PHASIANUS CHRYSOMELAS, Sverdrup.

PHASIANUS CHRYSOMELAS, *Severtz.*

Oxus Pheasant.

Phasianus chrysomelas, Severtz., Ibis, 1875, p. 493; Elliot, Ibis, 1876, p. 131.

DR. SEVERTZOFF, the celebrated Russian traveller, discovered this fine species of true Pheasant during his travels in Central Asia, under the circumstances narrated by him in detail below. Mr. Elliot, who has made a special study of the Pheasants, states in a letter to 'The Ibis' (*l.c.*) that the title of *P. chrysomelas* must sink into a synonym of his *P. insignis*, founded on an imperfect specimen from Yarkand. Whether, if this eventually turned out to be the case, Mr. Elliot's name, founded on an admittedly mutilated skin and incorrectly figured in his 'Monograph,' would be allowed to take precedence over the more exact description of Dr. Severtzoff's, I leave to other ornithologists to determine; but if the conclusions of Mr. Scully, published in 'Stray Feathers,' are correct, then *P. insignis* is not distinct from *P. Shawi*, which is said to be the only Pheasant in Yarkand. I cannot bring myself to believe that *P. chrysomelas*, at any rate, can be a stage of *P. Shawi*; but perhaps the careful figures now published will enable Mr. Hume and other Indian naturalists to make further comparisons and determine this interesting point.

The following very full account of the species I owe to the kindness of Dr. Severtzoff:—"I found *P. chrysomelas* on the river Amoo (Oxus), and on the lower parts of the same river, from the end of the Karakol, its most eastern arm, along the sandy country up to our new fort Petroalexandrowsk, on the right bank of the stream opposite Khiva,—also on the branches of the delta, as for instance Keggili, Koowanshdjerma, Lake Sarg-kul, &c. I possess also information that it is common upon all the branches of the Oxus delta without exception, including the most western, Taldyk: here it is very abundant near Kungrad, and is precisely similar to those found near Petroalexandrowsk. It also occurs on the left bank of the Oxus, and the great channels of Khiva, in fact everywhere where it finds sufficiently large jungles undestroyed by cultivation; these, however, are rare to the south-west of the Oxus delta. I do not know its limit above that river; but I think it not improbable that this beautiful bird will still be found in the jungles of Bask and Kundooz.

"It lives only in dense thorny jungle near the water, and is therefore confined to the valley and delta of the Oxus. Its range is bounded on the north-east by the sand-waste of Kysilkoom, which separates its habitat from that of *P. mongolicus*, and to the south-west by the Turcoman desert, which separates it from *P. persicus*.

"My observations on the habits of this Pheasant extend from the month of July to the middle of October. In July they come out from the jungle every morning and evening for the purpose of feeding, and both at sunrise and after sunset their screams may be heard in the bushes; but day by day towards the end of that month they are seen less and less, and remain more concealed in the thickets. The males are now fast moulting, and the females also, but in a less degree, the latter being then occupied with their chickens. At this time neither males nor females sit on the trees as they do later on, but remain always on the ground; and, from the foot-prints in the mud, I opine that at this season of the year the moulting Pheasants are actively pursued by the marsh-cat (*Felis chaus*). During the night, however, the birds retreat to such thickets as render the noiseless approach of their enemy impossible.

"The chicks of this Pheasant, like those of other Gallinaceous birds, are continually moulting until they are fully grown. I have no specimens newly hatched; but from analogy with *P. mongolicus*, I think that they must have quills when still in down. When they have attained the size of a Quail, their first feathers are already nearly full-grown, though some have still blooded roots; such specimens I have obtained at the end of July and in August, whence I opine that the female still has eggs in May and the early part of June. If so, she is a late breeder, like *P. mongolicus*.

