
The Feral Chickens (Phasianidae) of French Polynesia

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While in French Polynesia in January and February 1968, we had an opportunity to observe birds in the eastern South Pacific. Among the more interesting forms were feral chickens (*Gallus gallus*). It is believed that early-day Polynesians brought fighting cocks and hens with them when they colonized oceanic islands. It is further postulated that these people were originally from eastern Asia, where the red junglefowl of India, ancestor of today's barnyard birds, was domesticated during pre-historic times (Bump and Bohl, 1961).

French Polynesia consists of several archipelagos in the South Pacific with the seat of government at Papeete, Tahiti in the Society Islands. We visited the islands of Tahiti, Moorea, Raiatea, and Bora Bora. Feral chickens are found on these islands, as well as on other widely scattered groups such as the Australs and the Marquesas.

Through the centuries, chickens, called *moas* by Tahitians, have escaped from narrow, man-dominated beaches into jungles reaching out in places to island shores. It is an easy matter for domestic fowl to become feral by wandering into the adjacent, almost impenetrable tangled growth that abounds in food, water, and shelter.

On the island of Tahiti, we observed a small hen with a brood of eight newly hatched young foraging through a plantation of palm and banana trees. This particular hen, if domestic, was free-ranging and too elusive to photograph. The young were the size of newly hatched quail and reacted to our approach in much the same manner as young bobwhite. It is not always possible to tell whether these chickens are feral as often there is little or no difference in appearance between domestic and wild birds.

During the period 1920-26, the Whitney South Sea Expedition collected 92 feral chickens in the Society, Marquesan, and other islands. There is wide variation in color and size among these birds. Ball (1933) studied this series and reviewed the historical literature on the subject. He came to the conclusion that before 1840 these fowl were direct descendants of the original birds brought from Malaysia. He also concluded that the variation in size and color since 1840 is the result of the introduction of domestic poultry. Murphy (1924) considered the birds collected by the Whitney Expedition to be reversions to the primitive or phenotype of their ancestor, the red junglefowl of India. Like Ball (op. cit.) Murphy believed that modern birds have been mixed with domestic breeds such as cochins, brahmas, and others. Although it cannot now be proven, it would appear that both authors are correct and that the blood of today's Tahitian junglefowl includes both the original and late domestic strains.

In size and weight Polynesian birds, like India's junglefowl, resemble modern fighting cocks. Adult males weigh 1½ to 2 lb.; females are smaller. Roosters are 25 to 28 inches in length; hens are 16½ to 18½ inches long (Bump and Bohl, 1961). Like all chickens, these birds belong to the pheasant family (Delacour, 1951). The males we saw on Bora Bora were similar in appearance to wild East Indian birds, with white earlobes, a striking black and orange mantle, and glossy greenish-black tail feathers. The females were brownish-black with white earlobes like present-day untamed hens from India. Early explorers in the Marquesas found the colorful feathers of these chickens used for ornamentation. *Kahhis*, long poles indicating sovereignty of Hawaiian kings, were decorated with a feather cluster that at times included feral fowl feathers (Munroe, 1960). The resemblance of these birds to modern fighting cocks brings to mind that cockfighting, called *faatitoraamoa* by Tahitians, is an ancient Polynesian sport. In fact, it has been suggested that chickens were originally brought to the islands for this purpose rather than for their food value (Ball, 1933).

About 140 miles northwest of Tahiti on the island of Bora Bora, where we stayed in a thatched hut on the jungle edge, we were awakened each morning by the crow of feral roosters. This call resembles that of the domestic bird, but is more abrupt. During early morning hours these jungle cocks would slip out of the heavy brush to feed in front of our screened room. As human activity increased they returned to their tropical rain forest home.

Since Polynesian birds still escape to the wilds and feral birds invade domestic coops, there is a constant intermingling of blood. This bodes well for the continuing existence of the Tahitian jungle cock far from the home of his ancestors in the heavy growth and broken scrub of India and western Burma.

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