

# The Pheasant Coucal

*Coucals are large, semi-terrestrial, non-parasitic cuckoos of the family Cuculidae. This family also includes typical cuckoos. Some 28 species of Coucals all belong to the genus Centropus and are distributed throughout the Old World from Africa to the Solomon Islands (Fry et al 1988). Nick Atchison of Territory Wildlife Park, Northern Territory, looks at the Pheasant Coucal (Centropus phasianinus), the only representative of this genus in Australia.*

## Distribution and Habitat

The Pheasant Coucal is found from Shark Bay in Western Australia across the Top End to Cape York and south to Jervis Bay in NSW (Frith 1977). The distribution is broken in Northwestern Australia by the Great Sandy Desert. It is also found in Timor and New Guinea (Blakers et al 1984).

Pheasant Coucals inhabit eucalypt and paperbark woodlands with thick grassy understoreys, rainforest, pandanus, swamps and heath (Blakers et al 1984).

## Generally

Pheasant Coucals generally have an elongated, shaggy appearance with their long tail giving them the "pheasant" part to their name. The sexes are similar, but the male is smaller than the female and has a higher pitched call (Taplin & Beurteaux 1992). In breeding plumage the head and body are black with the wings and tail being mottled black, brown and buff. In eclipse plumage, the black on the head and body are replaced with brown and straw colouring, and the tail is brown mottled with buff. They have an unusual feel to their plumage, the feathers being soft and loose, yet slightly spiky where the rachis extends to the tip of the feather. They have strong legs and spend much of their time on the ground, skulking through the undergrowth with their head lowered and tail trailing behind them, rather like a small mammal. They also perch in trees and sun themselves in more open situations on the ground. They have a fairly laboured flight and utilise gliding frequently.

Coucals are opportunistic feeders, taking invertebrates, small reptiles, frogs, small mammals, nestling birds and eggs (Mackness 1979, Frith 1977).

Coucals call frequently during the breeding season, often a duet of dove-like whooping sounds with the male and female calling in a different pitch, starting slowly and picking up speed towards the end of the call.

Unlike typical cuckoos, coucals build their own nest and raise their young. The Pheasant Coucal builds a domed nest of grasses with a lining of leaves and small twigs. It is usually built in long grass at about 0.5m from the ground (Taplin & Beurteaux 1992). A clutch consists of two to five dull white eggs, with two to four clutches being laid in a season. Taplin and Beurteaux (1992) give a minimum incubation period of 15 days and an average fledging age of 12.6 days. They also found the male to be responsible for most of the parental duties.

## Captivity

Pheasant Coucals are familiar zoological subjects in Australia. They exhibit well, being large and conspicuous. From a keeper's point of view, they show enormous personality, being intelligent and having an inquisitive nature. This is especially apparent in hand-raised birds.

## Housing

Pheasant Coucals are large active birds that need a spacious aviary. They should be provided with shelter from

wind and rain, however they usually prefer to take refuge in aviary vegetation during bad weather. In fact they often appear indifferent to rain and go about their usual business. Being semi-terrestrial, coucals need some open space which can be enhanced with grass tussocks, rocks, stumps, logs and low bushes. They'll form a network of tracks and lookouts amongst this aviary furniture and make a fascinating exhibit as they race through tunnels in the grass, peer over boulders or clamber up to vantage points to survey their territory. High perches are used by coucals during the day for perching and at night for roosting.

Coucals utilise water for bathing and will saturate themselves in their water bowls, in the rain, or by running through wet grass. They follow this by draping themselves over a branch or rock with their wings and tail spread and feathers raised to dry off. They frequently sunbathe, even on very hot days.

## Compatibility

Pheasant Coucals are quite compatible with larger bird species. They have been housed successfully with Hooded Parrot *Psephotus dissimilis*, Musk Lorikeet *Glossopsitta concinna*, Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis*, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater *Acanthagenys rufogularis*, Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus megarhynchus*, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae* and Blue-winged Kookaburra *Dacelo leachii* to name a few. The major drawback of mixing with other species comes from the



coucal's predatory nature. While compatible with adult birds of larger species, they will eat the eggs and chicks of these birds if bred in the same aviary. Unpaired coucals have also been seen to predate eggs from breeding coucals (pers. obs.).

During the breeding season, pairs of Pheasant Coucals should not be housed with con-specifics. Odd birds (including previous seasons' young) have been seen to be harassed by a breeding pair, causing them stress and minor injury as they run back and forth along the wire looking for an escape route. Mackness (1979) records young being expelled from the breeding territory at 65 days. Larger groups of Pheasant Coucals have been successfully housed together when not breeding.

### Feeding

Pheasant Coucals can be maintained on a standard minced meat based diet with the usual vitamin, mineral and calcium additives. They will also take mice, day old chicks, mealworms and almost any other type of insect food. Large quantities of mealworms and chopped pinkie mouse are provided when chicks are being raised.

