



# MY PHEASANTS

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**It is over 40 years ago that I bought my first pheasant— a Common Pheasant cockerel—which was pinioned and free-ranged with my bantam chickens. Sadly, within a few days the bird had disappeared. After losing more birds, I decided to build my first aviary. It measured about 6 x 3 metres and housed a Lady Amherst, a Gold pheasant and a Ringneck pheasant—males only—to prevent fighting.**

Today I apply myself to the breeding of several purebred species, which is becoming more difficult lately, as crossbreds are becoming more common and there is also a ban on importing. The following species are bred by me.

## **Common or Ring-neck pheasant**



These are originally native to China; beautiful birds with a white neck ring. They have a long tail and lustrous plumage in all shades of copper. They are the cheapest to buy; nevertheless I like them very much. It is a well-known game bird, commonly bred and introduced to many parts of the world. It is 'naturalised' in Europe, and in Holland, can be found in the wild, due to captive breeding reinforced by continual releases of stock into the wild. They are easy to keep in an aviary and are shy in the beginning, but over time when calmly approached, they will even come and eat out your hand.

They don't need housing for the night and even when provided, are not likely to use it. Here they have a simple shelter, but they obviously don't mind staying out in the rain. During the night they like to sleep on a high roost, hidden between the branches of the trees. These pheasants can be kept together with chickens, quails, partridges or even with pigeons.

The birds are fed a special granule for pheasants/fancy birds, with an additional mix for turtle doves and lots of greens, fruits and berries.

I recently built a new aviary which will be planted with one or two larger conifers, laurel, privet plants, grasses and some heaths and heathers. On the netting covering, I plan to grow climbing plants like blackberries, climbing roses, Chinese fleece vine and grapes. This will provide more shade in summer and also provide shelter for the hens when the males become too sexually demanding in spring. Moreover they will hopefully serve as brood cover. In the coming spring I will put some pigeons with them and some partridges, and I hope to get some offspring.

They are reasonably quiet and peaceful birds, only during the mating season or when alarmed is their cry often heard. I have two hens and one rooster and each year they produce a number of good quality setting eggs. The eggs are greenish grey in color.

Having their new housing now, I hope they can be moved to natural brooding in the coming season. They usually lay about 7-8 eggs per brood which hatch in 23 days. If you keep taking the eggs away, you can collect about 20 to 30 eggs.

I cannot definitely say these beautiful pheasants are purebred, because of the amount of hybridisation in the past. One day I hope to be able to purchase a pair which is proven pure by DNA testing.



Note that these pheasants must be ringed.

### **Southern Caucasus Pheasant**

*Phasianus colchicus colchicus*

These beautiful birds look a lot like the Common Pheasant, but without the white neck ring. They are endemic to the Caucasus Mountains and like the Common pheasant it is an introduced game bird. In Holland it can be found in the wild, but is often crossed with other subspecies.

They are kept by only a few hobby breeders, which is a pity, as they are very beautiful. Fortunately the interest in these birds is increasing in Europe, and in the United States there is a lot of interest in keeping the Southern Caucasus Pheasant.



I have had a pair myself for a year and next year I hope to breed them for the first time. Feeding and care is the same as for the Ring-necks, and their habits are the same. Compared to the Ring-neck, the hens are a bit darker coloured on the back. They are true beauties to watch, in particular when the sunshine highlights their plumage. I keep them in an open aviary together with Spotted doves.

These pheasants must also be ringed.



**Green Pheasant** *Phasianus versicolor*

This beautiful pheasant looks a lot like the two aforementioned pheasants. The female is dark in colour and the rooster is predominantly green.

I had these for a few years but unfortunately the eggs were always infertile, and for that reason, I gave them away. I think they need a very quiet loft where they can quietly retreat to mate. I have another place reserved for a new pair though, that will be planted with a lot of greenery for them to shelter in. This species is really easy to keep and they have nearly the same requirements as the Ring-neck and Common pheasants.

*Below: Colour print from the book 'Kwartels en Fazanten' by A. Rutgers.*



### **Tenebrosus Pheasant**

Below: My first Tenebrosus chicks, at one-day old. In 12 weeks time the feather colouring gives a good clue which are the males. (photo right)



**Below: Developing into mature male plumage.**



### **Lady Amherst Pheasant**

This colourful ruffed pheasant species originates from south-west China and Burma. About 40 years ago I had kept a pair of these birds, and still I think these are very nice birds to keep.

