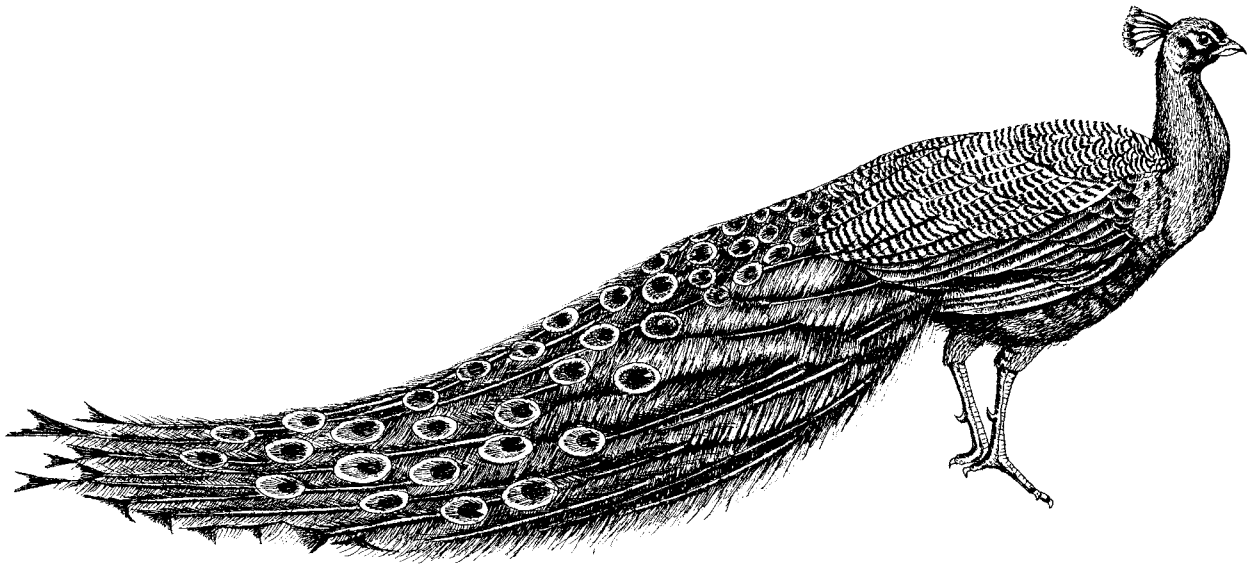


# Peacocks

(Tamil: *mayil*)



Although most people refer to these glorious birds as 'peacocks', strictly speaking that is a word only descriptive of the male bird, the female being a 'peahen', the babies being 'peachicks', and the species in general being 'peafowl'. However, for the purposes of this article we will use 'peacock' to cover both genders, in the same way that most people do.

## Distribution

Peacocks, which are native to south-east Asia, are members of the pheasant family, best known for the beautiful feathers of the male bird and their display. Essentially there are two Asian species, the Indian (Blue) Peacock which is found throughout India and Sri Lanka (plus parts of Pakistan by introduction), and is designated as the national bird of India, and the Green Peacock, which breeds from Burma/Myanmar east to Java (Indonesia), but is now heading for possible extinction thanks to hunting and reduction in extent and quality of habitat. (Although their natural ranges don't overlap, these two species can interbreed, producing a hybrid bird called a 'spalding'.) A third peacock, the Congo Peacock, inhabits African rain forests, though little is known about it.

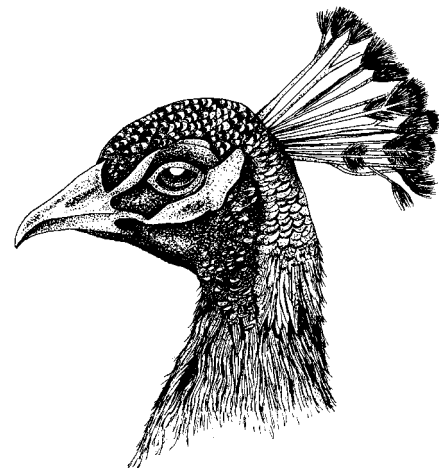
In addition to these three populations, one can find peacocks living wild in other parts of the world also, but in each case they have been introduced there by humans at some point.

