



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

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

PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia

BIRD LITERATURE:

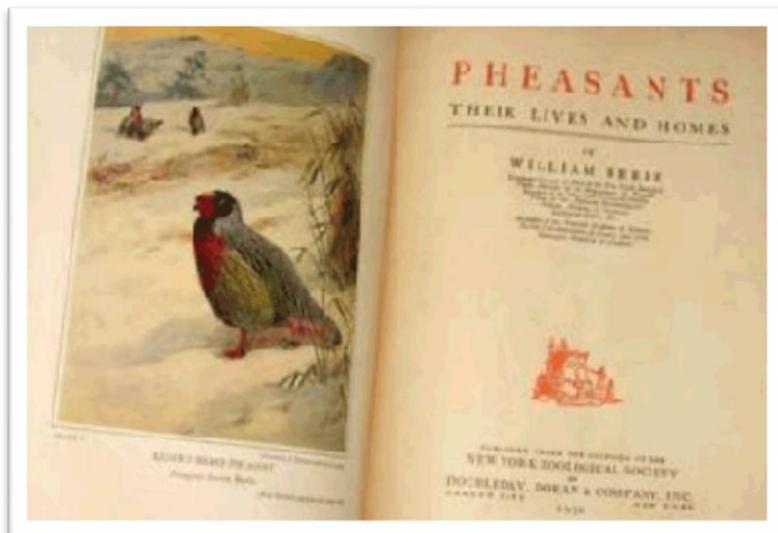
Silver Pheasant

Lophura nycthemera (Linnaeus)

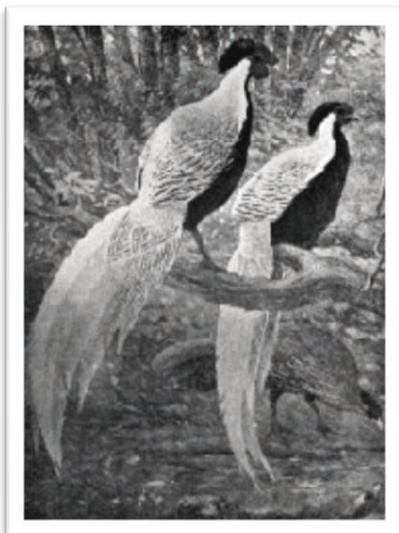
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From "*Pheasants: Their Lives and Homes*" by William Beebe Published under the auspices of the New York Zoological Society by Doubleday, Page & Co., New York. 1926.



Brief Description



Male:

Top of the head, long hairy crest and underparts black, glossed with purple; upper parts white, the feathers peppered, or on the wings lined, with four to six black converging lines; tail very long, centre feathers white, others with numerous oblique lines.

Female:

Crest blackish brown; throat brownish white; entire body plumage and central tail feathers olive-brown, finely mottled with dusky lines; outer tail feathers black, with irregular oblique white and olive lines.

Range:

South China, from central Yunnan east to Fokien. Also found south of Tonkin and northern Laos.

The Bird in its Wild Home

It was the [Ides of March](#) among the tumbled mountain ranges of Fokien. A week's rain had freshened the landscape and swelled each bud and lichen, and under the heat of the midday sun the myriad lives in egg and chrysalid were stirring restlessly. When I left the river bank in early morning the wind blew cold, but after a climb of a thousand feet the sun's warmth seemed that of midsummer. Although frost was almost unknown, yet the air filled with springy odours, and, to the eye, Nature revealed herself as awakening after a long winter's sleep.

The hills, ravines and mountains surrounded us, their steep, rounded outlines broken here and there by weathered cliffs of blackish rock. A soft coat of green covered the slopes, but nowhere were the dark spires of the forest. Cultivation must be all but impossible here, but the hordes of yellow men of this and countless past generations had gleaned again and again, and left only sprouting pines and brush bamboo. Grass was almost absent, its place taken everywhere by a low, coarse fern brake, covering densely every available inch from water's edge to mountain top.

I crouched and watched the south side of the open valley. Along the bottom flowed a quiet green stream; here and there were stubbled rice fieldlets, most of them only a few yards extent.

Two beautiful [shrikes](#) clung to a reed nearby, and now and then flew into a clump of brush, searching for insect food like [vireos](#). They were at last driven away by a flock of black [mynas](#), which whirled down to the fields and began to feed.

Now, an interesting sequence of happenings delighted me. A flock of a dozen [magpies](#) was searching busily through the ferns on an overhanging bank. Occasionally, one flew down and grubbed out a hollow with its beak among newly ploughed clods of small rice terrace below. It dropped something into the hole and carefully covered it up before flying again. After two or three magpies had repeated this, a hen Silver Pheasant walked slowly out into the field, followed by another hen and a cock, and all scratched vigorously where the magpies had been delving. Good sized black objects were found and beaten vigorously before being swallowed. For half an hour this went on, the magpies continuing to bring down objects and bury them, and the pheasants to dig them up and devour them. Neither species paid any attention to the other. Whilst this was going on, a creamy white, weasel-like animal appeared, winding along below the bank. A bit of earth dislodged by a magpie fell almost on the creature, and it turned and dashed back to shelter.

In order to solve the problem of the magpies and pheasants, I crept nearer, but missed in a try for one of the latter. With the second barrel I secured a magpie which had just started to fly down to the field with one of its treasures in its beak. I ran to the fallen bird and found a partly crushed [cockchafer](#), or June-bug lying close to it. In the mouth of the bird was a leg of the beetle, and in its crop eight more of the insects. The magpies had been feasting to repletion on the newly emerged beetles, and then, for reasons best known to themselves, had chosen to work hard at burying all the others they could find. The pheasants had come into the field to scratch for food and, having uncovered several of the newly buried toothsome morsels in the tracks of the magpies, had seemed to realise that these birds were in some way connected with this manna; and, for the last ten minutes, hardly had the magpie started back for the bank when one of the pheasants unearthed its cache.

