Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
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One of the great icons of Western culture is the peacock, whose long and fan-like train has been used for centuries to denote overweening pride. "Proud as a peacock" is a description recognized by everyone. At present, after a long hiatus, we have a peacock at the National Zoo. Unlike the practice at some zoos and botanical gardens, our bird does not run free, but occupies a large fully screened enclosure near the flamingos. He was displaying a few weeks ago when I walked by the enclosure, and I was once again struck by the luminous brilliance of his plumage and his rigid strutting. Humans have long been attracted to peafowl (the male peacock and the female peahen) and this month's letter considers their domestication and natural history.

Peafowl have undoubtedly been raised as ornamental birds longer than any other species. They were known and displayed by their owners in ancient Egypt; in the Bible there is a reference to ones owned by King Solomon (I Kings, chapt X 22 and 23). The bird was familiar to the Greeks and was featured in their mythology. According to legend, the goddess Hera[1] was responsible for the "eyes" on the peacock's train. Argus, the perfect watchman whose body was covered with eyes, was assigned by Hera to watch over Io[2], who had been transformed into a heifer. While guarding the bovine Io, Argus was killed by Hermes, causing Hera to be so upset that she transferred Argus's eyes to the peacock's plumage. The bird remained rare in ancient Greece until Alexander's campaign in the east; among the booty from that campaign were numerous peafowl. Aristotle and Pliny wrote about the bird, both complaining about its raucous call. The Romans, at the peak of their Empire, bred the birds and even ate them at sumptuous banquets, despite the toughness of the adult bird's flesh. Young birds, however, are tasty.

In the Middle Ages, knights took an elaborate "Vow of the Peacock" and the bird's plumes decorated their helmets. Throughout early times, not only Greeks and Romans but also Arabs, Jews and Chinese extolled the beauty of this bird. Its plumes were buried with Viking warriors and its eyed feathers were used as awards of merit to Chinese mandarins. Stories and myths abound about the peacock and the powers of its consumed flesh in counteracting the effects of snake venom. Detailed descriptions of its medical uses appear in the Ayurvedic texts of Sri Lanka.

Peafowl have long had a reputation for keeping an area free of snakes, which may account for their flesh being considered an antidote for snake venom. William Beebe, in his "*Pheasants—their Lives and Homes*" (1936), described a peacock attacking a small Russell's viper for about ten minutes until finally the snake retreated into its hole. There are, however, numerous authenticated accounts of small snakes being found in the crops of the birds. Nonetheless, the legend of peacocks keeping an area snake-free persists and

[1] sister/wife of Zeus
[2] a maiden loved by Zeus

is widely accepted in India and Sri Lanka. Such a positive attitude towards peafowl has kept them well-protected in many rural communities.

The natural history of peacocks is fascinating. The first wild peacock I saw was in an open sal forest in southern Nepal. Sal is an important timber tree in that part of the world, and it grows in open stands similar to the ponderosa pine forests south of the Grand Canyon. I flushed a male while walking along a wide forest trail. Despite the seeming burden of its long train, it flew up easily at a steep angle and perched some 50 feet above me. Although conspicuously plumaged, it was well camouflaged and hard to see. Wild birds are usually found in family groups with one male and three or four females, some with young of varying ages. They normally occupy relatively restricted home ranges, which explains in part their adaptability to gardens and zoological parks. Truly wild birds roost high in trees to avoid terrestrial predators, but some domestic peafowl learn this too late. When the National Zoo released about six young but fully fledged birds at Front Royal years ago, all failed to roost off the ground and sadly, within a week or so, local foxes caught each and every one. A more secure release site was the Freer Gallery of Art's courtyard where a peacock held sway for many years during the warm months. Its presence was an apt reminder of one of the Freer's greatest treasures—James Whistler's Peacock Room, so named because of the peacock motif used in its decoration.

Males have loud calls, particularly during the breeding season, which in India coincides with the rains. Females and young also call but not nearly as loudly. In India, the call is transcribed as "minh-ao," which means "there'll be rain," for the cocks often start calling when they hear thunder. Their noisiness is probably the main limiting factor for their not being more commonly kept as ornamentals. In fact, there have been some attempts to dampen or even eliminate their calls by operating on the bird's larynx; in my view a bad idea.

Among the popular misconceptions of the peacock is that its spectacular spread fan consists of tail feathers. These glorious eye-spotted feathers are actually the tail coverts or covering plumage. These specialized feathers keep growing for as much as six years and can measure 160 cm (> 5 ft.) in length. The actual tail feathers are underneath the train and consist of stiff quills about 45 cm long (18"). These quills are erected at almost right angles to the back and, in so doing, the train is lifted to form the magnificent fan-shaped display for which the bird is so well known.

There are two species of peafowl. The more common one is the Indian (*Pavo cristatus*), and the other is the Burmese green peafowl (*P. mutius*) that ranges from southeast Asia to Java, but is not found in Sumatra. The green species is generally considered to be even more striking than its Indian relative. The greens are larger and more stately with longer necks and legs and richer colors. However, green peafowl are

not as tolerant of cold weather as the Indian species and they are also more aggressive, both within their species as well as with small dogs and children. When riled, the male will attack using its sharp spurs, much like a game cock, making it a potentially dangerous bird when roaming free. Although they will breed in captivity as readily as the Indian ones, and are perhaps a little less raucous, their wary, wild behavior makes them prone to wander. Their disadvantages as a free-ranging ornamental bird probably outweigh their plumage advantages, and they are thus kept less frequently in domestic settings.

Although the green peafowl has been severely reduced in its natural range in southeast Asia, the future of the Indian species seems more secure. The bird is revered by many Hindus and in the vicinity of rural shrines where birds are fed regularly by the faithful, they often leave the forest in large flocks to enjoy the bounty and in turn be admired by the pilgrims.

The end of the peacock feather trade came quickly as fashions changed. There was around 1900 a strong demand for their eyed coverts, and a large industry once thrived in Kerala on India's southwest coast, where the plumes were used for decorating screens and mats. Train feathers were also exported in great volume to England, but new fashions arose and the demand for peacock feathers evaporated. Of all pheasant species, the long term survival of two of them seems assured: the popular ring-neck game bird, which has been widely introduced, and the peafowl, which will undoubtedly long enjoy protection both because of its beauty and the many legends associated with it.

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The topic of this month's letter was suggested by a long time colleague, Darcy Rodenhiser of Windsor, Colorado, and I give her credit for inspiring me to learn a great many new facts about this enchanting bird as I prepared this letter.