

## 7

## Species/Subspecies

Because true pheasants comprise such a large genus, their ranges are vast and overlapping, leading to hybridization with bordering subspecies. At present there are a few projects underway to verify the taxonomic classification of many *Phasianus*, one of which involves DNA samples being collected by Andy Maycen, Steve Faubion, John Bonser, and me, along with collaborating parties in Europe, such as Cleres Zoological Park in France, one of the leading investigating bodies. This is not being done to question the validity of the subspecies, but to determine if many of those described still exist in the wild or only stand in captivity.

Many elements influence the existence of various subspecies: Political issues in some countries inhabited by true pheasants, for example, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, have a negative effect on attempts to stabilize any remaining wild stock in those regions. *P.c. torquatus*, a much-loved jewel, also known as the Chinese ring-neck pheasant, has been responsible for the demise of many other *Phasianus* due to its introduction into the areas of other indigenous subspecies. The current status of feral *P.c. colchicus* appears grim due to hybridization and lack of regulated hunting. A survey by European associates has located less than desirable, extremely fragmented populations of birds having pure lineage in areas of current and historical range. It is my fear, and that of others more knowledgeable in the biology of these birds, that many true pheasants no longer inhabit their natural environments due to habitat loss, introduction of non-native *Phasianus* in regions occupied by other subspecies, man-made mutations, and a general lack of avicultural interest. Many described phenotypes may now only exist in private collections.

I am often asked how there can be so much variation in one species, and what defines a subspecies. They are legitimate questions that have inspired many conversations and outright debates that continue long into the night.

With *P.c. colchicus* being one nominate species and *P.v. versicolor* another, the remaining phenotypes make up the subspecies, which are comprised of individuals that have like continuity, but have phenotype (observable, physical characteristics, determined by genetics and environment) variations. Subspecies are deemed such due to the fact they have exhibited sustained, stable, reproduction of characteristics for some acceptable time span, often due to inhabiting an isolated or particular geographic environment that aids in the sustained expression of a particular phenotype. When we contemplate their sheer numbers of subspecies in comparison to every other genus within the family Phasianidae, it is apparent that true pheasants have demonstrated a remarkable ability for adaptation.

In spite of my admiration for this group, they are in every sense like starlings or mallard ducks, inasmuch as once they are established, they manage to thrive under the most meager of provisions and harshest of environments. They are the most widely distributed of any Phasianidae, and as with any species with an expansive range. Anytime breeding populations form (becoming established because they can overcome, adapt, or balance adversities, allowing for proliferation), the results of this will be visible via behavior and phenotype.

Now, if anything breeds long enough in a given range, change from the parental phenotype is inevitable, for genetic continuity (genotype) alone will not dictate this. Survival installs inherent traits, but feather patterns, foraging habits (feeding), and defense tactics are environment induced. When gene pools begin breeding within that given population, no matter how large or small (time being the key dictate), they begin to establish traits. This action of circular breeding to like traits and individuals begins setting the foundation, leading to the continuation of this recurring gene expression (phenotype) to the point of homozygosity (a set pattern in genetic continuity) within that population is established. Next thing you know, voila! An established subspecies. This can only happen with expansion. Why? If there is a dominant gene action in a given pool, it will continue to present itself as such until something forces deviation from the typically expressed phenotype, in most cases (this being geographic barriers) range shifts due to habitat loss (food), climate change, encroachment by flora/fauna/humans, and possible loss of nucleus members (breeding population) out searching for others becoming established in some prime new area; all this leads to change in characteristics. Remember, it's the morphometric characteristics (shape, color, pattern) that define the subspecies.

We are now able to take this one step further, not just relying on Mother Nature to show us her products; science has given us the luxury of DNA testing to make such determinations.

## 7.01 | The Black-necked Group

Black-necked pheasants are so named because purebred cocks typically never exhibit any trace of a neck ring or collar. The wing coverts of the cocks vary according to race in shades of white, buff and dark chocolate-brown.

There are two features that most typify the black necks and separate them from the white wings:

1. The overall skeletal structure is heavier and coarser than that of most white-winged skeletons, particularly the brow ridges of the skulls.
2. The hind parts (saddle, rump, and tail coverts) are colored either dark cocoa-brown or glossy lavender red.

Note: The black-necked, Kirghiz, and white-winged pheasants, while each comprising their own special and definable group, are all together termed "red rumps," referencing Mediterranean and Middle Eastern specimens. Gray rumps are Asiatic specimens, and the olive-rumped is an independent, bridging group.

