name meaning "crested peacock." Almost everyone knows of this splendid bird and, perhaps, also of his vanity. For as long as man has known of the peacock, the bird has been tagged with the tale of being proud and vainglorious. The exact creature of origin of the peacock is unknown, but there is evidence that he has been around for about 500,000 years. He has been mentioned in the Bible and in Shakespeare's literature. Even today, we use the saying "proud as a peacock" and his name is synonymous with one of the most illuminating shades of blue in the entire spectrum. No other bird has been so admired for beauty as the peacock.

Originating in the forests of India and Sri Lanka, the peacock has been sent to every country in Europe, and can be found also in America, Mexico, Australia, and other places world-



There is a distinct difference between the male and female peafowl. Here, the male and his harem of hens enjoy a treat of bread.

wide. His historical past goes beyond the Roman Empire, where he was declared a delicacy. The peacock was in America before George Washington's time and graced plantations and farms. Today, however, his main haunts include zoos and estates, and even some private farms.

I am fifteen years old, but I am boundlessly enthusiastic about this extraordinary bird. The Indian peafowl has been revered for its beauty

for thousands of years. India chose this flamboyant creature to be their national bird. *Pavo cristatus* is found from the foothills of the Himalayas south to the island of Sri Lanka. The Indian peacock is not the only peafowl found wild on earth. His close relative, the Javan or green peafowl, is found further east, from southeast Assam to Thailand and southern China, including the Malaysian peninsula and the island of Java. The Javan



While displaying, the peafowl turns around again and again to reveal the drab backside and to see if the female runs around to see the front, which means she is ready for mating.



A yearling peacock shows off for his possible "mate." You can clearly see the bird's true tail in this photo.

Photos by Marcus Martin

green peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) is a highly temperamental bird and is not as common in captivity.

The blue peafowl, as with all other pheasants, is sexually dimorphic, with the peahen being drastically duller than her gaudy mate. The male is unmistakable, with his plumage being exceptionally brilliant. The male's head, neck and breast are a radiant turquoise blue. The feathers of the back are greenish-gold with bronze edges. The tertiary wing coverts are barred white and black, the primary coverts and secondaries are blackish with metallic blue tints,

and the primaries are a sandy rust color. The fairly large beak is light grey and the iris of the eye is brown. There are two naked patches of white skin above and below each eye, and a crest of feathers with barbs only at the tip adorn the crown. The male boasts a huge train of 300 to 350 long, barbed feathers, ending with a patterned eyespot or ocelli. This train can sometimes measure up to six feet, but it is usually about five feet, with the length of the bird's body excluding the train being three to three and one-half feet. The peahen, or female, is so drab compared to her mate, that

one could mistake her for a separate species! Her overall plumage color is greyish-brown, with the breast being buff and the neck a dull green. The hen's face has one stripe over the eyes, but the entire throat is a bare, white patch of skin. She has a short tail, and lacks the gorgeous train. Both sexes have grey, spurred legs.

Husbandry

The Indian peafowl is popular as a pet bird because of its ease of maintenance, wide varying diet and, of course, all the dazzling colors! There is also a great eagerness in peafowl to breed, which makes them all the more desirable. Peafowl eat a variety of foods including shoots, leaves, berries, seeds, snails, worms, mice and snakes. Even small birds can be at risk. If you have a garden, free reining peafowl may enjoy your plants before you can, destroying small sprouts and pecking holes in tomatoes. Fences will not help, for the peacock can fly quite easily, and will do so to satisfy their conceited selves.

Even with clipped wings, a peafowl can clear a seven foot fence with ease. Peafowl roost in trees or on the tallest point on the property, if trees aren't available, or too small. (They prefer to roost at least 30 feet off the ground.) Peacocks take dust baths, scratching the soil, then flapping their wings in it to penetrate the feather quills to exterminate parasites.

Housing

The peafowl is a hardy bird which can be let to have free run of your property, even if you live up north. Snow, freezing temperatures, and rain do not seem to affect them very much. But they need a shelter facing south, for they don't like to get wet, and if the male's train gets soaked, he may not be able to escape predators, which may include large dogs, hawks, owls, skunks, opossums, and raccoons. They can also be kept in an aviary, just as long as it meets the required size. A male needs at least seven feet in height to display, and at least ten feet wide to be able to turn around with his full train and at least 20 feet long so he can exercise. A pair can live in an aviary this size, but the larger the aviary the better. They will live peaceably with most other birds.

Breeding

Breeding season for the peacock, which lasts from April to late June or July (when the male molts all of his

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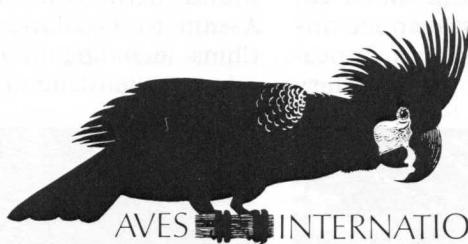
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long train feathers), is monsoon time in Asia. At the time of breeding season, the peafowl start vocalizing, staking out territories and letting hens know where they are. And by the way, despite the bird's beautiful appearance, he has not much of a song bird's voice. The main call is a loud, drawn-out scream, which may be mistaken for someone desperately screaming for help. The second call is a threatening call. It is a honk, which is like an 18-wheeler's airhorn. They use this call when threatened.

As the breeding season proceeds, the males begin to display in their territories. And it is this courtship display which has made the peacock so well known. It starts with the male becoming totally still, with his head tilting slightly downward. The bird then violently shakes himself all over, rattling the long train quills, and lowering the wings. With the wings quivering and the train quills still rattling, the males throws the half-opened train up, again shaking all over, and lifts the opened train to an almost 90° angle, all of this happening in seconds. The bird then struts and prances, turning to reveal the drab backside and true tail, which is ordinary. He may strut for only seconds, or for well over an hour, and his intended audience may be a peahen or even a group of admiring humans. While he is showing off, the peahens usually ignore him, and when they do get ready for mating, they crouch down, with their wings partly opened. At this point, the male quickly closes and lowers his magnificent train and mates with them in turn. A few days after mating, the hen looks for a place to lay her four to eight buff colored eggs. The nest is nothing spectacular, just the ordinary chicken-like scrape in the ground lined with leaves or grass. She incubates the eggs for 28 to 32 days and the chicks are able to follow the mother hours after hatching. The male chicks acquire the body plumage at one year, but it takes three years for the full train to grow, and this grows longer through the fifth and sixth year.

This spectacular bird has been revered for beauty since antiquity, and is still enjoyed today. They are not expensive, ranging from \$45 to \$100 each, and are a real pleasure to have. So, if you do not have this splendid bird in your collection, please do include it to ensure the future of this magnificent king of pheasants! ●



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