

Silver Pheasants

Lophura nycthemera

by Dan Cowell
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The Silver Pheasant is one of the best known and popular pheasant species in captivity and is well represented in captivity. Silver Pheasants have been kept as captive birds for many centuries and are also well represented in ancient Chinese art and poetry.

Range and Subspecies

Silver Pheasants are native to southern China, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia in a variety of habitats.

Jean Delacour describes 14 subspecies in *Pheasants of the World*, with the True Silver Pheasant *Lophura nycthemera nycthemera* being the most commonly kept. The True Silver is the largest of the subspecies and is found in southeastern China. The other subspecies include the Lewis's Silver Pheasant *L.n. lewisi*, the Annamese Silver Pheasant *L. n. annamensis*, the Boloven Silver Pheasant *L. n. engelbachi*, the Bel's Silver Pheasant *L. n. beli*, the Berlioz's Silver Pheasant *L. n. berliozzi*, the Ruby Mines Silver Pheasant *L. n. rufipes*, the Rippon's Silver Pheasant *L. n. ripponi*, the Jones's Silver Pheasant *L. n. jonesi*, the Western Silver Pheasant *L. n. occidentalis*, the Lao Silver Pheasant *L. n. beaulieu*, the Fokien Silver Pheasant *L. n. fokienensis*, the Hainan Silver Pheasant *L. n. whiteheadi*, and the Szechwan Silver Pheasant *L. n. omeiensis*.

Of the mentioned subspecies, I can only find vague information on those kept in American aviculture. It is believed that most of the different subspecies which made it to America have interbred with the True Silver. I have seen breeder listings with Jones's and Lewis's, but I have no information on their status.

Hardy and Aggressive

Male Silvers have the reputation of being aggressive toward their keepers

and hens. I have had many males that I have had to ward off with a stick and on the other hand, our current Silver male is perfectly harmless.

Males can sometimes have very bad attitudes. It is tough to break them from being mean once they have started. My first breeder male would kill every hen placed with him, while another would spend his time picking fights through the mesh with other birds and attacking our legs! Their attitudes usually depend on the bird. I once had one male that would perform his wing-whirl display when I would clap my hands and would follow me around his enclosure looking for a hand-out.

They are big birds that are extremely tough and hardy. We once had an ice storm and had to go pull the Silvers off the roost to place them inside the shelter only to see them back outside again on the roost within an hour.

Description

The male True Silver has a long black crest, a black chin and throat, with a glossy bluish-black belly. The rest of the body is white, with many black lines. Their tails can be quite long, with the central feathers pure white. One of the most noticeable features are the bright red face wattles which are used during courtship. Silvers do not achieve their brilliant plumage until their second year.

First year males often have many black markings on the chest, while the rest of the body is mostly brown with light gray streaks.

Hens are a drab olive brown overall. There is much variation from hen to hen in the vermiculations of the belly and breast, and I have never seen two hens exactly alike. Hens have a much smaller and paler face wattle. The bill is gray and the feet are red. Immature females resemble adults but are often lighter and paler.

Breeding

Breeding Silver Pheasants are among the first species to lay in the year. We have even dug eggs out of the snow. While March is the average starting month, we are not surprised by a February egg. The eggs are quite large, comparable to a domestic chicken egg.

Photo by George A. Allen III



A male Silver Pheasant. Silvers are among the easiest of the ornamental pheasants to keep and breed.

Clutch sizes vary from 6 to 15 eggs, usually depending on the age of the hen. Incubation lasts about 27 days. We have had great success with hatches using an incubator as well as foster Bantams.

The chicks are easy to raise and often learn to eat right away. Chicks that are stubborn eaters can be coaxed with mealworms. They grow well when fed a high protein game bird starter supplemented with greens and live food such as mealworms and small crickets. They are not problem makers like many other species during the brooding phase. I have noticed that they are also much more calm and can be easily tamed. They do grow quickly, and by about six weeks of age, they can be put in outside pens.

General Comments

Silver Pheasants are perfect aviary birds and great for those new to pheasant raising, but they do have a few bad habits. One of them is egg eating. I have experienced this and heard from many other breeders about the birds eating their own eggs. There are many methods to stop it. One that has worked for me is to inject a hot or nasty tasting substance into a bantam egg (we have used Tabasco sauce). Once the birds got a taste they didn't like, they quit eating their eggs. I also

have heard of breeders placing hard-boiled eggs in the aviaries to distract attention.

We've had Silvers breed in nearly all sizes of aviaries. An ideal aviary is one that is at least 120 square feet, landscaped with various shrubs, grasses (which usually do not last long), logs and rocks. Only a minimal shelter is required during the winter months. I have run into problems when trying to share the aviary with other bird species. If this is a must, place feed and water stations in areas where the Silvers do not have access.

Diet

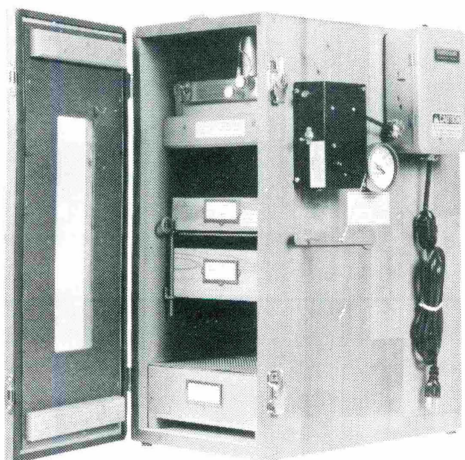
Diets for adult Silvers are fairly simple. Many use a commercial game bird pellet that has a protein content of 18% or higher during the breeding season and 14 to 16% protein during the off-season. Grain is often added to the pellets in the off-season, with cracked corn being a favorite of the birds. Pheasants also enjoy greens, veggies and fruits year round. Mealworms are added to the diet as a treat every other day.

Bibliography

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