

Bornean and Malayan Crested Fireback Pheasants

(*Lophura ignita ignita*) (Lophura ignita rufa)

by Ed Lawrence
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As the photos accompanying this article so graphically depict, these are two extremely handsome and striking members of the pheasant family; highly ornamented and turned out. Along with English trifle and Texas longhorns, their respective places of origin are rather sensibly a part of their name, and thus I will not repeat the obvious. While they are under the same kinds of habitat pressure shared by other avian species of the tropical forest areas, these two species are reported to be holding their own currently. Even though they are highly desirable specimens, they are certainly not commonplace in captivity, and the Malayan crested fireback is becoming especially difficult to obtain. If present trends continue, the Malayan crested fireback will soon be an endangered species in captivity, regardless of its status in the wild.

One of the big problems in raising firebacks and other pheasants is obtaining unrelated stock for breeding purposes. I am sure this same difficulty exists with regard to other species of birds. Much of the problem can be laid directly at the doorstep of breeders who, in the past and even today, act in total disregard of the most basic concepts of genetics and improvement through selective breeding.

Truly unrelated birds, given the proper maintenance and environment, will produce strong, healthy offspring that have a will to live, and will be anxious to reproduce upon achieving sexual maturity. Inbred birds, given the same maintenance and environment, will produce offspring that have a genetic predisposition towards disaster. The inbred offspring will harbor within their genetic background all the distilled evil that was masked in unrelated birds, and they will have a much depressed ability to reproduce.

This is so axiomatic that it causes pain when you hear breeders state such hoary falsehoods as, "It is okay to breed brother and sisters together for one generation." If it was not detrimental to breed brothers and sisters of any species together, there would not be a universal taboo that is

as deep as our DNA condemning it. The most primitive tribal societies have abjured the practice. The courts and the temples have always forbidden it as an abomination, and for good reason. The experience of mankind has shown it to be a destructive practice, and yet, some people who seriously call themselves aviculturists persist in the bizarre belief that a little incest and pollution of the gene pool is a permissible expedient, especially if breeding season rolls around and all you have are some closely related stock. Better not to breed than to breed related stock. Better to break

the eggs on the driveway or throw them against the wall than to hatch out incestuous offspring. And to peddle such offspring onto an unsuspecting public should be enough to bar you from entry at the Pearly Gates. At least they should make you take a seat in the waiting room while they try to clear up the mess and headache you caused, before further processing your entry form.

1. Aviculturists are entrusted to make good use of their stock to perpetuate and improve, not to destroy and diminish the stock. As holders of a trust, we are held to a much higher



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duty than someone who doesn't know any better. "Those to whom much is given, much is expected."

2. The purchaser of stock that is from closely related ancestors is buying problems, and when his stock fails to perform to expectations, he becomes depressed and spends money and time trying to correct what can't be corrected. Eventually, aviculture loses another aviculturist to despondency resulting from inbred stock.

3. You can't tell by looking at a bird whether it is from strong, unrelated stock or carries within itself the genetic disaster of incestuous inbreeding. You have to rely on the people from whom you purchased your birds. To maximize your chances of obtaining unrelated birds, I would first of all encourage you to deal with people of good reputation. Even then, it is wise to ask many direct, even blunt, questions such as where the stock came from and the knowledge that the breeder has as to its remote ancestry, if any. When you have finally made your decision, I then suggest you buy additional stock

of the species in question from as disparate a background as you can find, and then set them up in the best pairs that you can manage to insure that you produce unrelated stock.

It is likely that the main reason that Malayan crested firebacks are becoming so difficult to find is because there are few robust, unrelated breeding pairs existing in aviculture. They are very beautiful birds, as are the Bornean crested firebacks. The hens of both species are almost identical in appearance, at first glance, but further inspection will reveal they have one very clear identifying mark to differentiate them — the Malayan hen has legs that are almost bright red when compared to the very pale pinkish color of the Bornean hen.

Both species are very substantial in size. I'm not talking emu or ostrich size, but they would make a substantial meal for a jungle family, the males weighing in at about 6 to 8 pounds.