It is such a pity that almost no purebred Lady Amherst are for sale, as almost all of them have one time or another been crossed with a Red Golden Pheasant. Fortunately some members of [Aviornis](#) started a project to register the purebred Lady Amherst pheasants and in this way we hope to identify a breeding population of pure birds.

At the moment I have one pair and a spare rooster. It took me a great search to find—hopefully—a pure pair.

**Right: A purebred Lady Amherst male.**







**Left: This fault is commonly seen: a Lady Amherst Pheasant that shows some hybridisation with a Golden Pheasant. The tail has a different marking and also the crest feathers are too long and too red. It sure is a beautiful bird to see, but no good for breeding.**

**Below:**  
In spite of the dashing colours of its plumage, the rooster is still well camouflaged in the vegetation.

In the aviary these pheasants are a delight to see and—if the aviary is large enough—can be kept with almost all sorts of birds (except other pheasants). Caring for them is very simple: just like the other pheasants they get granules with some pigeon and cage bird mix. Greens or vegetables and grit are also provided. They do not need a closed or heated loft, not even for the night, because they prefer to sleep outside on a high perch. At my place they only come inside the loft to eat.



In early spring, courting begins and the cock will call to the hens—he is very bright and busy hissing—but no other birds will be harassed as he is only interested in the hens. From May the hens start to lay creamy-white eggs.

**Below: Broody hen with newly hatched chicks.**







The hens prefer to lay the eggs in old milk-churns, tucked away between the bushes. They will defend their nests and chase away all other birds that come too close to the nest. They are good sitters and mothers and the natural way of breeding is quite possible with the Lady Amherst, although the Dutch climate is often too wet to rear the chicks. I usually take away the first clutch of eggs and put it in the incubator and let them brood their second clutch.

My Amherst pheasants are housed in an aviary of 27 square metres with separate housing for the night of nine square metres. The ground in the aviary is a thick layer of sand with large conifers and various bushes and smaller plants. I

created a sort of hilly landscape with large stones and an old trunk standing as a look-out post. They are kept together with Grey Jungle Fowls, Zebra Finches, Java Sparrows, Chinese Painted Quails, California Quails, Rock Partridges, Diamond Doves, Laughing Doves and Emerald Doves. They all go well together and breed happily in this aviary—which is so profusely planted—each bird can find a place to brood.

**Right: A young male, already clearly recognisable by its tail.**

The roosters get their full coloured plumage only after the second large moult, but you can pair them after their first winter. The sexes can be identified at an early age. These beautiful pheasants are suitable for novice breeders and I would recommend them for anyone looking for a quiet pheasant that can be kept in a mixed aviary with other birds.



### **The Golden Pheasant**

This is another beautiful ruffed pheasant endemic to western China, where they live in high, stony hills with bamboo woods. They feed on seeds, berries, green sprouts and insects. The roosters create places to display and charm the females with their colourful plumage. The females choose the most colourful rooster to mate with and then hide to make a nest and care for their chicks all by themselves.

In China, these pheasants have been kept in captivity for thousands of years, and in Holland they have also been kept for many years. Over that time many different colours have been created by hybridisation, the Yellow and the Dark-throated being the most common. This has resulted in there being only few pure Golden Pheasants left in the wild.

Fortunately, a number of pheasant breeders in cooperation with Aviornis initiated a breeding specialist group and collected a large number of birds which are likely to be pure. The offspring of these ruffed pheasants are ringed with special ring numbers from the '5000 series', making them recognisable as purebred pheasants from this breeding plan.



I keep some pairs myself. They are in open aviaries with shelter against wind and rain. They flourish here. A few of my aviaries need more vegetation to provide proper shelter in spring for the hens and to offer a good nesting place to lay their eggs.

I prefer to give the rooster more than one hen, thus he can divide his attention between the various ladies.

I feed them a commercial blend of pellets for pheasants and ornamental fowl, with additional poultry or pigeon corn mix and lots of greenstuffs from my garden. They eat grated carrots and also like fruits, so all year long I feed them apples and other fruits from my garden, such as all kinds of berries and grapes.

