



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

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BIRD LITERATURE:

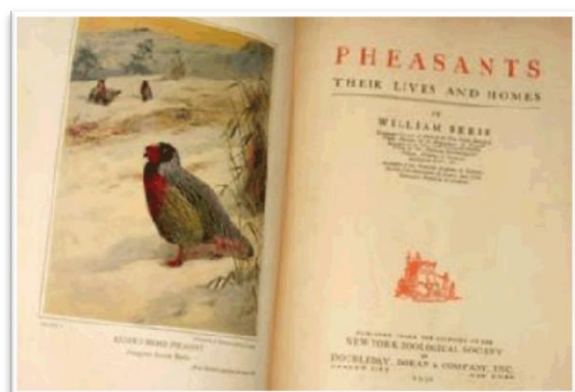
Indian Peafowl

***Pavo cristatus* (Linne)**

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From "Pheasants: Their Lives and Homes" by William Beebe.

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Brief description

MALE: A tall, spatulate crest; facial skin whitish; head and neck metallic green, back bronze, upper tail converts forming an enormously elongated train, green with numerous large ocelli, each ringed with blue and bronze; ventral plumage purplish blue; closed wings and thighs buff, the former mottled with black; flight feathers and tail cinnamon brown.

FEMALE: Head chestnut; mantle green, back brown indistinctly mottled with buff; wing coverts coarsely mottled with buff and black; throat and fore neck white; breast brownish black, fringed with greenish; under parts buff.

RANGE: India, Assam and Ceylon.

The bird in its wild home

I crouched low on a hummock of coarse dried grass. Sprawled flat, I looked through the stems toward the half-filled lagoon in front, Ceylon junglefowl were my object, and hence it was that, instead, I saw my first Peacock. Through the ensuing months I was to learn that the oblique glance was the one that most often counts, and frequently penetrates more deeply into the lives of wild creatures. So after a few lessons I gave up devoting a day to this or that pheasant. I merely went out with pheasants at the back of my brain, ready for anything which might appear. For as certainly as I sought junglefowl, that trip was sure to be replete with the excitement of Peacocks; and when I made a dead set for the latter, my trail was certain to cross that of the wilderness poultry.

I had left my hummock long before dawn. It was five o'clock when I was alone at the lake edge, hidden in my turf retreat, with the green tent cloth laid over me. Almost at once the first junglefowl crowed. Then spoonbills and pelicans arrived separately; curlews; more spoonbills, and a host of flamingos flying so high that they caught the sun's rays long before the acacia scrub was alight. Two elephants moved slowly away from the lake and swung into the jungle, and to my left five axis deer came out and fought the flies on a gentle rise of ground. In my cool ambush I seemed to be in some unfenced zoological garden, so abundant and unsuspecting were the wild creatures.

Then a familiar, long drawn-out scream reached me, and I twisted quickly enough to see a great bird with undulating feathery train glide down from a distant high tree and disappear a hundred yards away behind a ridge.

Discarding my helmet, with my luger slipped around between my shoulder blades, my glasses buttoned into my shirt and my leather elbow pads in position, I began to "caterpillar" along on my back trail. From observation on a former trip, I knew the first bit of rolling ground was a depression with a stagnant slough in the centre. I writhed and levered my way up the sandy slope, and then worked through dense grass clump, peered out, and saw nothing - at least my first glance showed no life except one the of omnipresent pairs of bee-eaters. Then a dead, angular, wooden stub, protruding from the grass, swayed, and I knew it for the head and neck of a Peacock, a real wild bird of Pan, the first I had ever seen outside of civilized surroundings. The bird was standing drawn up to its greatest height, and its attention was centered, not on me, but on the ground close to its feet. Its neck was so stretched out that it appeared attenuated to the breaking point; the head was bent forward in a position which a taxidermist would have been ashamed to imitate; the body was partly hidden by the grass. Suddenly, it gave a leap into the air, a single spring and flick of wing sending it up to six feet and over in a half-circle, the long train fanning out into a feathery mist. It alighted, and slowly approached the spot of interest again, and after a period of intense gazing, it repeated the manoeuvre. This time I saw something brown shoot quickly across an opening and then, whatever it was, the Peacock seemed to trail it for several yards and bring it to bay again. This was in an open spot, clear of turf. Slowly, with infinite caution, I got my glasses up and focused. First a blur of indefinite haze; then the brown turf in the distance coming into focus; then the glorious breast of the Peacock, and the very hazel of its eye, as distinct as though it were within reach of my arm. And finally, on the ground, a tiny vibrating point, of which I could make nothing. My eye followed it to what looked like a little mound of mottled clay, and a Russell's viper suddenly stood out clear, snapping into optical recognition. The viper was of the earth, earthy in colour, and only its tail-tip quivering with emotion betrayed it.