## Peacocks in history

Peacocks have been kept as tame birds in India for over 3,000 years, and even feature in the Bible and Greek and Roman mythology, in the latter case as the favourite bird of the goddess Hera(\*) for the Greeks, and of Juno for the Romans. The bird was also known to the Pharaohs of Egypt, and to 14th-century Europe, where it was sometimes served up and eaten at banquets. Needless to say, the prime reason for all this attention down through history has been the plumage of the male bird, which has long been known and valued for the brilliant feathers of its tail. Meanwhile, their feathers have also been the subject of superstition and folklore, being considered as tokens of good or bad luck depending on the location and/or source consulted.

## Description / plumage

When most people think of peacocks, it is primarily in terms of the beautiful colours of their feathers. Blue, green, gold, and the appearance of what looks like an eye in the centre of some of them are their identifying features, together with the crest on the top of the head of both the male and female birds, which adds to their regal look. However, these features take some 9-12 months to emerge, the near-look-alike-at-birth male and female chicks being much more drab and colourless in appearance.



The very long, elegant and colourful plumage of the male birds is grown over the winter months to make them ready for the early spring mating season. Reaching heights when erect of over 3 ft when displayed, their 'train' of tail feathers can be up to 5 ft. in length, and their wingspan up to 6 ft. However, they don't come into this full glory until they are nearly three years old.

Following the mating season comes the moulting season, during which the males shed their magnificent train feathers and reveal the grey-coloured tail normally hidden beneath. As to the females, their much less imposing plumage serves a more practical purpose, blending in so well with weeds and grasses that when sitting on their nest on the ground they are almost invisible.

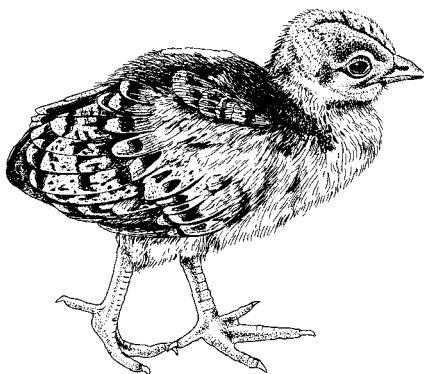
### Mating / reproduction

Both Asian species of peacock are considered polygamous, meaning that they usually have more than one mate. Suitable males aged 2-3 years or more try to gather harems of several females, each of which may lay three to five eggs. Courtship – involved bloodcurdling loud screams and cries both by day and night – takes place on the ground, the male first giving vent to repeated calls, and then putting on a display for the females in the area by facing them with his magnificent train fanned out in all its glory. At the same time he makes a "zizzing" noise by shivering the tail quills that hold up the fanned long plumes with the eye markings on them, so much admired by the females, and meanwhile stamps his feet and turns from time to time to also show off the fan from the rear. (*If that isn't "strutting one's stuff", then what is?!*)

The plumage of the male peacock, and the peahen's preference for males with the most magnificent display (which generally gives older birds more breeding success than their younger counterparts), would seem to be a classic example of sexual selection, because by displaying their tails males generally manage to attract a harem of 2-5 females, with whom they mate. However, in recent years research has shown that the size and brilliance of a male's plumage doesn't automatically lead to mating success, and that a key factor in attracting females is also the calls and sounds made prior to mating.

### Hen birds and chicks

The hen bird's nest is usually a shallow scraped depression in the ground hidden under hard-to-penetrate cover such as lantana, with sometimes sticks, leaves and grass roughly lining it, though they are also known to nest occasionally on flat house rooftops in rural villages. In the nest the hen bird lays 3-5 whitish eggs in the spring, and sits on them for around 28 days to hatch them (the male doesn't help with the incubation), leaving the nest only once or twice a day to feed and drink. When she does so, she usually utters a shrieking "trouble" call, a quickly repeated *cuk, cuk, cuk, cuk* when clear of the nest, as a way of drawing potential predators away from the nest site.



Within hours of hatching the chicks are able to flutter and move around. The mother then leads them away from the broken eggs, aware that the smell of the eggs can attract predators. They then proceed to follow their mother about for protection.

Peahens make excellent mothers. They teach their chicks what to eat by putting the point of their beak down onto a chosen insect, seed or leaf and making a throaty *grock* sound. The chick puts its beak against the mother's, follows the beak to the tip, and then eats whatever it finds there. The chicks can also learn what to eat from a hen of another species, but unlike baby chickens can starve to death if there is no hen to teach them. In addition to the "eat this" sound, the female also has a particular call for a missing chick, a "where are you?" 'hoo-hah' call, two toned, high then low, *mi-do, mi-do*. When a chick is missing this call can go on for hours.

