

may be impressed with the peacock's beauty, the true target of all his glamorous excess is his potential mate, the peahen.

In spring, peacocks begin establishing leks, a group of small adjacent territories, each of which is the domain of a single male. Interested females visit the lek, assessing the various males before choosing a mate. In order to attract mates, the peacock employs his most striking feature, the breathtaking train of feathers often referred to as the peacock's tail. This 4 foot long collection of hundreds of feathers is actually made up of the upper tail coverts, a humble grouping of feathers at the transition between body and tail in most birds. During the breeding season, the peacock erects his "train" into a massive lacy fan, supported by the true tail which is dull grey in color. The peacock's train features as many as 175 ocelli, or eyespots, important markings for attracting potential mates. Vibrating his fan and wings, the peacock struts and dances, trying to impress as many females as possible.

Studies have shown that the peahens choose males with more ocelli and thus larger trains. Additional studies indicate that the peacocks with the most ocelli have more robust immune systems and are in better health than those with lesser displays. The offspring of these males are heavier at birth and are more likely to survive to their second year. The peahen's preference for the males with the most ornate display has driven the evolution of the massive train which the peacock must now carry.

Peahens conceal their nests, a simple scrape lined with grass, in thick vegetation. The eggs are laid every other day until a total of up to eight is reached, at which point the 28 day incubation period begins. The peachicks are "precocial," meaning they are born with their eyes open, feathered, and ready to walk soon after hatching. Peahens are attentive mothers, but the peacock is not involved in raising his young. The next generation of peahens will be ready to reproduce at one or two years of age while the males need three years to develop a full train of display plumage. Peafowl are hardy birds and may live 20 years or more.

At Ardenwood, the relative calm is suddenly filled with excited voices as a glossy peacock struts from the shadows into the sunshine. Some want to chase him, or offer some food—PLEASE DON'T! Others enjoy the brilliant fowl from a respectful distance—PLEASE DO! The peacock seems unconcerned with all the human activity around him. It's as if he considers it his due!

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juvenile peafowl



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Imagine four large silhouettes suspended in the heights of a walnut tree. Launching from their nighttime roost, three peahens glide on short, stiffly down-turned wings, their feathers ruffling the cool morning air. They descend quickly, dropping into a patch of sunlight within the safety of a willow thicket. The last bird to plummet from the treetop is a massive male—a peacock trailing his spectacular bustle of shimmering iridescent feathers. He joins his harem in the sun. This is truly a bird of the gods, of pharaohs, kings, and yes...farmers.

While we have no evidence that the Patterson family of Ardenwood Historic Farm kept peafowl, these exotic birds would not have been out of place. Wealthy Victorians expressed their appreciation for nature with orderly gardens featuring well manicured lawns and exotic plant species from across the globe. The Victorian garden was an



peafowl with peachicks

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adult peacock

extension of the parlor, serving as a space for entertaining and another way for the host to convey status to visitors. What better way to “gild your lilies” as it were, than to take a page from the kings and lords of old Europe who, since the 14th century, adorned their grounds with the ultimate living landscape ornament: the peacock.

The species of peafowl seen at Ardenwood is *Pavo cristatus*, commonly known as the Indian or blue peafowl. Native to the forests of the Indian subcontinent, it is the national bird

of India where it is known as sarang. There are two other recognized peafowl species: *Pavo muticus*, the Javanese green peafowl of Southeast Asia and *Afropavo congensis*, the Congo peafowl from central Africa. Peafowl are in the order Galliformes, from the Latin for “chicken-like,” and the family Phasianidae, the pheasants. Relatives of the peafowl include grouse, quail, turkey, and the red jungle fowl, ancestor of all domestic breeds of chickens.

Like other pheasants, peafowl are adapted to a life of walking and foraging on the ground as they search for the seeds, plants, insects, and reptiles that make up their diet. Pea-

fowl fly when pressed by a predator or when retreating to their evening roost. Their short, broad wings are suited for an explosive take-off followed by a long glide. Peafowl feet feature three long toes facing forward and one small toe facing back. Spurs on the legs of the male serve for defense against predators and as weapons during territorial disputes.

The peacock's feet have never gained him much human attention, but the striking colors and textures of his plumage certainly do. Three thousand years ago, the Phoenicians imported peafowl to Egypt and Syria. Merchants and admirers have since spread these birds around the globe. While humans

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