



## *The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)*

*(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)*

### **BIRD LITERATURE:**

## **Green Peafowl**

### ***Pavo muticus* (Linne)**

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From "Pheasants: Their Lives and Homes" by William Beebe. Published under the auspices of the New York Zoological Society by Doubleday, Page & Co., New York.



### **Brief description**

**MALE:** A tall, narrow vaned crest; facial skin blue and yellow; head and throat green; neck and fore part of the body above and below bronze, with blue centres showing the mantle; back green, centred with bronze and edged with blue; posterior ventral surface dull green and black; smaller wing coverts green, larger ones and primaries chestnut; train as in Indian Peacock.

**FEMALE:** Resembles the male, except that the upper parts of the body plumage lack the green gloss and are mottled with buff; no elongated train.

**RANGE:** Chittagong, Burma, Siam, Cochin China, Malay Peninsula, and Java.

### **The wild bird in its haunts**

It was mid-October when I reached the country of the Green Peafowl among the foothills of the Pahang Mountains. One night, after a long unsuccessful search for peacock pheasants, I had my Malay crew paddle half an hour down the Pahang River in the moonlight. At last, when the clouds came up and an increasing number of snags made it dangerous to proceed in the dark, my headman stopped close to a sandbank, warped the houseboat close in under the bushes, and tied fast. I had no idea of where we were. The Malayan jungle rose high overhead - a mass of black shadow, silent, save for now and then the shrill monotone of some nocturnal forest insect. Once a half-submerged tree drifted past, scraping the sides with its withered foliage. The rest of the night passed quietly.

Early morning on the Pahang is always beautiful. As one awakens slowly from slumber, so the dawn comes slowly in this tropic lowland. The glare of the sudden leap of the sun above the horizon is dimmed, delayed, diluted by the thick morning mist, and only gradually does the dusk give away to the grey twilight of dawn. Rising on elbow and looking out over the side of the boat, the swift current becomes more and more distinct through the fog which drifts slowly downward like a sluggish aerial river flowing gently over the denser one below. As the light grows, and the mists lift and fray upward, a low brown line shows across and down the river, and finally the shapeless masses of foliage beyond the sandbank come into view.

Here and there white-barked trunks gleam like the ghosts of trees. The saturated air is heavy with the odour of the white plum blossoms. The eddies are filled with their petals. A pair of hornbills cross high overhead, wholly hidden by cloud, but registering every wing beat in a loud, deep *whoof! whoof!* which, even through the still mists, carries far. Bulbuls burst into song, drongos send their hoarse cries down from the treetops, their wings flicking showers of drops from the drenched foliage.

Several great leaden forms take shape on the bars of sand upwind, and at last I make out a quartette of statuesque buffalo, all with noses outstretched towards us, standing half on the sand, half in the water. But of far greater interest are five indistinct shapes moving about far down at the other end of the bar. Resting my glass on the edge of my bunk, I see dimly through the moist lenses a flock of Green Peafowl. They have seen us long before, but as my Malays are fast asleep, they are as yet only suspicious. We may be harmless, a huge tree stranded during the night. Two have sweeping trains which clear the sand neatly as they walk. Now and then a bird stands quite erect and flaps his wings, vigorously, probably to rid the feathers of excess moisture. In fact, I can even see the others shake their heads as the shower of flying drops sprays over them. Two young of the year are much more active than the others, running here and there, chasing each other, stopping suddenly to scratch among the gravel.

A passing log draws the attention of the Peafowl, and they all stand motionless, watching it pass. The sun shines brightly for a moment, the mists swirl upward, and the air is clear, showing the long range of dark hills beyond the trees. From up-river comes the invariable morning chorus, peal after peal of rollicking laughter, of the serious-faced gibbons, a family of wa-was in some distant treetop. Then a dense cloud sweeps across the sun and a rush of wind and fog fills the air with thick, grey twilight. A sudden shower pits the smooth surface of the river, and from the depths of all this concentrated moisture rings out the wild, unrestrained cry of a Peacock.

