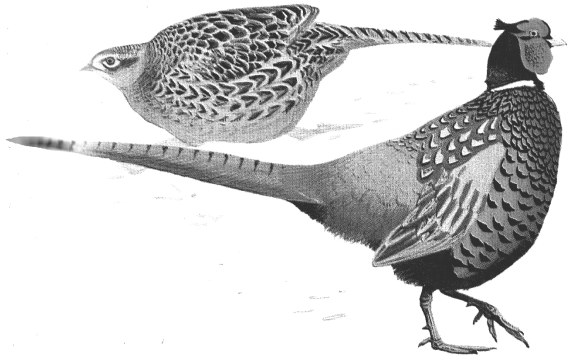


Pheasants



Our garden is graced, if that is the right word, with a proliferation of pheasants – one beautiful gaudy male who currently has a harem of 7 dull females. The plumage on the male bird in spring is truly splendid – patterned coppery feathers with a purple sheen, contrasting pale greenish areas on the rump and wings and a dark glossy green head with a white collar and red fleshy wattles around his face. He flaunts this plumage with a potential mate by running around her with his back tilted

towards her and one wing extended towards the ground – this shows off his plumage, including his loose green and gold rump feathers, to best advantage. The females are quite easily impressed and consequently a lot of mating goes on!

The females then build nests which are just scrapes in the ground, they produce quantities of eggs, and sometimes these eggs hatch. Often they don't – the females don't really seem to know much about incubating. If they do hatch, and we do see a few small groups of baby pheasants most years – then the female is a terrible parent. She takes them through places such as thick grass which they just can't get through, she kicks them when she is feeding and they get too close, she doesn't understand about patrolling buzzards – she really doesn't have a clue. And why should she when she has been brought up in a pen with thousands of others without any maternal guidance? Because, of course, most of these pheasants originate from batches released by the nearby shoot.

The Ring-necked Pheasant, to give it its proper name, is not native to the UK or indeed Europe – it is thought to have been introduced in the early Middle Ages, and maybe initially by the Romans. Their native range spreads from the Caucasus across to China. And indeed China is the main home of the 23 pheasant species in the world many of which have quite stunning plumage and are often kept in captivity. The Golden Pheasant and Lady Amherst's Pheasant are often seen in zoos and bird parks but we are hoping to see these, plus a number of others, in the wild on our next trip abroad – I will let you know how we get on!