Because the roosters are very lively and noisy during the mating season, it is best to keep them in a large aviary. This way their tails don't get damaged and they stay beautiful for a longer time. You can keep the Golden Pheasants with almost all kinds of other birds (apart from other pheasants).



**Right: The yellow gold pheasant. These are only bred in captivity.**

The breeding is problem-free. At the end of April, the hen starts to lay and hide her eggs, but as with the Lady Amherst, I take these first eggs away as it is often too cold and wet for the little chicks. I incubate these eggs in my incubator and rear the chicks under a heat-lamp.

The chicks get pheasant chick starter crumbles, mixed with 'universal' food, moistened with cod-liver oil and some yeast extract added. This always gives me healthy youngsters that never have crooked breast bones.





When they are old enough to be without the extra heat, I place them in a somewhat darkened room to prevent fighting—just until they are old enough not to lose their leg ring. As soon as that ring fits, they can go in the outside aviary where they can grow to adulthood.

With natural breeding—not before mid-May—I let the hens brood their eggs and don't interfere. When the chicks have hatched, I provide them with starter crumbs, just like the ones that are hand-raised by me. When the weather is stable, warm and not too wet, natural breeding often succeeds fairly well. The netting must be fine enough so the chicks cannot escape and not wander away from their mother. Pheasant chicks are often very enterprising and apart from losing their mother, they can be an easy prey for crows and cats.

The Golden Pheasant males get their fully-coloured plumage in their second year, but first-year birds are often fertile.

When purchasing a pair of adult Golden Pheasants, be aware there are a lot of hybrids for sale. Don't buy or breed with these. It is better to find a pair of purebreds to start your hobby. Purebreds are no more expensive than hybrids; it only takes some time to find them. But when you have them, you will enjoy them for many years to come.



### **The Silver Pheasant**

These beautiful pheasants are endemic to China and are extremely hardy and can withstand the winter cold. They need a dry and sheltered place to eat and sleep, which makes them a perfect aviary bird and great for beginners to pheasant-keeping. They are ideally kept in a large aviary; one rooster with several hens. During the mating season Silver cocks are often aggressive to other species and are known to attack. I always keep a close eye on the rooster and never turn my back to him as

they can also attack their keepers and inflict wounds with their sharp spurs.

The hen incubates her own eggs and the rooster often participates with the rearing of the chicks.

Silvers do not achieve their brilliant plumage until their second year. First year males often have many black markings in the crest and on the chest. They get the same food as the Golden, and also like some tinned cat or dog food.





### Reeves Pheasant

This spectacular pheasant with its very long tail is endemic to central China. The male's long tail feathers have been used for ornamental purposes for thousands of years.



They are beautiful and graceful birds that are very hardy and able to withstand winter cold; a dry corner out of the wind will do. I keep them in a large aviary covered with netting, together with chickens and peacocks. Breeding them is quite easy. The hens lay many eggs and are good broodies. I usually take the first eggs away to hatch in the incubator. The eggs are whitish grey.

The chicks are easily reared and they grow rather quickly. The roosters get their full colouring in the first year. I leave the later clutches for the hens to brood, which they do very well.

They are fed a commercial blend of pellets for pheasants and ornamental fowl, with additional poultry or pigeon corn mix. Fruits and greens are very much to their liking with a little bit of tinned dog food thrown in.

During the mating season the cocks are very demanding—I usually put five hens with the cock, so he can divide his charms between them and the hens get some rest.



### Eliot's Pheasant *Syrmaticus ellioti*

The Eliot's pheasant belongs to the long-tailed pheasants (Genus-Syrmaticus ) and is endemic to the south-east Chinese provinces of Tsekiang, Fokien and Anwei. Due to changes in their original habitat—thick mixed forests changed into bamboo woods—their number in the wild has decreased alarmingly.

The Eliot's Pheasant first arrived in Europe in 1874 and the first successful breeding was in 1880 in Paris.

The males will attain their beautiful adult plumage in the first year and are sometimes also fertile in their first year. They need a large aviary and don't need a heated loft for the night. The aviary must have ample shrubs and trees to provide plenty of cover for the hens to escape, as the males can sometimes be



quite aggressive towards them and keep chasing them all day long.

