Bornean and Malayan Crested Fireback Pheasants

(Lophura ignita ignita) (Lophura ignita ruta)

by Ed Lawrence
Woodland Hills, California

As the photos accompanying this article so graphically depict, these are two extremely handsome and striking members of the pheasant family; highly ornamented and turned out. Along with English trifle and Texas longhorns, their respective places of origin are rather sensibly a part of their name, and thus I will not repeat the obvious. While they are under the same kinds of habitat pressure shared by other avian species of the tropical forest areas, these two species are reported to be holding their own currently. Even though they are highly desirable specimens, they are certainly not commonplace in captivity, and the Malayan crested fireback is becoming especially difficult to obtain. If present trends continue, the Malayan crested fireback will soon be an endangered species in captivity, regardless of its status in the wild.

One of the big problems in raising firebacks and other pheasants is obtaining unrelated stock for breeding purposes. I am sure this same difficulty exists with regard to other species of birds. Much of the problem can be laid directly at the doorstep of breeders who, in the past and even today, act in total disregard of the most basic concepts of genetics and improvement through selective breeding.

Truly unrelated birds, given the proper maintenance and environment, will produce strong, healthy offspring that have a will to live, and will be anxious to reproduce upon achieving sexual maturity. Inbred birds, given the same maintenance and environment, will produce offspring that have a genetic predisposition towards disaster. The inbred offspring will harbor within their genetic background all the distilled evil that was masked in unrelated birds, and they will have a much depressed ability to reproduce.

This is so axiomatic that it causes pain when you hear breeders state such hoary falsehoods as, “It is okay to breed brother and sisters together for one generation.” If it was not detrimental to breed brothers and sisters of any species together, there would not be a universal taboo that is as deep as our DNA condemning it. The most primitive tribal societies have abjured the practice. The courts and the temples have always forbidden it as an abomination, and for good reason. The experience of mankind has shown it to be a destructive practice, and yet, some people who seriously call themselves aviculturists persist in the bizarre belief that a little incest and pollution of the gene pool is a permissible expedient, especially if breeding season rolls around and all you have are some closely related stock. Better not to breed than to breed related stock. Better to break the eggs on the driveway or throw them against the wall than to hatch out incestuous offspring. And to peddle such offspring onto an unsuspecting public should be enough to bar you from entry at the Pearly Gates. At least they should make you take a seat in the waiting room while they try to clear up the mess and heartache you caused, before further processing your entry form.

1. Aviculturists are entrusted to make good use of their stock to perpetuate and improve, not to destroy and diminish the stock. As holders of a trust, we are held to a much higher

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duty than someone who doesn't know any better. "Those to whom much is given, much is expected."

2. The purchaser of stock that is from closely related ancestors is buying problems, and when his stock fails to perform to expectations, he becomes depressed and spends money and time trying to correct what can't be corrected. Eventually, aviculture loses another aviculturist to despondency resulting from inbred stock.

3. You can't tell by looking at a bird whether it is from strong, unrelated stock or carries within itself the genetic disaster of incestuous inbreeding. You have to rely on the people from whom you purchased your birds. To maximize your chances of obtaining unrelated birds, I would first of all encourage you to deal with pairs existing in aviculture. They are few robust, unrelated breeding pairs available where they can cover their feet by hunkering down and using their body heat and feathers as insulation. If it gets colder than that for any period of time, I would urge that some form of heat be provided to them, for firebacks are birds of the tropics. In nature, they don't hang around ski lifts or Christmas card scenes. They are very hardy, seemingly long-lived, and moderately difficult to raise. The Siamese firebacks are easier to propagate.

I have one Malayan crested fireback hen that is driving me to despair and, perhaps, by sharing my frustration with you I will undergo a kind of therapy. It can't hurt.

This particular hen celebrated her third year of life last spring and proceeded to lay many perfectly formed eggs with great regularity. She and her male companion appear to share a common interest in a mutually fulfilling heterosexual relationship, and one would naturally expect that, in the grand scheme of things, many little Malayan crested firebacks would have been raised last season. Fic on the thought!

She attacked each egg as it was laid; piercing, cracking, smashing, busting, purposely destroying her unborn young like some poor demeaned soul in a Greek tragedy of mythic proportions. "And how are the kids, Medea?"

To stop this infanticide, I have camped at her pen and, like a voyer, watched her every move as she prepares with clock-like regularity to lay her next egg. And watchfully, she would wait until I blinked an eye, and then she would instantly lay and destroy it; not quite in mid-air, but nearly so. I have retrieved broken eggs from her that still retained her own body heat. I mean that is really

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incredible, and I am the one that is suffering post-partum depression, not her. She seems to relish the whole thing, although she never eats any part of the egg, indicating that her needs are psychological and not the result of some metabolic disorder or nutritional deficiency.

Various suggestions have been put forward by friends who are concerned about my well-being. "Get rid of the bird," is one that is too simplistic when you consider how nearly impossible it is to find a mature, egg laying hen of this species. "Tie a blindfold on her," isn't as preposterous as it first sounds; and I may put some kind of "blinker" on her this spring which will impair her vision so she will have to crack her eggs using the Braille system which, I suspect, she is currently studying in preparation for my next move. "Flood her pen with chicken eggs" has been another thought that several have suggested, but I have visions of her standing in the middle of a vast yellow sea of uncooked omelette, and her latest addition will be in the middle, cracked irremediably, like a bad marriage.

I will not let her defeat me. I will persevere and prevail.

Each spring our thoughts turn from contemplating our past failures, and we look forward to the challenges that are ahead; for, of all the species on this small planet, we are undoubtedly the most hopeful and optimistic. We must be. We couldn't have come this far without it. Pray for me.●