For ten minutes more, this strange, one-sided encounter continued, the Peacock apparently moved only by curiosity, keeping well beyond the danger line, but making the serpent strike again and again, and then followed it when it attempted to escape. Either the snake found its hole, or the bird tired, for at last, when some distance away, it left its amusement, went to the edge of the water and drank deep, lifting its head a score of times before it was satisfied. It then called loudly, familiarly, with the same cry, the same mournful intonation that one hears at home from birds which have known no real freedom for generations. It picked here and there among sedges at the water's edge, now and then finding a bit of food which occupied it for some time and required much pounding and pecking before being swallowed.

General account

Within certain limits, the Peafowl is the most sedentary of birds. Unusual drought will of course, force them to travel to new drinking places, and in the breeding season they retire to deeper, denser jungle than they ordinarily inhabit. But aside from such movements their lives are very regular, and their daily wanderings are only of sufficient extent to enable them to find food and water. When any given food supply is ensured, their visits to it are as regular as those to a drinking place, or their evening return to a favourite roost. Unless I especially indicate otherwise, all my statements in regard to this species apply to the birds which are truly feral and unprotected. For where mankind never kills or annoys them, the birds while at full liberty, alter their habits to such an extent that an account devoted to them would give very imperfect idea of the real life history of the truly feral bird. So when we see a host of wild Peafowl coming regularly at evening to a temple compound to be fed, we can hardly accept such regularity as characteristic of the species, until we know that in birds of the deep jungle the same love of routine holds good.

When certain fruits were abundant in southern Ceylon, evening after evening I have visited a narrow, water-worn gorge, certain of finding six birds there: a full-grown male feeding with three hens and a half-grown bird, while a short distance away a second year cock fed by himself. In localization, the argus, of course, leads all the pheasants, owing to its specialized dancing ground; but the kaleege and the Peafowl certainly excel in this matter of daily regularity of habit. At least in two instances which I observed, they even had favourite places for spending the heat of the day, apart from their feeding ground and their roost. All this regularity, however, on the part of the jungle birds is dependent upon their being undisturbed. If one comes suddenly upon them when feeding and thoroughly frightens them, several days may elapse before they will return to that spot.

The Peafowl is a bird of the low, hot country, seldom found at any height above sea level. Strangely enough, it is unusually amenable to acclimatization in even cold temperate regions, and can resist long periods of frost and live unprotected throughout severe, snowy winters without showing any signs of discomfort. It is by nature, truly tropical, and I have seen it walking about unconcernedly in the sun with the thermometer at 147° Fahrenheit.

As regards abundance, the question of mankind's feelings toward these birds introduces, of course a very unnatural factor. Where held sacred there may be thousands within a comparatively narrow area. In the real jungle, where they have to take their chance with other wild creatures, they appear to be relatively more abundant than other birds of their family. This is due to the fact that they are not skulking birds; their desire is to detect approaching danger as soon as possible and to escape by flight; as often as by fleetness of foot. So that passing through a particular bit of jungle, inhabited, let us say, by equal numbers of peafowl, junglefowl and pheasants, one is made aware by sight and by ear, of many more of the first than of the last two, and the wrong impression is gained that the Peafowl are by far the most abundant species.

Peafowl are gregarious birds, and seem to enjoy one another's companionship. Throughout much of the year, even the full-plumaged adult males do not object to each other's company, and only at the approach of the breeding season do they draw apart with their harems. Even the voluntary domesticity to which they yield themselves seems to have a degenerating effect on their relations with each other, and the males seem to show little of the fierce competition which certainly holds true of the isolated individuals away from man's presence and protection.

Nature has endowed the Peacock with a voice as unmusical as it is powerful, and the bird takes as much pleasure in exercising its vocal chords as it does in showing off its wonderful train. While it is especially noisy during the season of courtship, yet not a week of the year passes without the bird giving voice. Little excuse is required. A peal of thunder, the report of a gun, the noise of a falling tree is often sufficient to set calling every bird within hearing. I have known the call to be uttered while roosting in a high tree, while lying prone upon the ground, and a brave attempt made at uttering it when the bird was in full flight. When walking quietly through the deep, dense jungle, with no sound of wind or insect audible, it is most startling to hear this piercing raucous cry ring out close at hand. When a flock of birds has been scattered, especially late in the afternoon, there ensues a great calling until all are gathered again.