I keep one rooster together with two hens, hoping the rooster will spread his attention between both hens.

Usually the hens lay between six to eight eggs per clutch and incubation takes 25 days. When the eggs are laid early in spring, I take away the first eggs and incubate them in the incubator and hand-raise the chicks. The second clutch I leave with the hen, but again, if the weather is too bad, I take away the chicks and raise them with a heat-lamp.

The young are fed with a quality starter mash for pheasants. Daily additions are universal food, boiled eggs and chopped up insects. Every now and then they are treated with some extra animal protein in the form of crickets, meal worms or minced-meat.

The adult birds are fed pheasant pellets. Various mixtures for specific periods, such as breeding season, moult or grow are available. The advantage of these pellets is that they contain everything that pheasants need. I still like to feed them some turtle dove grains and other seeds, a bit of tinned cat or dog food, universal food, meal worms every now and then, and lots of fruits and greens.

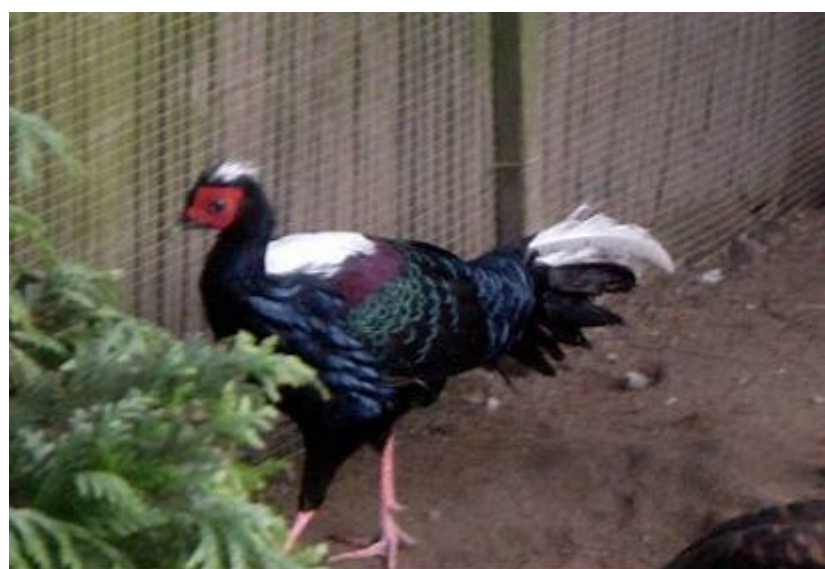
They are easy birds to keep that make few demands and will give you much pleasure for many years.

### **Swinhoe's Pheasant**

This very colourful pheasant is endemic to the forests of Taiwan. Swinhoe's are one of the best beginner pheasants and there are many captive-bred birds. It takes two years for the roosters to get the full brilliancy of their plumage. The hens are mostly brown, speckled with triangular yellowish-buff markings. They are easy to keep, but do require a roomy aviary with lots of cover, but only a minimal (dry) shelter is needed as they are very hardy and can withstand both extremes of temperature. Breeding goes well with first-year birds often being fertile. They are best kept as a pair, because the hens tend to fight each other. I am in possession of two pairs and they are kept without problems together with other birds like pigeons, partridges and ducks.

They are related to the Silver and Siamese Fireback pheasants, but although they are larger, I find they are less aggressive. Even so, it is safer to keep an eye on the cock during breeding season.

Their main food is pheasant pellets but as with the other varieties, the Swinhoe's also get extras like chicken grain mix and apples, pears or bananas. Also vegetables from my garden like grated carrots, cabbage, lettuce and depending on which are ripe, raspberries and grapes.





Moreover I moisten the feed a bit with cod-liver oil, garlic oil or wheat germ oil and sprinkle some yeast extract over it. Only once in a while they get some canned dog food or meal worms.