## General account

The distinction has been made between the two species of Peafowl that the Green bird lives rather in isolated families and is not so generally distributed as the Indian bird. But I think in this respect, as in many others, the habits of the two birds are almost exactly alike, where absolutely feral Indian birds are considered. It is certainly true in the case of the Green Peafowl that, even where they are most abundant, they occur in small isolated groups; sometimes two or three cocks and a larger number of hens, more often a single cock and his harem. I have observed this bird in both Pahang and Java.

Not only this, but these groups are extremely sedentary, and where not molested may be found in the same patch of jungle month after month, feeding in various places, but usually drinking and roosting with extreme regularity. Even where no effort is made to disturb the birds, they show a very different acceptance of this immunity. They often feed in pastures where domestic animals are kept, and less often wander into cultivated fields, but they are always on the alert and never permit the very close approach of man. No scarecrows are necessary; a single alarm will serve to keep them at a distance for days at a time.

There is considerably more variation in the voice of these Peafowl than in the Indian birds. I have heard a male call in answer to one of the latter species when it was difficult to tell the two cries apart. Both had the same harsh strident, mournful wail. The Malay name *Merak* is onomatopoeic. More than this, however, the Green bird has a second call which I have heard given time after time; the time, place, and reiteration suggesting its being a new vocal acquisition. This is a subdued but very penetrating cry, several syllables following one another in quick succession, easy to imitate, but impossible to transcribe into words. The loud scream seems relegated to express emotions of fear or of intense effort, as in escaping from the onrush of an animal, or in beginning the flight up to the roost. The call or challenge note is especially characterised by its ventriloquial quality. This, one would judge must be of great value to the calling bird, if we concede that the confusing quality be potent in the case of listening beasts of prey.

As the Green Peafowl is less tolerant of the vicinity of man, so is it correspondingly more ready to accept life in dense jungles. And yet in this, as in the other species, my assertion still holds that Peafowl are not real jungle birds. Pahang, for example, is covered for the most part with dense forest, and Peafowl are abundant, but they haunt the banks of rivers by preference. When found away from these places, it is because there are large pampas-like areas, on the edges of which they may be found. They seem to want to take to flight, if need be - to perceive danger before it gets within striking distance.

Other observers besides myself have noticed this, and have recorded the fact that the Pahang sandbars form a favourite haunt of these birds. On the east coast of the Peninsula, it prefers park-like country, dry if possible, or grassy land with scattered clumps of trees.

I found such a country when I crossed the river and stepped ashore after the brief vision of the five Peafowl in early morning. Every cloud had vanished, and Bukit Singum stood sharply silhouetted against the Malaysian sky. Beyond the fringe of river jungle, the region showed flat and open, a fifty-acre expanse covered with grass or small dense thickets of vetches and melastoma. A few yards from the river I flushed four birds which flew over the low vegetation and on into thick jungle. A single twig cracked and the quartette rose with a rush, calling *Wak! wak! wak! wak!* Their loud cries were answered in the distance by a pair of red junglefowl. Eight massive dead trees lifted their bare trunks and scraggly limbs high above all the jungle, and after the alarm, seven of these held each a single Peafowl, while three perched on the eighth. No protective colouration for these birds! Their green and variegated plumage, according to human ideas, might merge perfectly with the jungle foliage. But they themselves had apparently little faith in such static tactics. And in this wooded country I realised that only a subterranean creature could successfully run the gauntlet of that score of piercing eyes and come within striking distance of the trees of refuge. Two of the birds were at such distance that they appeared as mere dots on the limbs, but my glasses showed them with heads turned in my direction, watching me with more than telescopic vision.

