

Siamese Firebacks

(*Lophura diardi*)

by Ed Lawrence
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Fireback pheasants are colorful, fascinating avicultural subjects, and their preservation and captive propagation should be encouraged if we are to protect them from extinction through habitat destruction in the wild. Population pressures and deforestation in Indonesia and south-east Asia currently threaten their normal range.

Firebacks tend to inhabit the lower elevations of their range, the same area that is favored by increased population and the concurrent spread of slash and burn agriculture. Large scale logging of the forests of Borneo and similar areas in the region has also reduced the natural surroundings of these birds, and thus makes it mandatory that efforts be made to preserve and protect these species.

In this series of articles, I will be describing the crested firebacks which consist of the Siamese (*Lophura diardi*), the Bornean crested fireback (*Lophura ignita ignita*), the Malayan crested fireback (*Lophura ignita rufa* — also often confusingly referred to as Viellot's crested fireback), and the Bulwer's wattled fireback (*Lophura bulweri*).

The fireback clan also have two species that do not have crests; and, you have rightly concluded they must be known as the Bornean and Malayan crestless firebacks, respectively. These two crestless firebacks are a considerable rarity in aviculture, probably due to their lack of head ornamentation. They need attention and preservation just as much as their more colorful cousins.

The firebacks that are of most interest to aviculturists are those that are most colorful and distinctive in appearance. Unfortunately, this is one of the selective mechanisms that is operative in all aviculture, so that the least colorful species of birds are the ones that are likely to quietly go into extinction simply because no one is particularly attracted enough to them to be willing to put in the time, effort, and expense necessary for preservation, no matter how endangered they may be. There is, thus, a Darwinian process of selection going on in aviculture, and a bird's chances of being selected for survival depends in large measure upon its attractiveness to the general public and the aviculturist.

The Siamese fireback (*Lophura*



Male crested Siamese fireback pheasant



Female crested Siamese fireback pheasant

diardi) is still fairly common in its native haunts of Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and is also well-established in pheasantries around the world. It is generally regarded as being the easiest of the firebacks to raise, and good unrelated stock is highly productive. I have one pair that produces 20 to 30 offspring each breeding season, usually in three to four clutches, that are artificially incubated. The breeding pair is fed a basic diet of all-purpose poultry pellets, with occasional additional feeding of mealworms and fruits, as availability and the breeding season makes desirable.

The Siamese fireback male is a very elegant fellow, all dressed up like the father of the bride; he is sartorially correct, self-possessed, and with a demeanor of prideful importance. Never as flashy as other members of the genera, still he knows he is a good looking specimen whose time will come. As with most pheasants, the hen is much more demure, but she is still very attractive in her own right. If you had to set on eggs for 24 to 25 days in a world abounding in predators, you probably wouldn't want to bring attention to yourself with a

garish costume. It is a system that seems to have worked out fairly well for them so far.

In the spring and early summer, when the breeding season is well underway, the Siamese fireback male makes a display that involves strutting upwards on his legs, all the while furiously beating his wings while displaying the very bright spot on his back that has given the firebacks their name. He looks somewhat like an overloaded Huey that can't quite get enough lift to go airborne. The dust swirls about him, there is a churning of the air, and the noise of his beating wings can be heard for some distance. Since fertility is normally good, it is a technique that is demonstrably successful, although they are a very discrete couple. I've seen more actual reproductive action on a dance floor than I've witnessed in their enclosure.

Firebacks usually reproduce for the first time in their third year, although I suspect males become fully fertile prior to that time, and can be used as a two year old. No matter how much you supplement their feed or engage in acts of divination or prayer, hens normally will not lay until their third

year.

While some pheasants are polygamous, none of the firebacks are and they should be housed in separate pair quarters if you are to avoid the heartbreak of sudden death syndrome. If the aviary is large enough, a pair of firebacks can be used with other compatible birds, such as doves and certain selected non-aggressive species, but I think it is best to keep them separated from other birds. They will reproduce better if there are no other distractions in their pen. And never, never introduce a new bird into any pen of pheasants, no matter what the species, unless you are there to intervene to save the newcomer and, hopefully, you will be wearing your suit of armor before you intercede to correct your lack of caution. Amiable, happy birds, normally as content and laid back as Californians in a hot-tub, can instantly become as aggressive as a school of piranhas coming upon a swimming pig in the Amazon, when a strange bird is introduced into their domicile. Far better to keep them in separate quarters, or to introduce all the prospective tenants to new quarters at one time; otherwise you are just asking for high mortality and personal stress, and the birds are adversely affected as well.

