

There is a small village in North Cornwall – part of the '7 Bays for 7 Days' stretch of that beautiful and dangerous coastline. Some years ago a new landlady became the incumbent of the Farmers' Arms in St. Merryn and, with her, came her cat, Jimmy. This black and white moggy was a bruiser whose favourite amusement was chasing birds – the bigger the better but the success rate was not great. The preferred option was wood pigeons but the dozy ones in the local park would do nicely, thank you.

However, young Jimmy was about to meet his nemesis and in spectacular fashion. He sashayed out on the prowl to get his bearings in his new neighbourhood and came across the father of a local, well-loved and protected family. Thinking 'Ah, fun' – and keen to stamp his mark on the scene, up came the fur on the spine, back went the ears, teeth bared with a growling snarl at the intended victim. But, contrary to all his previous avian encounters, this bird simply glared back and, instead of just two beady eyes, a myriad of golden eyes shimmered at him. Jimmy, appalled, had just met his first Peacock.



Barbados (2000) S.G. 1164

In England, in a small coastal community, roaming freely and breeding successfully, is not the most expected territory for one of the planet's most colourful and extravagant birds whose indigenous range is half a world away. Originating in South Asia and revered for thousands of

years, *Pavo cristatus* is known as *Mayura* in Sanskrit, the derivation of the word being from the root *mi* for 'kill', and it means 'the killer of snakes'. Whilst every individual state has its own bird emblem, the Peacock was chosen to be the national bird of India in 1963 and is protected by law to the point where methods to identify whether feathers have been plucked or shed naturally have been developed as Indian law only allows the collection of feathers which have been shed.

The spectacular appearance of the peacock is probably responsible for the plethora of the myths and folklore which abound. They even appear with Mickey & Minnie Mouse!



St. Vincent (1988) S.G. 1171

In India peacocks have graced temples for over 4000 years and are venerated for the good luck they are supposed to bring and its iconic image has been depicted on all manner of objects down the ages, one of the earliest surviving being the gold coins issued by Kumara Gupta1 (AD 415-450) which show the god Karttikeya riding a peacock on the reverse and feeding one on the obverse. Believed to have been one of the most magnificent thrones in history, the Peacock Throne created for the 17th century Mughal emperor Shah Jahan featured the fanned tails of two peacocks which were gilded, enamelled and jewel-encrusted. However, its fate was to be stolen from Delhi in 1739 by the Persians.

According to the Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*, the god king Indra sought refuge under a peacock's wing after failing to defeat the many-armed multi-headed Hindu demon Ravana and, as an expression of his gratitude, Indra endowed the peacock with 1000 eyes.



India (1973) S.G. 703

The peacock in Ancient Greece was originally owned by the god Pan who gave the bird to Hera. She was the Queen of the Sky and the peacock was sacred to her with its tail feathers resembling the stars in the heavens. The Greek version of the myth has Hera's husband, Zeus, falling in love with a mortal girl, Io. Hera was insanely jealous and she turned Io into a heifer. But Hera still had her suspicions and instructed the hundred-eyed giant Argus Panoptes to keep watch on this woman/cow. However, Zeus ordered Hermes to kill Argus through eternal sleep and so free Io. According to Ovid, Hera had Argus' eyes put into the tail of the peacock to commemorate her faithful watchman. In the fifth century BCE there was even a Peacock zoo in Athens and there were eye-wateringly severe punishments for harming the bird in any way.

In Egypt the Peacock was a sun symbol and connected to the worship of Amon-Ra, the Sun God. There is a similar story to the Greek myth whereby Argos was a traitor to Osiris and, while the king was away, he locked up Isis, Osiris' wife, and declared himself king. Argos had spies everywhere so was able to track the movements of Osiris. However, Osiris learned of this treachery and, in retribution, turned Argos into a Peacock giving the bird's tail all the eyes of his former spies.



China (Taiwan) 1991 SG 2020-1



During the time of the Tang dynasty in 8th century China, Peacocks were paid to the state as tribute as the feathers were in demand by the authorities for use not only for imperial processions but to designate rank: they were also used as reward for loyal service and to show imperial favour. The reason behind this mark of respect emanates from a story about a general of the Chin dynasty who was fleeing capture and ran into a forest full of Peacocks. He hid in a tree and when his foes followed him into the forest the birds were so quiet his enemies assumed that no one was there. So the general escaped and the Peacock was honoured in recognition for its help in keeping quiet.

European folklore includes Peacock feathers being interred with Viking warriors and, in medieval times, knights took a chivalric 'Vow of the Peacock' and decorated their helmets with its plumes. In 1526, the legal issue as to whether Peacocks were wild or domestic fowl was deemed sufficiently important for Cardinal Wolsey to summon all of the English judges to rule on the matter. Surprisingly, the judicial opinion came down in favour of the birds being a domestic creature!! Even today, during his Easter procession, the Pope carries a *flabetti*, a fan comprising ostrich feathers tipped with Peacock feathers which, allegedly, represent the all-seeing eyes of the Church.