After watching them for some time I shot several small birds which I desired, and at each muffled report of the insertion barrel, the loud *Waaaaa-aak!* went up from each tree, uttered in a musical, quavering tone. Then I returned to the houseboat and, armed only with glasses, began a stalk around the border of the open area. I found a dense dwarf palm growth from which I could see four of the trees, while a gentle breeze which constantly moved the fronds prevented the birds' discovery of me. Three of the Peacocks had full length sweeping trains, and within half an hour, all had descended to the ground, the great feathers undulating with the utmost grace as the birds slanted swiftly to earth. Several foregathered a hundred yards away, and I crept slowly toward them. Here, as elsewhere, the home of the Peafowl was essentially a dove country - half-open grassland, surrounded by the dense growth of bamboo and jungle tangle through which I was making my way. Here and there buffaloes had driven a maze of tunnel paths and trodden the crackling leaves to powder, making for easy stalking. Every few yards, from the heart of old buffalo sign, there shone the intensely scarlet terrestrial blossoms of the ground ginger gleaming from the black mould-like huge jewels - leafless blossoms of glowing pigment.

My quest this particular day was futile, the birds were too much on the alert, and a wretched little babbler set up a screeching alarm just as I had settled into a good point of vantage in an ancient buffalo wallow, and the Peafowl did not stand upon the order of their going.

Future stalks were more productive. The easiest method of observation was to locate a favourite drinking place by tracks and sign on some gravel or sandbar where the river was narrow, and then take up a good point of view across the stream. Here, the best way was to force a dugout straight into the vegetation which overhung the water, rearrange the foliage, and lie flat, with glasses mounted like a brace of swivel guns on the gunwale. In such a position, only a few venturesome leeches could reach one, and in this region, any place where one could lie quiet for several hours with only a dozen leech visitors was a haven indeed.

I found the Peafowl came regularly morning and evening to the river. In the morning, as I have related, often before the mists had cleared away, they would come silently, and would depart after a half-hour of leisurely preening and drinking. At five in the afternoon they would come again and often remain until dark. They would sometimes wade into the shallows, always holding their trains high out of reach of the water, and more than once, after a hot day, I have seen them completely immerse their whole heads in full enjoyment of the cool water.

With one family of four, an adult cock, two hens, and a bird of the year, I became quite acquainted, although the friendship was rather one-sided, for naturally they never knew they were under surveillance. One bird, and one alone, sometimes the cock, more rarely a hen, preceded the others, and it was fascinating to see the care with which every object in sight was scrutinised. The bird would leave the shelter of the bushes with slow, high steps, scanning the water, the sandbar, the sky, the jungle in every direction. Clever indeed would the enemy have to be which could outwit the Peafowl scout at such a time. A Hornbill or drongo crossing overhead would cause a moment's hesitation.

A few minutes late, the others appeared, more or less together, but with not nearly the super alertness of the first. They evidently trusted the advance guard as to detection of general danger. One afternoon, when the leader - the cock, this time - turned without apparent reason and walked slowly back, night shut down without a single bird appearing.

By carefully going over the ground and watching at all hours, I was able to map out with considerable accuracy the daily life of these four birds. After leaving the river in early morning, they went either to a big colony of termite mounds, or to a narrow valley shut in by steep limestone walls and filled with rotting vegetation. Twice they disappeared and fed in some unknown direction, but usually I could locate them in one or the other of these two places. No skill of woodcraft would have enabled me to do this if I had had to depend on sight alone, but I could locate the birds, after a little practice, at a considerable distance by the sound of scratching and the low conversational tones which they kept up. They fed for several hours, but toward noon they invariably worked slowly toward another sandbar, farther down river, and almost wholly encircled by vegetation. In the course of my houseboat trip down the Pahang and up several of its lesser tributaries, I found three such bars, all of which seemed to form favourite siesta places for Peafowl. To this particular bar, three other birds came, but never mingled with the first four. I found a tree, strangely enough free from stinging ants and leeches, and on one of the larger branches I made an arboreal cache in which I hid myself, and, at the expense of frightfully cramped limbs, observed the birds at their noonday siesta several times in succession without being observed.

