

breeding the  
Grey Peacock Pheasant  
at the Tracy Aviary

(*Polyplectron bicalcaratum*)

by D. Grenville Roles, Curator  
Salt Lake City, Utah

One of the most delightful, elegant, subtly patterned and adorned of all of the pheasants, this beautiful creature is deservedly popular with a wide range of aviculturalists.

In the wild it is found in five different forms from Sikkim and Bhutan in the westernmost part of its range, to the Island of Hainan in the east. Preferred habitat is dense vegetation up to 4000 feet elevation.

Even though it is labeled *P.b. ghigi*, it is impossible for me to know which form is represented here at the Aviary. The differences between most forms are subtle, ranging from greyer in the west to browner in the east. However it is clearly not the smallest, brownest *P.b. katsumatae* from Hainan.

Although the largest of the Genus, Grey Peacock Pheasants are still quite small birds — rather like a small chicken with big feathers.

The male is a warm grey shade dusted with tiny, paler grey spots and vermiculations and bearing jewel-like ocelli on his wings and tail, which are either amethyst or emerald depending upon the angle of light. His only other adornment is his bushy, erectile crest. The scientific name *Polyplectron* (many spurred) *bicalcaratum* (double spurred), emphasizes the variability of the number of spurs which can be present on the males' legs - sometimes three on one leg, two or one on the other.

Hens are much smaller, darker and

without the colorful ocelli and spurs.

For the most part they are fairly silent birds, conversing in subdued, throaty purrs and clucks. Springtime, however, stimulates the males to call loudly and frequently with a two-part whistle very early in the morning, which will not endear them to your neighbors.

Our birds live in very large, planted aviaries which they share with a great many other species. They have always been well behaved and non-aggressive, giving way before smaller and feistier species. Males, however, will scrap with each other through an adjoining fence, so a solid barrier is required if pairs are to be neighbors.

We know of a number of people in the Salt Lake area who successfully keep and breed these birds best in their tiny winter quarters, which can be as small as 4' x 3' x 3' high. Photoperiod and ambient temperature are significant factors in those breedings, of course.

They are simple and easy to maintain on a diet of gamebird pellets supplemented three or four times a week with tidbits of mealworms, chopped fruits, greenstuff, raw meat (hamburger) or hard-boiled egg. They should always have access to clean water and oystershell grit.

Birds will breed at one year old (or even a little less) and make excellent natural parents. The one or two chicks which make up the clutch will

follow the hen very closely, staying beneath her tail for the first few days as she moves around — and then darting forward as she calls them to take a morsel she has found, directly feeding the chicks from her bill.

When pulled for handrearing (which can induce the hen to multi-clutch) the chicks are rather more difficult to rear, often requiring handfeeding and coaxing to eat at all in the first few days. Sometimes the chicks are encouraged to eat by giving them a self-feeding companion, either a Golden Pheasant or Quail chick — depending upon what happens to hatch simultaneously. This companion usually induces the chicks to start eating, particularly if mealworms are supplied. Typically, as the worms are dropped into the brooder, the Quail (or Pheasant) chick will madly dash around with a worm in its beak exciting the Peacock Pheasant chicks into chasing them and attempting to snatch the worm from the other pheasant's bill (bug-mugging?), thereby learning to recognize food. They will also learn to show interest in food scratched and picked at by the companion chick.

The chicks are initially delicate and do require heat, around 90 degrees, for the first week or so, the temperature gradually being lowered as the chicks get older. They do require close observation to ensure that they are getting enough to eat and that they are being kept warm enough.

Chicks raised by their parents seem robust and competent from the word go, and are certainly a lot easier to provide for.

As mentioned earlier, the birds can be induced to multiclutch if their eggs are removed, and they can breed (given heated quarters and appropriate lighting), at any time of the year. The male has a beautiful display in which he will call the hen over to a tidbit, picking it up and dropping it again to pique her interest, then launching into an initially lateral then full frontal display, in which he places his breast on the ground and partially spreads his wings in front of his fully spread tail to display his family jewels.

These birds are delightful, beautiful, readily tamed and easy to maintain. Though not quite a beginner's bird, they can really be recommended for the aviculturalist of some experience who is ready for something different. ●