The cry is almost indescribable. It has a crescendo, wailing quality which can be mistaken for the note of no other bird. The note of alarm, on being suddenly flushed, is a loud *kok-kok-kok-kok!* This is also uttered, although less shrilly, at the commencement of the long upward flight at evening into the roosting tree. The call of the Peahen is not so loud, but quite as raucous. The young birds have a soft chirp, and the warning and content notes of the mother are devoid of all harshness.

Peafowl are able to rise rapidly and at a remarkably sharp angle from the place where they start. The hens can sustain themselves for a number of flights of several hundred yards each, but the cocks, when burdened with a train of full length, are less successful, and it is not at all uncommon when the birds are cornered away from dense jungle, for a number of natives to run down a Peacock and capture it with their hands. The habit of the cocks in keeping to their roosts until dew is dried up, knows that they realize what a handicap is their drenched plumage.

Their usual gait is too well known to describe. Suffice it to say that, however conscious the cock may be when showing off, much of his ridiculous swagger and stiff-legged strut is due to the mere mechanical effort to keep balanced. In a high wind, these pseudo feelings with which he is credited, are correspondingly increased.

The Indian Peafowl is omnivorous. This is to be expected in a bird whose haunts include such diversified areas. It is by preponderance a vegetarian, and the larger part of the contents of one bird's crop will usually be found to be vegetable, either grain of various kinds, or tender grass, or bamboo shoots, and flower petals if the bird inhabits the plains or jungle borders. Few types of animal life, if small enough escape them at one time or another: molluscs, insects, and grubs of all kinds, worms, small lizards, frogs, and even snakes. In some places, termite or white ants form a very important article of the diet, as they do with other pheasants.

Most of the Peafowl I secured in southern Ceylon were taken in the early morning, when the crops were still empty, but a few were shot in the evening. One of these had both the crop and gizzard crammed with panicles of grass seeds. A second had in its crop two hundred peal-like berry pods, a number of large purple berries, eight or ten large heart-shaped leaves swallowed whole, a few grass seeds, and a single walking stick insect, two inches in length.

Their fondness for berries, fruit, grain, and sprouting buds makes them very destructive to the natives' cultivated fields and to young plantations. In some places the farmer has a hard time trying to keep his crops from both the sacred Peafowl and the monkeys. He has to resort to the most ingenious devices: scarecrows, strings of glistening, jangling tin, or men and women constantly on watch to frighten off marauders.

I have mentioned the item of snakes in the diet of the Peafowl. There are several authentic instances of small snakes being taken from the crops of these birds, but, more than this, there is a fixed belief in all the countries which the Peafowl inhabit that it is the inevitable enemy of snakes great and small.

The Singhalese have a pleasing little legend, which tells how the Ground Thrush, or Pitta, once possessed the plumes of the Peacock. One day, when bathing, the peacock stole his dress, and ever since the disconsolate Pitta wanders through the jungle calling for its lost garments - *ayittam! ayittam!* (my dress! my dress!).

One will hardly deny that the chief *raison d'etre* of the train is the effect produced on the Peahen. But it has come to serve other requirements, and seems to provide an outlet for a number of emotions, some apparent, others obscure. Cock birds, before they begin flight, will often erect their trains and walk about one another, although when the first actual threat is made these ornaments are folded away as compactly as possible, so as not to interfere with active movement. Hens with their chicks erect their tails, although the train is wholly lacking, and then rush forward to any foe which may threaten their brood. The chicks themselves, with scarce-grown juvenile tail, will raise this diminutive fan and imitate the fighting tactics of their elders when only a few weeks old.

It is also true that the cock birds will very often display to a crowd of people, with no hen about and however we, as scientists, desire to eliminate all humanizing of the habits of birds, it is difficult to refute the common verdict that the peacock is vain and consciously proud of its plumage, and that it derives pleasure from the gaze of admiring throngs. In zoological parks these birds certainly never display as often for as long-continued periods as when numbers of people are present. Under such conditions, I have known birds, scores of times, to display for half an hour at a time with no hen in sight, turning around and showing their beauties in all directions. Appearances certainly favour the opinion of the layman.

As to sexual selection, I need only repeat my belief, already expressed in the case of other species, that the Peahen exercises no conscious aesthetic choice, but is profoundly influenced in some subconscious way by colour, movement, voice, and quill music, and especially by the persistent repetition of these phenomena. I have known of an instance where a young, short-spurred rather unornamental cock was successful over two adult males, but in this case although constantly driven away by one of the other older birds, he never failed to return as soon as their backs were turned, and during the time I could spare to watch he displayed his small beauties twice as often as the others, and eventually won the hen, although, even after pairing, he was kept on the run much of the time by his unsuccessful rivals.

On the whole, there seems little danger of this bird's extermination, and Peafowl will probably survive long after most of the pheasants have vanished from earth.

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