The birds are wise in this selection of a hidden sandbar. As they are almost surrounded by foliage, they can see through it and easily detect approaching danger. For the same reason, combined with approximation to the river, they are as cool as the stifling heat will permit in this region. They may drink at will and there must be food in some kind of abundance, for the younger birds seemed never to tire of scratching up the gravel and picking in the shallows. But these were exceptions. The Peafowl, as a whole, became quiescent, and either slept or preened or stood with fixed sleepy expressions, half on guard from habit, but obeying the law of the country, which demands that almost all living creatures should rest during the midday heat.

On moonlight nights, they are sometimes awake and calling for hours, and once I frightened one or more from some termite mounds in the glare of the full moon. When they roost in dense jungle, it is in such tall, dead trees as I have describe, and these they reach not by a single upward flight, but by flying into a neighbouring tree and then to the top of another, from which point of vantage they reach their lofty perch. In the morning, however, from these same trees they descent with a single splendid flight; a flutter of wings at the start, then a long descending glide, ending in another and rapid beating, and occasionally a very undignified half tumble, as they encounter a branch or low bush before they reach the ground. Four or five birds will sometimes roost in a single tree, and Doctor Ridley reports as many as seven. But they seldom or never sleep close together, or side by side, except in the case of the young birds. In more open jungle, Peafowl roost on lower trees, always choosing, as far as my experience goes, a tree whose trunk is smooth and without branches for some distance. This may be more than a coincidence, as such a selection must be of great value in guarding against the attack of small carnivores. Civets must be a constant menace to these big birds, and fortunate it is for them that their almost glandless body is practically devoid of odour. My one definite proof of an enemy was the body of a cock, surrounded by leopard tracks. Northeast of the Pahang, in the limestone den of some carnivore, I found old Peafowl feathers mixed with the fur and bones of mouse deer.

Let us pass finally straight down the Pahang to its mouth, and then, on the firm white coral sand, take a trip to the southward. Here, too, it is better to search for the birds in the evening or early morning. The fresh, cool sea air blows salt across our faces, and the heavy boom of the monsoon breakers, which bar this coast to vessels for months at a time, is pounded out on the sand, sending curling sheets of foam far up toward us. Turning inland, we pass through a grove of Casuarina trees, which gradually give way to vast stretches of tall coarse grasses, deep rooted in the half-sandy soil. Concealing myself behind one of the trees, I begin my watch. For a long time, nothing but the waving expanse of grass is visible. Then, without warning, something thin and black shoots into view far off. There is a crook at the top, and the general impression, as a Government Officer suggested, was of an umbrella handle. The glasses show the head and neck of a Peacock; then a second and a third. Stalk as carefully as one may, the spot is always deserted when one reaches it, but by concealing one's self at the base of a tuft of grass the birds will often come quite near before they detect anything wrong.

Two old nests with remnants of eggshells were in the centre of grass plots, so like thousands of others that accident alone could lead to their discovery. Here the birds breed in safety, for even Malay praus will not live in the monsoon along this coast, and the unhealthiness keeps the human inhabitants down to small numbers.

In the Malay States the Peacock is considered an unclean bird and is not eaten by the Mohammedans. They believe that it guided the serpent to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, and hence it is under an eternal curse. The Malays of other faiths are not troubled with these beliefs and readily eat the flesh. That of the young birds is delicious, but the adult cocks are unbelievably tough. They have a proverb: "Like a peacock displaying in the jungle", signifying that its beauties are wasted.

Both in Java and Burma there is a widespread belief that it is very dangerous to have Peafowl near young children, as the birds are fond of swallowing precious stones and are deceived by the eyes of the children and endeavour to peck them out.