As a general rule, pheasants should be raised in as large a facility as your pocketbook and real estate will allow. Since most of us don't live on a section of land obtained under the Homestead Act, and are not the scions of robber barons, we have to make do with what is available. My pair of Siamese firebacks do very well in a pen that is four feet wide by sixteen feet deep and eight feet high. For years they resided in an adjacent pen that was exactly twice as large, but these

are times that require sacrifices of us all, and the move did not seem to embitter them in any way.

Still, as a general rule, the larger the pen the better the chances for reproduction. And, skittish birds seem to adjust better to heavily planted aviaries where they feel more secure, so there are good arguments that can be made in favor of lots of landscaping and hiding places in an aviary. The counter argument in favor of spartan, bare bones accommodations is that you can see the birds better and observe both their needs and behavior without the distraction of foliage and hiding places. Vigilance is a necessary ingredient of aviculture, whether you choose to maintain your aviaries in the "naturalized," or "clear view" mode, or a combination of both.

Being birds of the tropics, all firebacks will require some modicum of protection from the extremes of weather and climate. Aviculture is an interest that has spread throughout the world and, thus, if you live in the tundra or the taiga you will have to take a few more precautions in housing your firebacks than you would if you lived in a more balmy climate. Firebacks don't like having their toes frozen off, nor do I. A judicious application of forethought, and occasional supplemental shelter and heat will do wonders. All in all, they are birds that can be raised without great difficulty and are adaptable to a wide range of situations. They are remarkably hardy if provided with the basics for living.

In conclusion, I would recommend highly the Siamese fireback as a good starting bird for the aviculturist interested in this most interesting group of pheasants.

Next issue — the Bornean and Malayan crested fireback pheasants. ●

Veterinary Viewpoints

edited by Amy Worell, D.M.V.
Woodland Hills, California

Editor's Note: The AFA is very pleased to present a new series of columns called Veterinary Viewpoints, edited by Amy Worell, D.V.M. Dr. Worell was graduated from Auburn University with a D.V.M. degree, with honors. She has practiced in southern California for the last six years where she sees a large number of avian patients. She has a special interest in pediatrics and nutrition and, as an aviculturist, is currently working with nine species of cockatoos, African gray parrots, scarlet macaws, and pious parrots. Dr. Worell is active in a number of professional associations and is a frequent lecturer on avian medicine.

A unique thing about Veterinary Viewpoints is that a number of veterinarians are consulted and a broad spectrum of viewpoints are presented. You won't get just one veterinarian's opinion. No single vet can know all about everything so Dr. Worell will solicit answers from various vets. This way we hope to get the best answers from the best people on any given subject.

If there is anything you'd like to know about avian medicine, nutrition, even husbandry or anything else, please send your questions to Veterinary Viewpoints, P.O. Box 1568, Redondo Beach, Ca 90278.

Question: I recently purchased a blue fronted Amazon from a pet store. I thought its eyes looked funny so I took it to a veterinarian. He said it had avian pox. We have been treating its eyes for three weeks now and it looks much better. Is this contagious to my other birds and why did the bird look okay when I bought it?

A. Sillman, Florida

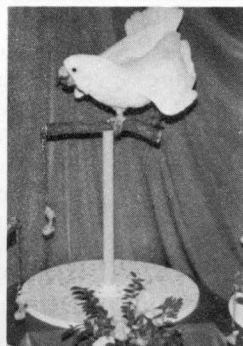
Answer: Avian pox, a disease of birds caused by seventeen different pox viruses, is a transmissible disease. The virus can be spread in a variety of ways. Mosquitoes and other biting insects transfer the virus from victim to victim. The virus can be carried on fomites; hands, gloves, feeding and

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