### Breeding

Frith (1977) gives the breeding season as being November to March, although Mackness (1979) notes that May and July are the only months without records of coucals breeding. Here in the Northern Territory, breeding occurs over the wet season. In 1993 and 1994, captive birds began mating in October. Mackness (1979) described a courtship with the male crouching behind the female and following her with his head moving from side to side, the female moving off with her body close to the ground. This courtship also included the male straightening his body and dragging his outstretched wings along the ground. Mating was immediately preceded by the female raising her body to full height and straightening it. Captive birds have not been noted

courting at TWP but are frequently seen mating, the female adopting the straightened pose described above. This brings a immediate response from the male who comes running to mate, clasping the base of each of the female's wings with his feet while copulating. The breeding male has been seen to display with out stretched, dragging wings to a keeper, which may be a result of imprinting from being handraised (T. Barnes pers. com.).

Incubation is carried out by the male. Observations of incubating birds have revealed that there is no change-over at night, the female roosting away from the nest (pers. obs.). The male is also responsible for brooding and for a greater part of feeding the chicks.

Pheasant Coucal chicks look incredible. They have jet black skin which is covered in long white hair-like threads. These threads are an extension of the sheath that covers the growing feather (Mackness 1979). The inside of the gape is red, and the tongue is red with a black tip. The development of three chicks hatched at TWP in 1993 is briefly outlined as follows: The eyes start to open on the fourth day, and pin feathers start developing on the wings, back and neck on the fifth day. The pin feathers grow quite long before the feathers start to break out on about the twelfth day. The chicks fledge at 14 to 17 days.

Both sexes feed the chicks, however the male makes more feeding trips to the nest than the female. The female would often feed herself before taking food to the chicks, whereas the male always fed the chicks as first priority. Food items are crushed in the bill by the adults before delivery to the nest, once again the male is more particular in this task than the female. The adults make quiet noises while at the nest with food which may be a prompt for the chicks to beg. Faecal sacs are removed from the nest by both sexes. The main food items fed during the first few days after hatching were mealworms and chopped pieces of pinkie mouse, with whole day-old

pinkies being fed when the chicks were four days old. At nine days-old the chicks were also being fed pieces of chopped day old chickens and pieces of the meat mix.

After fledging, the chicks sit quietly on the ground and are fairly inconspicuous. When approached they run quickly along the ground. The breeding pair at TWP showed no signs of distress or gave no distraction display when the chicks were handled, in fact they would often sit close by and watch calmly as the chicks were weighed. This may be because both parents are handraised. Mackness (1979) describes an alarm call which is used to alert the chicks and prompt them to leave the nest, but he does not note any distraction display by the adults.

Chick	1	2	3
Day 1	17.3g	14.8g	14g
2	25g		21g
3	29g	27g	23g
4	42g	33g	34g
5	49g	49g	
6	70g	56g	
7			63g
8			62g
9	104g	92g	100g
10	120g	86g	110g
11	140g	120g	124g
12	152g	136g	130g
13	160g	138g	144g
14	164g	162g	148g
15	166g	166g	148g
16	184g	174g	
17	188g	178g	
18			192g
19			
20	218g	212g	
22			228g
24	268g	248g	

Chick three was notably smaller than the first two chicks due to an age difference of two days. To ensure it didn't fall too far behind, it was supplementary fed pieces of pinkie two to three times a day for four days from nine days old.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Bird Staff at Territory Wildlife Park for their help in taking weights and keeping notes on the developing chicks.

### Personal communications:

Barnes, T. Bird Keeper, Territory Wildlife Park.

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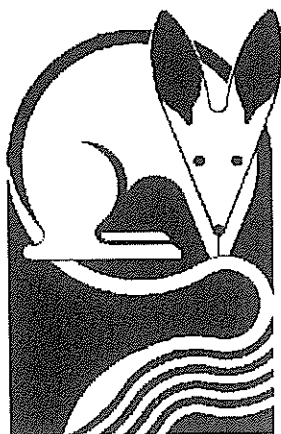
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## Paws for thought

I am writing this with a certain amount of dismay. Some issues ago, fired with enthusiasm, and perceiving a need for the Society to have a Mission Statement in place, I instigated a process to canvass members for their suggestions via the Journal. To date, one reply only has been submitted.

In light of this, I think it might be a prudent idea to suspend our Mission Statement efforts for the minute. I am particularly mindful of the title of next year's Annual Conference at Healesville Sanctuary - "Zoos: Evolution or Extinction." In anticipation of the vibrant debate and discussion that will no doubt occur around this topic, it seems likely that

the atmosphere it provokes will easily throw up a powerful and forward-looking Mission Statement to aid our zoo's safe passage into the coming century.

Here's hoping you enjoy this issue which, in part, covers some of the events of the conference just gone hosted by Perth Zoo. Apologies for the delay in getting this issue out.



**Bernard Kennedy**  
Editor