The Green Peafowl ranges over much of Java, and I observed it, both in the mountains and not far from the coast. It never occurs directly on the coastal lowlands however. I had been shooting and studying Javan peafowl on the north shore near the eastern end of the island for some time before I went into the interior. The high rugged limestone ridges which extend at right angles to the coastline converge in some cases as they run inland, and form more or less narrow valleys. Such a one I followed for many miles and found it steadily rising and becoming more arid, and this proved to be the favourite home of the Peafowl. In character of vegetation, it was almost the counterpart of southern Ceylon, and the abundance of Peafowl and junglefowl in each case made the comparison all the more striking.

As a whole, the country is colourless; dry and dusty hues prevail, with only the tiny specks of red and orange lantana blossoms scattered over their aromatic foliage to brighten the scene. A few swallow-shrikes flapped or soared about, an oriole blazed its way across the sky, and doves, brown as the foliage, ran quickly about. Here and there a dryland kingfisher perched mournfully, on the lookout for insects. And here, in the heat, Peafowl rested under the acacias and waited for the sun to leave the zenith so that they could feed in comfort, plucking berries or scratching among the dead roots of the grass for grubs and other insects.

In the uplands of the interior of the island, the Peafowl nest among the jungle undergrowth, sometimes not far away from the coffee plantations. Where not disturbed, they frequently enter the cultivated areas morning and evening but seldom do much damage. Whenever obtainable, whiteants form their chief animal diet, and they will leave all other sources of food untouched when these termites are to be had in abundance. In the crops of Peafowl in Java, besides berries and whiteants, I found grass seeds, peppers, flower petals, crickets, grasshoppers, and small moths.

The birds are becoming rarer in Java, and before many years, as the plantations increase, they will become extinct. Pythons are said to kill them, although I have only the assertion of several gentlemen in different parts of the island as proof.

A reliable observer in Java reported to me that he had once witnessed three cocks showing off simultaneously to a pair of hens. Several people testified to the severe battles which take place during the season of courtship. One man was able to walk up within a few yards of the two combatants before their alarm overcame their pugilistic emotions. The same gentleman found a dead bird which had been pecked and spurred in a frightful manner, the breast torn open and an eye destroyed, the evidence all pointing to a duel with another bird. On another occasion, in mid-September, he found five recently hatched chicks in a dry swamp, with no signs of the parent about. But, half an hour later, all had disappeared, so the hen must have come silently and led them away.

In Java, Peafowl are in perfect plumage in June and July and August, and it is during this period at the beginning of the vast monsoon that the courtship and fighting take place. In the north, in Burma, the breeding season is about the same. The birds moult in August in the North, in October and November in Java, but there is much irregularity. Newly hatched chicks have been found from August to December in southern Burma. At Chang-lung, on the Salwin River, a female on March 21st had partly developed eggs in the ovary.

In the Malay States I found only old nests with the remnants of eggshells, but in Java I had the good luck to discover a nest with the hen sitting. This contained five eggs about half incubated. The nest was on the ground between two trees in light jungle not far from a coffee plantation. It had a secure protection from all ordinary surprise, as the trees grew from a narrow ledge which projected abruptly from the mountain slope, and the rock wall back of it made it necessary for the bird to look for danger only from in front down the hillside. The bird flew, when she saw she was discovered, with the loud screams which drew answering calls from several distant Peafowl.

As many as six chicks have been observed in Pahang following a single hen, but two seem to be the number ultimately reared to maturity, both on the coast and in the interior. Several Dutch observers, one of whom had a collection of eggs, had found nests with four, five and six eggs, all of which were complete sets. In captivity, the Green Peafowl has been known to deposit as many as eight in a single laying.

The eggs are hardly to be distinguished from those of the Indian bird, varying from dull white to a rich dark cream. I have never seen a spotted one. The average size is 78 by 53mm.

Green Peafowl are much more delicate than the Indian species, and not nearly so amenable to domestication. They breed less readily, but the chicks seem to be easily reared. In the case of eighteen individuals which have lived in the London Zoo, the average length of life was thirteen months, while one bird lived almost four years.

[The Official William Beebe website](#)

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