"The birds, as soon as the moult is ended, gather in small flocks, consisting of males, females, and young; some old males, however, remain single. This association begins with the first days of October, but is not very strictly kept up. During the day, numbers of them often disperse amongst the bushes, a flock of from ten to fifteen specimens occupying a space of as many acres; and on being disturbed they fly up one at a time. They keep more together when feeding in open places, as, for instance, on the stubble-land. They eat the seeds of *Eleagnus*, *Halimodendron*, and *Alhagi*. Near the open spaces covered with the last-named thorny grass they conceal themselves amongst the Tamarisk bushes, in which they find shelter, but no food. Besides these wild seeds, they eat in autumn every kind of cultivated corn, particularly *Panicum miliaceum*,

as well as peas and lupins. In order to obtain *Alhagi* seeds, I have seen this Pheasant frequenting the Saxaul woods (*Holoxylon ammodendron*) near the river Karakol. On the Syr (Jaxartes) all these haunts are frequented by *Phasianus mongolicus*; but this bird is also very commonly found in the dense reeds of summer-drying swamps, a kind of locality in which I never met with an Oxus Pheasant. The flocks of this last species, though often dispersed during the day, gather themselves together more closely at night, which they generally pass in the densest bushes, as in summer. I have also found them assembling for the night on the walls of abandoned and deserted farm-yards, which on the Oxus, as well as in Turkestan, are built of clay, in the form of small fortresses.

"In the autumn, and in all probability in the winter too, this Pheasant feeds the whole day long, and grows very fat, even before the moult is finished; whereas in summer, as we have seen, it feeds only in the morning and evening, resting during the heat of the day in the shade of the jungle. Its flesh is white and tender, rendering it a first-rate bird for the table. When flushed, it flies at first perpendicularly with a great noise about ten or twelve yards high in the air, then horizontally at the same height for about a hundred yards, and at last sinks obliquely into the jungle, where it is not easy to find again, even though the spot be correctly marked; its flight is very short and heavy, though rapid. In dense bushes it will run in front of the sportsman, until it decides on flight; in open spaces also it runs out of reach of shot; and winged birds can go at a great rate of speed. In some places, such for instance as the Karakol and near the Dankara Lake, they are plentiful enough to be hunted profitably without a dog; but this is not the case where they are scarcer, as near Petroalexandrowsk. A dog, however, is more useful to scent out where a Pheasant is hidden in the bush, as it is not much use trying to follow a dog in the jungle, especially as a Pheasant never makes a stand, but keeps on running continually before the dog, just as a Landrail does. I have never seen a dog bring one of these Pheasants to perch, as is related of *P. colchicus* in the Caucasus; and indeed *P. chrysomelas* is eminently a ground-bird, perching only exceptionally, although commencing to do so at an earlier season than *P. mongolicus*. This latter species I have only seen perch in the depth of winter, viz. on two occasions in January 1875, and never before, during many years of observation. Both the species mentioned were seen to perch only in *Eleagnus* trees.

"The female of *P. chrysomelas* is, both in proportions and general colouring, exceedingly like the female of *P. mongolicus*; on an average, however, the head is smaller, the bill and the feet more slender, and the toes somewhat shorter; but these characters vary with individuals of both species, as also do the details of coloration. The only difference that I found to be more constant is to be noticed in the black markings of the hind neck (cervix); the female of *P. chrysomelas* has each feather on this part marked with a single black horse-shoe of variable shape, while the female of *P. mongolicus* has two large transverse oval spots: but the three females of *P. chrysomelas* which I possess can scarcely be considered sufficient to fix these characters as constant."

In conclusion I may state that the figure in the plate is taken from one of Dr. Severtzoff's typical specimens, given by him to Mr. Osbert Salvin. From Mr. Salvin this fine bird passed to my own collection, which contains a complete series of this group of birds.

My readers will have no difficulty in perceiving the masterly hand of Mr. Wolf in the outline of both the drawings of Pheasants in the present part.

The principal figure on the accompanying Plate is about one tenth less than the natural size.

Gould, John. 1876. "Oxus Pheasant, Phasianus chrysomelas, Severts. [Pl. 36]." *The Birds of Asia* 7(XXVIII), -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323195>.

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