

Irene took this to Journal Oct. 10-1944
3 negatives

RING-NECKED PHEASANT, CANNY BIRD OF THE SEASON

by

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Photographs by William L. Finley

The pure gold of the harvest moon fell down, creeping under the long, hanging limbs of the fir trees, lighting the dew-wet grass down to the river which lay like a pale satin ribbon. The screech owls and their grown brood were abroad, for the owl and the moon belong together. Three little black knobs sticking up in a stiff row on a limb were silhouetted against the dim light. One wafted down as soundless as a leaf, and soon the other two fell off and wavered to the ground. A series of mellow, rippling notes broke the silence like water dripping on the sounding board of night. Perhaps the spell of the great gold moon, hanging so close above, was an omen of change to the parent owl, an end of summer and home life, leaner hunting, or loneliness.

There was a rustling in the brush on the hillside below the owl's perch, the uneasy China pheasants settling closer under their covers, perhaps thinking of the great horned owl with his moon eyes that lived in the deep woods across the river, the owl that came hunting one night into the chicken yard and cut a full grown rooster in two, eating the eyes first and after feasting, leaving the remainder for another night, the owl that likes the taste of pheasant and even another owl. So the pheasants froze in their beds.

Morning came. The pheasants were subdued and slightly clannish at this time of the year, their coats dulled and a little disheveled. But of spring, came the first whiff, there was an electrical change in the air. On a chill January morn, there burst on the air a long, metallic note followed by a short, staccato one, and quick flapping of wings, the opening trumpet of the pheasant mating season. From then on the air was punctuated by ringing calls and beating of wings. Sometimes the performance reminded one more of a bantam rooster than of a noble pheasant. When a cock was

flushed, he burst up straight from the ground with a metallic whir of wings, and he covered ground like a race horse. Some say he can spring along at thirty-eight miles an hour, each stride seven or eight inches in length. He can also cower and sneak along as softly as a cat. He is full of tricks.

The cocks, suddenly bedecked in glowing colors of iridescent greens, browns, reds, the wattles like blood, the white neck band, strutted slowly and pompously for the full effect and warning to other cocks. Sometimes one after another, catching up, would mill gingerly about each other in the field, until one would tilt his tail in the other's face, then they would be facing each other, tense for an instant. Then it came, two forms jumping at the same instant, spurs gouging and slashing, eyes red with anger. Around and around they went until one ducked his head under the breast-bone of his challenger to hedge the blows. Suddenly he made a dash to one side and with head up and all sails set, went flying down the field. Whereat, the winner threw back his head, puffed out his chest and sent a clarion burst of victory into the air for all the cowering damsels on the side lines to hear and take note.

This went on day after day in the field, under the grape arbor, always on an open runway. When the game lagged and seemed to growing stale, several cocks would go mincing apparently demurely in a line after a leader, but always keeping about the same distance between them. They were bent on something. When the head bird had all he could stand, he showed the yellow feather and took flight, hiding in the first blackberry bramble or other cover. The game was up for a short time. They started all over and worked it up again until a couple clashed. The hens paid little attention to this performance, but sauntered about singly or in twos feeding.

The pheasant was a showy suitor at courting time. He pranced around the demure ^{brown} hen with short steps, the tip of an outstretched wing sweeping the ground in front of her, and stopped, lifting the feathers

of his back and his tail toward her, bending his head low. After some seconds, the puff-ball feathers settled back into place, his head jerked up and he gave out a hissing sound. It was a showy performance as the scarlet patch of skin around the eye seemed larger and brighter than usual, and the purplish ears were pointed outward. The little hen moved away with indifference and went on picking up bits from the ground.

Through the mating and laying season, the pheasants fought and fed over the cultivated fields and the grassy pastures. When the vegetable garden began to grow up and the corn came on, the farmer was in a continual rage. He went out of a morning to find young ears in the milk slashed straight down and pecked to pieces. A canny old cock would land straight up and come down, gouging a green ear. After feasting, he would go on to another. Forgetting that pheasants liked juicy corn, the irate boss laid it to the black-hearted crow, who was also around, silent and soft-winged. He got up in the dim of the morning and laid for him with a gun - and between the corn rows flushed a whole flock of pheasants that scuttled swiftly away like wicked shadows, - his pheasants that he had fostered and loved to see about the place. He would give them a lesson anyway, and he sent a shot crackling over the patch. The morning after, and mornings on mornings, he went out to find new rows of corn invaded and ruined. He gave up. His only solace was to ruminate on how many injurious insects, as potato beetles, squash bugs, larvae of all kinds including the gypsy and brown-tailed moths, tent caterpillars, and weed seeds they had devoured. They also liked grain of any kind, but did no damage when they fed in the vetch and oat field after the crop was harvested.

There were seventeen Chinas that had lived on the hillside for some years, eating with the chickens, walking unafraid across the yard, hunting in the flower garden. Most of the hens had nested in the flat, open hayfield with the thick grain like a green forest about them, but one or two hid their nests on the tangled hillside near their roosting place. When the mowers came noisily down the grainfield, a mother pheasant sitting.

on her nest froze in fear, as is the custom of the pheasant when danger is near. She depends upon her dull colors to hide her. The next day her body was found headless. The hillside under the trees might have been a safer place, even with the noisy owls above.

The Chinese or ring-necked pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus torquatus*, was brought into Oregon by Judge O. N. Denny in 1881, after whom it was sometimes called the Denny pheasant. The bird proved to be remarkably hardy and prolific and spread rapidly by natural increase, artificial breeding, and new shipments of eggs and birds. It does well and fends for itself in the northern states, but does not hold out long in the southern part of the country except under protection. For many years the success of the ring-necked pheasant, ^{in Oregon} has been complete. It is strong and plump, wary of enemies, and multiplies amazingly where conditions are right. In fact, in the eastern oregon cornfields they are too prolific and bold, literally settling down in swarms and taking possession.