Full disclosure laws make it incumbent upon me to tell you the males of these two species can also be extremely aggressive to anyone entering their private domain. They are not only the lords of their own castles, they have the inclination to assert their primacy by the employment of sharp, stabbing gaffs which grow as bony protuberances to their legs. Just when you have about finished your chores in their enclosure and feel that you will make it unscathed to the door, they can launch a lightning fast sneak attack that Admiral Yamamoto would have rejected as being immoral. And you will hardly know that you have been victimized until you feel a warm squishiness in your shoe, and gradually come to understand that it is your own blood flowing down your gaffed leg and collecting in your bloody sock. One of my Borneans is known quite accurately as "Blue Meanie," and none but the brave and the foolish venture into his pen. And I never enter the pen of the Malayan male without going armed with a metal garbage can lid, like a Roman warrior with his shield. I think he has come to enjoy attacking me; watching my face go pale, as the shield quakes in my none-too-steady hands.

The Siamese firebacks do not share the sanguinary combativeness of their Bornean and Malayan crested fireback cousins. They are tractable additions to any aviary.

Housing and maintenance of these firebacks is no more complicated

than for Siamese firebacks, which were discussed in the last article. A well-balanced poultry pellet or crumbles, along with fruit, mealworms, peanuts, or scratch on an occasional basis will keep them well-fed. An enclosure approximately eight feet by sixteen feet is sufficiently large for successful reproduction, although a larger pen would certainly be desirable if you have the means to provide it. There should be some kind of covered area to protect against rainy weather, and provision for adequate shade should be made. They will endure cold into the 25 to 30 degree Fahrenheit range for short periods of time, especially if there is a perch available where they can cover their feet by hunkering down and using their body heat and feathers as insulation. If it gets colder than that for any period of time, I would urge that some form of heat be provided to them, for firebacks are birds of the tropics. In nature, they don't hang around ski lifts or Christmas card scenes. They are very hardy, seemingly long-lived, and moderately difficult to raise. The Siamese firebacks are easier to propagate.

I have one Malayan crested fireback hen that is driving me to despair and, perhaps, by sharing my frustration with you I will undergo a kind of therapy. It can't hurt.

This particular hen celebrated her third year of life last spring and proceeded to lay many perfectly formed eggs with great regularity. She and her male companion appear to share a common interest in a mutually fulfilling heterosexual relationship, and one would naturally expect that, in the grand scheme of things, many little Malayan crested firebacks would have been raised last season. Fie on the thought!

She attacked each egg as it was laid; piercing, cracking, smashing, busting, purposely destroying her unborn young like some poor demented soul in a Greek tragedy of mythic proportions. "And how are the kids, Medea?"

To stop this infanticide, I have camped at her pen and, like a voyer, watched her every move as she prepares with clock-like regularity to lay her next egg. And watchfully, she would wait until I blinked an eye, and then she would instantly lay and destroy it; not quite in mid-air, but nearly so. I have retrieved broken eggs from her that still retained her own body heat. I mean that is really

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Photo courtesy of Wildlife World Zoo, Arizona

Bornean crested fireback male



Photo courtesy of Wildlife World Zoo, Arizona

Bornean crested fireback male, detail of elaborate blue facial skin.

incredible, and I am the one that is suffering post-partum depression, not her. She seems to relish the whole thing, although she never eats any part of the egg, indicating that her needs are psychological and not the result of some metabolic disorder or nutritional deficiency.

Various suggestions have been put forward by friends who are concerned about my well-being. "Get rid of the bird," is one that is too simplistic when you consider how nearly impossible it is to find a mature, egg laying hen of this species. "Tie a blindfold on her," isn't as preposterous as it first sounds; and I may put some kind of "blinkers" on her this spring which will impair her vision so she will have to crack her eggs using the Braille system which, I suspect, she is currently studying in preparation for my next move. "Flood her pen with chicken eggs" has been another thought that several have suggested, but I have visions of her standing in the middle of a vast yellow sea of uncooked omelette, and her latest addition will be in the middle, cracked irremediably, like a bad marriage.

I will not let her defeat me. I will persevere and prevail.

Each spring our thoughts turn from contemplating our past failures, and we look forward to the challenges that are ahead; for, of all the species on this small planet, we are undoubtedly the most hopeful and optimistic. We must be. We couldn't have come this far without it. Pray for me. ●

Malayan crested fireback male in the act of displaying.



Photo by Jerry Jennings

Malayan crested fireback male



Photo by Jerry Jennings