General Account

Like the [Golden Pheasant](#), the Chinese Silver Pheasant is one of the best known of its group in captivity. The two are still further alike in their isolation in a wild state. While we may purchase a pair of Silvers for a very small sum and be quite certain of rearing numerous young birds to maturity, there is no authentic record of the finding of a nest of wild birds, and, in fact, only the most meagre of notes even of distribution.

In spite of numerous repetitions of the fact, there seems to be no definite record of a Silver Pheasant in Chekiang. [Abbe David](#) asserted, as long ago as 1877, that it was becoming very rare in its wild haunts, but gave no reason for the statement. In Fokien, several naturalists have found it in numbers, and back from the seacoast I observed it in isolated parts of the country.

There is considerable shooting and trapping of the birds on the part of natives, but no systematic collecting for their feathers such as I noted in Yunnan. One method reported by the Chinese is to build a rough shelter of boughs and to scatter around it quantities of grain. When the birds have become accustomed to come day after day for food, the hunter conceals himself in the shelter and shoots the pheasants as they come to the grain. The dead birds are not disturbed, and by remaining quietly concealed, it is said that as many as eight may be obtained in a single morning. I have described a similar disregard for the noise of gunfire on the part of related species of Burmese pheasants. The Chinese hunters are also reported to shoot the birds by torchlight from their roosts. It is said that the civil mandarins wear a Silver Pheasant embroidered on the heart and back badges of their official dresses to indicate their rank. It is certainly one of the favourite subjects for decorative painting and embroidery among the Chinese.

The insight which I could gain into their lives showed that their habits differed in no way from other [kaleege](#). I never saw a bird at midday, but in early morning and late afternoon, their noisy scratching would reveal their whereabouts, and a careful stalk would sometimes give a chance for a shot or a glimpse of white-and-black plumage. I observed a regularity of movements, no accustomed trail toward water, and so was unable to head them off or intercept them. They seemed to wander about with but little definite direction in view, and I could locate no roosts.

The food of those I examined consisted chiefly of insects, such as grubs and [wire-worms](#), together with a less quantity of various kinds of berries, and occasionally flower petals and leaves. La Touche tells of four eggs brought in by a Chinaman in Central Fokien said to belong to the Silver Pheasant. In captivity, the Chinese Silver Pheasant is one of the readiest breeders. Indeed, no fewer than seventy-two fertile eggs have been laid by three hens in a season. The eggs are broad ovals, rather glossy, and without pigment markings. They vary in ground colour from pale to warm reddish buff, usually cafe au lait, and average of many eggs is 39 by 51mm. From four to six eggs seem to form a complete set, and the period of incubation is twenty-five to twenty-six days. There are authentic records of cock birds in captivity which have lived twelve, eighteen, and even twenty-one years.

Birds both living and dead are brought for sale into the large Chinese cities, such as Foochow, Amoy, and Canton, but all have been trapped or shot, and I doubt if the pheasants are ever reared by the Chinese.

In Europe and the United States, however, it is one of the commonest of its family with dealers, and is one of the first to be obtained and bred by the amateur. While these birds are beautiful and hardy, their pugnacious habits make it inadvisable to confine them closely with other birds, and even if given the freedom of coverts, they will usually drive off the other species of pheasants. When a pair is allowed to pair and nest, the cock is very faithful in attendance upon the female and in defence of the young, and this unquestionably points to the monogamous habits of the wild birds. The cock, of course, usually has nothing to do with incubation, although there is a record of one bird sitting on the eggs. When a second batch was laid, the cock, in fully adult plumage, began to incubate, and so successfully that three young Silvers were hatched, and were reared by the combined efforts of both birds. This is every unusual, however. But the cock vigorously opposes any threatened danger, and will fearlessly launch himself at the head of anyone of whom he has suspicions, and has been known to follow a person indoors to continue his assault. The hens are equally brave, and will drive away cats and dogs when they are with a brood of young chicks.

As furnishing sport in private preserves, they are unsatisfactory, as they are difficult to flush, preferring to escape on foot, and even when they take to wing, they merely skim the underbrush, offering little chance for other than snapshots, and these dangerous to beaters and to fellow sportsmen. Birds shot under such circumstances have been described as very inferior in flesh, but two which I had cooked in the field left nothing to be desired. The chief objections to their artificial establishment as game birds are their tameness and their habit of coming close to houses and gardens.

The wing whirring and courtship are like those of the other kaleege pheasants, and the former habit is not confined to the breeding season but seems to function as a warning signal, and probably in other ways as well. The usual kaleege, broken, semi-harsh, semi-liquid, guttural cry is characteristic of this species.

When courting, there seems to be usually a quite definite utterance, combined with a wing whirr. The cock approaches the hen slowly and in an indirect sidling manner. He then stops suddenly, faces her, stands erect, and utters a two-syllabled note, something like ohr-chac! short and sudden, the accent on the first syllable. This is instantly followed by an equally short and sharp whirr, thus; ohr-chac (whirrrr!). Then the cock runs or walks swiftly around the hen, with tail and wings spread widely, showing them laterally or frontally, according to his position relative to her eyes.

When the wing whirr is given as a note of suspicion or upon some similar provocation, it is usually double, thus, whir! whirrrrrr! - a short, quick beat, followed by a long roll, during which the half open wings vibrate back and forth in a maze of motion within a small arc at the sides of the body, the bird standing erect.

[The Official William Beebe Web Site](#)
[Silver Pheasant \(from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia\)](#)

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