Within a few days, at most a week, the chicks can fly up into trees by going first to lower branches and then working their way upwards. They roost on either side of the mother, who extends her wings to cover them during the night, thereby protecting them from rain or the predation of owls. They begin to grow their 'crown' when they are only a few weeks old, though it takes about a year for it to reach full size.

### Behaviour

Peacocks are essentially large, powerful forest birds that live happily in open forest, bushland, thorn forest and sometimes rainforest. They nest and feed on the ground, but roost high up in trees, ascending in the early evening as the light fades. They are generally reluctant to fly, but can do so strongly for short distances when they feel the need, such as to escape predators, to reach a roosting place, or to take a rest





from holding their heavy train off the ground. Although mostly associated with the hot tropics, they can also survive in freezing temperatures, as long as they have a dry perch out of the wind and weather to retire to, hence the fact that they thrive equally well in places like Europe.

Normally after the breeding season one sees them wandering around in same-sex groups, called 'parties', typically in open areas where there is plenty of sunlight. They are quite sociable birds, and generally get along with other bird species, though they can at times be quarrelsome with domestic animals.

### **Stress**

Peacocks like peace and harmony, and can become stressed if they don't have it. They also need companionship, and can become depressed – even heartbroken – if obliged to live alone.

### **Predators**

Using their exceptionally keen eyesight and hearing peacocks often warn each other when danger approaches, by way of loud shrieking cries and honks. Normally they run to escape any threat, but will take to the air if necessary. Meanwhile, both Asian species have sharp, powerful spurs on their legs which they can use to protect themselves against lesser predators. Their greatest threat comes from animals like tigers and leopards, which treat them as a prime food source.

### **Diet**

Peacocks are omnivorous and eat not only creatures like ticks, termites, ants, locusts, mice, scorpions, reptiles, worms and frogs, but also the green shoots of plants, flower petals, seed heads, vegetables, grass, wheat, cracked corn, rice, etc. In fact they will eat almost anything reasonable that they can get their beaks into, even pet cat or dog food! For those who like having them around, they will learn to come to a specific site for regular feeding, as was done in Auroville's Gratitude settlement when they were first introduced there in the 1980s.

### **Life expectancy**

Peacocks reach maturity at around 10-12 months of age, and usually start breeding at around 2-3 years. They can live for at least 15 years in captivity, but probably don't live as long in the wild.

### **Humans and peacocks**

Because of encroachment into their natural environment, wild peacocks have come into increasing contact with humans, though not always amicably for two reasons. The first is that their taste for seeds

and insects attracts them to gardens, where they can be very destructive, plucking seedlings, leaves and flower heads as they wander around, and also messy thanks to their sizeable droppings. The second is that the male's powerful calls, which are even louder than a rooster's, can become a source of irritation after a while. In fact many people view them as pests in behavioural terms, though they are usually tolerated for their outstanding beauty.

On the positive side, they are valued in India because they eat young snakes such as cobras, thus keeping their numbers down around human settlements. And, like geese, they are also considered to be excellent watchdogs (*OK, watchbirds!*) because of the way they start calling at night if they spot anything unusual in their area.

### **Additional miscellania**

- \* Peacocks are very much attracted to anything white.
- \* The eerie call of the peacock – usually a *may-awe* from trees just before dawn and at dusk – is often heard when rain is approaching.
- \* White peacocks are considered to be a mutation, not albino birds.

(\*) ***Hera** was the wife of Zeus, the supreme god of the Greeks, who ruled on Mt.Olympus. Her main function was as goddess of women and marriage, to whom the cow, and later the peacock, were sacred. She was known for many beautiful attributes, but could also be jealous and vengeful, specially where Zeus's paramours and illegitimate offspring were concerned. Once when Zeus was consorting with a beautiful nymph, Hera arrived on the scene. Zeus hastily transformed his lover into a white heifer, but Hera was not fooled. She insisted on being given the animal as a gift, and set her loyal hundred-eyed giant Argos to guard it. To free the nymph and continue indulging himself, Zeus commissioned the messenger-god Hermes to carry off the heifer, which he did by lulling Argos to sleep with sweet melodies, then killing him. Hera couldn't restore Argos to life, but in appreciation of all that he had done for her she transplanted his hundred eyes onto the tail of her favourite bird, the peacock.*