The first eggs can be expected in April, but I take those away and put them in my incubator. The second clutch will be laid in May and I let the hen incubate them. This goes without problems. The rooster has no interest in the young; the chicks are cared for by the hen and she will viciously defend them against intruders. The chicks get pheasant starter pellets and the same extras as the older birds; with this way of feeding they grow fast and do well. The chicks are rung when they are about eight weeks old. Leg rings are mandatory in Europe; the advised size is 14 millimetre. This is also the right time to give the young birds separate housing, and at this age the males and the females can be recognised by the colour of the plumage.



**Right: A young cockerel in the snow.**  
**They don't mind snow or cold weather.**

### **Siamese Fireback**

Another beautiful pheasant species, the Siamese Fireback is endemic to Laos and Thailand. Although these birds are from tropical regions, they can be kept in our climate without problems—there is even no need for heated housing in winter. A dry and wind-free shelter will do. The feathers at the middle of the back are bright yellow (hence the name "fireback").

**Below: Siamese Fireback, the "fireback" only shows when it claps its wings.**



A few years ago I purchased some young birds and composed two fine pairs from those. They are housed in large, well-planted aviaries, along with a number of doves. They are very tame but the males will protect the aviaries from intruders. They breed in their third year, so this season I expect to get some experience breeding these beautiful birds.

I feed them pellets for ornamental fowl, supplemented with pigeon mix and fresh greens. These pheasants like to eat canned dog food too and will take meal worms out of my hand.

### Eared pheasants

Eared pheasants are beautiful, large pheasants. There are four species which are commonly kept in captivity: White-Eared Pheasant, Tibetan-Eared Pheasant, Brown-Eared Pheasant and Blue-Eared Pheasant.



I have been breeding the Blue-Eared Pheasant *Crossoptilon auritum* (Pallas) for several years now. Males and females are almost similar. The rooster has spurs and is a bit larger than the hen. Sometimes a hen may also have small spurs.

These pheasants are endemic to western China and east of Tibet, where they live in the mountains and tablelands almost to the snow-line.

In the wild they live in groups of 40 to 50 birds, except in the mating season, when the rooster and the hen live monogamous. The hen lays

eight–15 eggs that she incubates alone, while the rooster stays around and watches over the nest. When the chicks have hatched both parents watch over them together.

Here they are kept in a large run covered with nets, together with turkeys and Lakenfelder chickens. The rooster is very tame and eats out of my hand. It is often said—and may well be true—that the males can become very aggressive towards their keeper, however, that has never happened here. The rooster can be fiery however, when defending the hen and nest. Even the turkey tom keeps well away then.

In the beginning the breeding was not successful. I fed them too much grain mix and kept trying to have them sleep in the loft during the





night. Time after time they suffered with respiratory disease and were simply not in a good condition. Now I leave them alone and they almost always sleep outside on the highest possible position. They don't seem to mind wind, rain or even snow. Last winter during the many long, cold nights, they decided to sleep inside for a while.

The pheasants are now in good condition and have shiny plumage almost all year round.

They are fed premium brand chicken grain mix and pheasant pellets, supplemented with lots of fruits and greens, some mealworms and twice per week a small can of dog food. This food brings them in



excellent condition and each year I can expect offspring. I take the first clutch of eggs away from the hen after about two weeks, hatch them in my incubator and rear the chicks under a heat-lamp. The reason is that with natural brooding and rearing by the old hen so early in season, things often go wrong because of the cold and wet weather. The second clutch she can brood and rear herself.

The chicks are fed with starter pellets for ornamental fowl and a little bit of dove seed-mix. They also get universal feed and egg feed. From time-to-time I moisten the feed with some cod-liver oil and add some yeast extract (to prevent crooked breast bones.) The larger chicks get greens and fruits, plus a tidbit of minced meat or canned dog food.

Eared pheasants like to dig and make large holes in the soil looking for grubs, insects and roots. These holes are welcomed by the chickens and turkeys for use as sand baths.

### **In conclusion**

Fanciers keep pheasants because they are especially beautiful birds. With adequate care you may enjoy your pheasant for 10 to sometimes 20 years. Novice breeders are often told to start with 'simple' species but in my opinion there is no such thing—although there are cheaper and easy to grow varieties. All pheasants are wild birds and need a lot of attention from their keeper. Do not be fooled by thinking: "What a beautiful bird", rather see if the bird (the species) suits you, as many pheasants are quite fiery and not everyone will like such a characteristic.