

The line between Conservation Breeding and Captive Breeding – My Chinese experience with Pheasants – 10-13th October 2012

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The Pheasant Conservation Breeding Workshop – China 2012 was hosted by the Chengdu Zoo from the 10th to 13th October 2012 which was followed by two days of field visits to Feng Tong Zhai Reserve.

The Workshop was conducted by John Corder Vice President of the World Pheasant Association, and also successful pheasant breeder, along with lectures from – Andy Beer – Animal Nutritionist from Sparsholt University, UK, Professor Zhang from the WPA- China, Sat Pal Dhiman – DFO from the Forest Department of Himachal Pradesh, Ms. Zhang Jing from Beijing Zoo, and me – a veterinary graduate having recently returned home to Sikkim after working with birds in Ahmedabad at the Jivdaya Charitable Trust. The workshop was attended by aviary keepers and two veterinarians from different zoos and pheasant collections across China involved in pheasant conservation in the country.

The three day workshop covered a diversity of topics on Pheasant Conservation and Breeding which included Aviary Design and Management, Predator control, Breeding, Incubation and Rearing, Management, Catching and Handling, Nutrition, Health and Disease control



Presenting lectures on Pheasant post mortem, and Health Management

and *post mortem* of Galliformes. Practical sessions included a demonstration on how to catch and handle pheasants, and also on preparing catching nets and travelling boxes for the birds. Field trips were also carried out to Feng Tong Zhai Wildlife Rescue Center – an upcoming Chinese Monal Breeding Station currently housing two breeding pairs and two juveniles. The facility also

houses two rescued Red Pandas, one Himalayan Griffon and one Bearded Vulture, both who cannot fly due to old injuries.

The workshop was an eye opener in terms of demarcating the line between Captive Breeding and Conservation Breeding. The importance of breeding pheasants on a conservation scale is important considering that seven states in India itself have pheasants as their State Bird, most of them being endangered. My home state of Sikkim has the Blood Pheasant as its State Bird and as unassuming as this bird may seem, it is also one of the most difficult species to rear in captivity. With large scale developmental activities being carried out that could potentially threaten forest land and essential habitat for pheasants in our country, these birds, along with several other species are fast losing their homes and in the process slowly on their way out to becoming names on the endangered IUCN Red List.

While Captive breeding would seem practical and yield quick results, it is perhaps more of a start to increasing captive populations that would



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John Corder demonstrating Pheasant Handling to trainees

eventually belong to other collections. Conservation breeding places more emphasis on breeding pheasants in such a way that they retain their natural behaviour and habits, including rearing chicks and in turn teaching them survival skills that they would need in the wild. Learning these skills at the right time in a young bird's life can determine the decision of reintroducing it back into the wild. Reintroduction involves a release of healthy, genetically pure stock with good survival instincts back into their natural habitat and for this, it is essential that the right environmental stimuli are provided at key periods of development.

Reaching a stage where wild birds with little experience of human interference, start to breed comfortably in a breeding facility takes time and patience. Collections intending to breed pheasants would initially have to interact with their birds in such a way that daily activities such as cleaning and feeding do not stress the birds. In this way, birds that are familiar with their keepers would be comfortable enough to breed normally as well as raise offspring. In order for parent birds to rear offspring and also to teach

them natural skills essential for survival in the wild, breeding programs must ensure the availability of natural or near natural habitat and stimuli. Birds reared this way are much better prepared for reintroduction and have a better chance of survival. Care must also be taken that birds do not inbreed or interbreed. For example, Golden Pheasants have been known to have bred with Lady Amherst's Pheasants resulting in hybrids that are not suitable for further breeding or reintroduction as they would then go on to dilute the gene pool of pure stock in the wild.

In case of eggs collected from the wild, it is essential that they are incubated under optimal conditions – either mechanical or using broody hens. Incubation should be carried out in a precise manner with optimal temperature, humidity and regular turning to ensure that chicks that hatch are healthy and have no malformation of the feet or wings, or have infections. Blood Pheasants have been successfully reared at the Beijing Zoo, China using incubators and a precise methodical procedure that allows estimation of the perfect temperature and humidity conditions.

Such methods, if applied from an early stage at the start of an ornithological collection, whether for Galliformes or other species of birds, would yield successful results. Parent reared offspring – birds that are reared by their parents, having learned natural behaviour without any dependence on humans, would then form the parent stock for future generations of birds that could possibly be put up for successful reintroduction.

Sikkim has several species of Galliformes and with plans for a new Bird Park, it would greatly benefit the state, if the Park could also be used as a base for breeding endangered species as well as rear pure breed Red Jungle Fowl, a species that has been known to be breeding with domestic chicken, and has possibly already started diluting the gene pool. Breeding Pheasants on a conservation level would greatly benefit the status of Pheasants in the Sikkim and the rest of the country.