It seems really strange to adulate male Peacock feathers when they are not true feathers at all and that, whilst regarded as a tail, the elongated coverts actually grow from the back. The true tail is brown and short as in the Peahen and the display plumes themselves are supported by much shorter quills.

Guyana (1997) SG 5066

Hungary (1977) SG 3097



Pakistan (1976) SG 411

As with many birds, the vibrant iridescent plumage does not emanate from pigments but structural colouration.

Optical interference reflections based on the structure of the barbules of the feathers produce the colours. The barbules contain microscopic two-dimensional crystal-like entities and changes to the spacing of the barbules result in different colours as does the angle of the light. The ocelli, those mythical eyes, are also dependent for their colour on their barbules and, whilst appearing all to be roundels, some 30 to 40 of the ocelli around the outer edges of the fanned tail are v-shaped.



North Korea (1990) SG MSN2960

Ceylon (1966) SG488



Occasionally and startlingly beautiful, Peafowl have white plumage. These exquisite creatures have a condition called leucism which causes an overall reduction in different types of pigment, hence the lack of colour in the plumage although the normal brown eye colour remains. They are not albinos although the latter do exist, albeit very rarely. They are true breeders as, when bred with another white-feathered Peafowl, all their offspring will have the snowy feathers. Leucistic Peachicks are born yellow and become fully white as they mature.



North Korea (1990) SG 2959

The size of the specie varies mainly between male and female. If the length of the tail and wingspan are included, the Peafowl are among the largest flying birds. They weigh in between 2.6-6 kg, have a wingspan of 1.4-1.6m and vary widely in length from 0.86-2.12m. Both sexes have strong, grey-brown legs adapted for running for cover and both are equipped with inch-long sharp spurs.

Peafowl are forest birds which nest on the ground but roost in trees. However, being the most energy-saving (or the laziest) members of the family, *Pavo cristatus* only flies to the lowest branch of its chosen tree and then works its way up, branch by branch, until it has reached a safe height! They forage on the ground in small groups, known as musters, and are omnivores. The diet encompasses plants, flowers, arthropods, small mammals, amphibians and, of course, their trademark victims, snakes. Hardly picky, they will actually eat anything they can get in their beak! In their indigenous habitat, they are found in the open scratching in the leaf litter either early in the morning or at dusk as they retreat to the shade and security of the woods during the hottest part of the day.

Bhutan (2002) SG MS1728b

All Peafowl require a great deal of water to drink and groups are known to walk in single file to a favourite waterhole to drink, but getting those feathers wet is a real problem to them. It weighs down their feathers and, if they do get wet, they wait in a safe spot until they are dry. So to keep the plumage pristine, dust baths are the solution together with copious preening sessions, especially for the males in the breeding season.



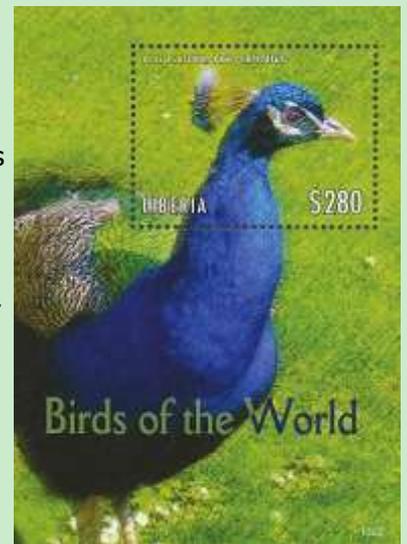
Moldova (2013) SG MS816

Avian fidelity does not apply to Peacocks! They are polygamous and the breeding season is spread out but, in the wild, appears to be dependent on the rains. Peahens normally only have one clutch per breeding season.

However, if raised in captivity and a clutch is taken away from the female, she will mate again and can lay up to three clutches in that season. The clutches removed can be incubated artificially or raised by a foster mother such as a turkey hen. The average clutch is 5 eggs and these take around four weeks to hatch. At hatching, chicks are very mobile, fully feathered, can fly in about a week and rely on their mother as a family or bevy for around two months. From birth, they are identical to the Peahen and remain so until around six months when the males begin to change colour although it is not until 2-3 years old before they develop their train and those unforgettable feathers.

Liberia (2013)

Pavo cristatus can live up to 25 years in the wild but the average is around 20 years due to predation, disease, electrocution from flying into power lines, pesticide poisoning and destruction of their natural habitat. In captivity, the maximum lifespan is 23 years with an average around 16 years. These differences are normally attributed to diet. In the wild, Peafowl must constantly search for food, must eat whatever they can find and get exercise whilst exploring: in captivity, they eat the food placed in front of them and so do not burn off excessive protein and calcium which can cause gout and kidney failure to shorten their lives.



The ubiquitous worldwide spread of these spectacular birds sees them on the IUCN list as of 'Least Concern'. A favourite item found during research on the Peacock is the collective nouns for the birds: these range from the family group called a 'bevy', to the dull 'muster' for a general group or, reflecting the appearance, an 'ostentation' but the absolute best must be a 'party of Peacocks'!!

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