

Eared Pheasants

by Loretta Vaughn

There are three species of Eared pheasants, brown, blue and white, with four sub-species. Since we have only kept the brown and blue, I will write about these two species. Eared pheasants are unique in that both sexes look alike; they are mountain birds and usually do not do well in damp localities. Beebe states that the habits and haunts of both species are almost identical in the wild.

Eared pheasants are large, highly ornamental, and tame easily. They possess crimson red legs and have long white ear tufts which project above the nape. William Beebe in his book "Pheasants, Their Lives and Homes", Vol. 1, was impressed with their "remarkable protective colouring." When motionless they blended right in with the landscape. Eared pheasants feathers give the appearance of being more hair-like than feather-like. Brown-eared tails consist of 22 rectrices and blue-eared tails consist of 24 rectrices. Their tails are long, upright, curving with the central rectrices always above the others. Both species, with their long, upright, curved tails and their slow and dignified gait, are very graceful.

Both Beebe and Delacour state these birds are not good fliers in the wild and Beebe doubted that they could fly uphill. We do know from experience that they fly well enough to get away from one if the opportunity arises. Many people have kept these pheasants at liberty but the bird's powerful, curved beak is used to dig, and can destroy a beautifully landscaped place in a very short time. They use these powerful beaks in the wild to dig for food which consists mainly of roots, tubers, seeds, leaves and insects. In captivity they do well on a good game bird or turkey feed along with lots of greens and fruit when available. They require a good supply of clean, fresh water daily.

Brown and Blue-eared pheasants are rather voluble and talk almost continually, conversing in undertones. Their cry is high and raucous. In the wild, Beebe says "they are fond of one another's society" and congregate in flocks; sometimes up to 30 birds. He states that it would be very easy to kill off a whole flock of Manchurians (Brown-eared) because flocks attach themselves to a limited region which they call home.

In the spring they separate into pairs and are considered monogamous. In captivity,

if kept together, they are seldom more than a few feet from one another. Once in a while a trio can be kept together with no problems. They have a bad habit in captivity of feather picking, especially tail feathers, which can make them look pretty ragged. A lot of breeders keep them separated except during the breeding season. Delacour in "Pheasants of the World" says this habit is due to a lack of cellulose in their diet, inactivity and boredom.

Today brown-eared pheasants are an endangered species but have been put on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Captive Self-Sustaining Populations list in the United States. All of the brown-eared pheasants in captivity today seem to be descendants of a trio of Brown-eareds brought into France in 1864 and two males brought into the London Zoo in 1866.

In 1976, the Pheasant Trust in England was able to get 2 pairs of wild-caught brown-eared pheasants from the Peking Zoo. In 1978, nine young were raised from these wild-caught birds. We hope that in the near future this new blood will be distributed around the world to help keep this beautiful bird, "Hoki" in Chinese, prolific. Due to inbreeding, this species is sometimes difficult to raise. Sometimes hens can not produce a good egg. Fertility is a big problem and if both of the above problems are not present a great many chicks are hatched deformed, with legs that cannot hold them up, crooked toes and feet, and crooked necks.

Blue-eared or 'Maki' or 'Machee', in Chinese (meaning Horse Chicken as they were believed to run as quickly as a horse) were brought into captivity much later than the former species. They first came from China into France in 1929. There were several shipments with quite a few birds arriving safely. Young were raised from most of the original birds, giving this species a lot better chance of survival in captivity than the Brown-eared. This species, probably as a result of careless inbreeding, has at times seemed to become smaller than birds that were not inbred. This is an important factor to look for when this species is being judged — the bigger bird is much preferred. This

makes for an interesting observation in that the much greater inbred Brown-eared size is seemingly holding up well compared to the inbred Blue-eared.

Sexing of eared pheasants can sometimes be difficult, especially the Brown-eared. The cock birds are generally larger than the hens, the males usually have a heavier looking, stronger leg and the red wattle appears to be larger and rounder than the hen's. The cock bird has short spurs. Probably due to inbreeding, Brown-eared cocks sometimes do not possess spurs and occasionally a hen will have spurs. Sexing is difficult in this species, but I can usually sex them when they are about 8 months old by their disposition. Chicks are extremely tame and young cock birds will usually get aggressive as do the adult cock birds during breeding season. A tame young hen will sometimes squat in front of her keeper but is very seldom aggressive.

Eared pheasants have a lateral display and both species usually lay in a dug out nest on the ground, usually in a secluded spot in the pen. After laying the egg the hen will cover the egg or eggs with dirt, leaves, grass or anything that is at hand. Eared pheasant eggs are large and oval, Brown-eared being a stony green in color and Blue-eareds a dull pale greyish brown. If pairs are from good unrelated stock, they can be very prolific.

Here in Colorado we have very little humidity at nearly 5,000 feet above sea level. We find that large game hens do the best job of hatching these beautiful birds. If our humidity is over 76 wet bulb, they drown in the shell.

Chicks are large, fluffy, well-developed and grow VERY fast. They consume large amounts of food and due to their rapid growth, we start to gradually drop the protein in their diet at about 2 to 3 weeks of age. They should be fed lots of greens from the very first day; dandelions and clover are a particularly good source of greens. I believe extra vitamins in their water is a must and fresh water should be in front of them at all times. We do not feed mealworms to Eared pheasants because this can cause a big problem with toe picking.

Because of the Eared pheasants large size, beauty, tameness and great personalities, both species, the brown and blue, make wonderful aviary birds which are always enjoyed by their keepers.