**Figure 7.01 (Opposite)**  
*Color plate from Josef Wolters' book, Edelfasane: Spezies in Farbe, depicting all four subspecies in this group.*



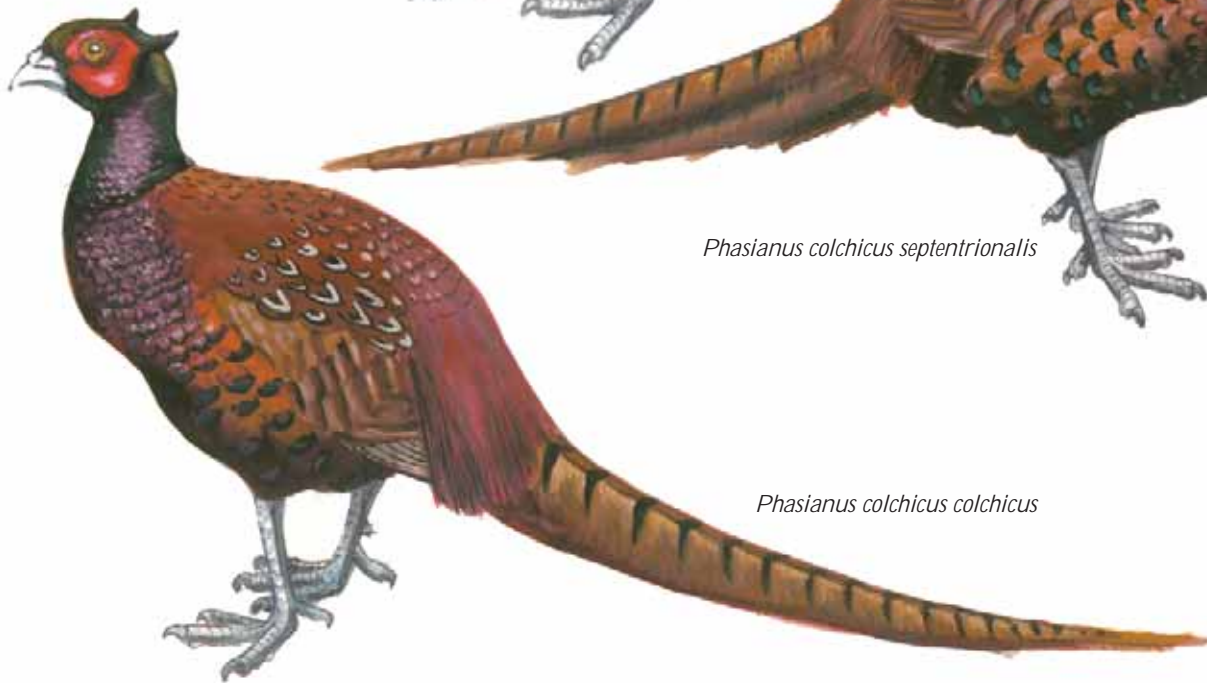
*Phasianus colchicus persicus*



*Phasianus colchicus talischensis*



*Phasianus colchicus septentrionalis*



*Phasianus colchicus colchicus*

## 7.01.01 | Southern Caucasus Pheasant

### *Phasianus colchicus colchicus*

#### IDENTIFICATION

**Cock:** Largest overall of the black-necked races, but slightly smaller than *turcestanicus*.

- Iris: dark orange.
- Head and neck: like that of *talischensis*.
- Mantle and flanks: more coppery but still dark, with flank marking much larger and glossed with blue.
- Breast: similar to that of *talischensis*.
- Abdomen: glossy bluish-black similar to the abdomens of gray-rumped cocks.
- Wing coverts: dark, but showing variable degrees of buff invading the areas over the wing webs and along the scapulars.
- Saddle: dark cocoa-brown; sometimes shows a little brassy green (like tarnished brass) on the inner parts of the feathers.
- Rump and tail covers: entirely dark, cocoa-brown (not purple as in *talischensis* and *persicus*).
- Retrises: like those of *talischensis*, but with the outer fringes browner and less purplish.
- Size classification: large medium.

**Hen:** Like *talischensis* hens but slightly paler and tinged with reddish throughout the plumage and lacking the sooty cast.

- Iris: dark brown.
- Chin and throat: creamy-buff.
- Size classification: small-medium to medium.

#### RANGE

The native range is in the valleys south of the Caucasus Mountains, northwest Iran, and from the Caspian Sea west to the Black Sea and Turkish Armenia.

The race was also introduced into the Thessalonian region (present-day Thrace), western Turkey, and Bulgaria, probably by Greek traders, at some time between 500 and 250 BC. Specimens from northern Thrace are identical to birds collected in the former Soviet and Turkish areas of Armenia.

#### INTEGRATION

Mixes with *talischensis* in northwest Iran, and with *septentrionalis* on the coastal plains between the western end of the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea.



**Figure 7.01.01**

*P.c. colchicus*, Southern Caucasus pheasant.

Painting by Major Henry Jones



Photos: Matt Shanley. Courtesy Thomas Trombone, American Museum of Natural History

Figure 7.01.01.01



Photos: Matt Shanley. Courtesy Thomas Trombone, American Museum of Natural History

Figure 7.01.01.02



Photos: Matt Shanley. Courtesy Thomas Trombone, American Museum of Natural History

Figure 7.01.01.03

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Figure 7.01.01.04



Photos: Matt Shanley. Courtesy Thomas Trombone, American Museum of Natural History

Figure 7.01.01.05



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Figure 7.01.01.06

*P.c. colchicus*, Southern Caucasus pheasant.





Figure 7.01.01.07



Figure 7.01.01.08



Figure 7.01.01.09

*P.c. colchicus*, Southern Caucasus pheasant.



Photo: Edouard Jelen, WPA France

Figure 7.01.01.10



Photo: Kenneth W. Fink

Figure 7.01.01.11

*P.c. colchicus*, Southern Caucasus pheasant.