

# Pheasants in the Tarim Basin. Confusion and controversy.

## Brief history:

In 1870 D.G.Elliot describes two new subspecies of common pheasant based on the observation of four skins from this region: a pair and two males. He discovered them being far from there in Bengal at Capt. CHT Marshall, the Bengal Staff Corps, which had just received them from Yarkand from the collection of Mr.R.B.Shaw.

Two males are identical and D.G.Elliot names them *Phasianus shawii* in honor of the collector.

The third male, that is different, he named *Phasianus insignis*, which is a remarkable pheasant. His description, that he has published in the "Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London" corresponds to those known since W.Beebe and J.Delacour of *Phasianus c.tarimensis* and *Phasianus c.shawii*. His exceptional drawings, that he has made of them confirm that.

D.G.Elliot did not know the exact capture locations of these pheasants. However, he supposes that the four birds cannot come from the same region. He could never solve this question,

because he probably never met with Mr. R.B.Shaw. There will be no answer to this question: so we can hypothesize that he has not met Mr. R.B.Shaw to ask him. We also know that Mr. Shaw did not know the pheasant subspecies well; because when he was hunting in Yarkant, he thought that he would hunt *Phasianus colchicus*.

In 1870 only 4 subspecies were known: *P.colchicus*, *P.mongolicus*, *P.torquatus* and *P.versicolor*, and 5 new subspecies were discovered that year: *P.shawii*, *P.insignis*, *P.sladeni* (= *elegans*), *P.decollatus* and *P.formosanus*. D.G.Elliot knew these new subspecies: he described four of them.

He immediately recognizes that *P.shawii* differs from all others. This led him to articulate a theory that this subspecies is the source of all the others in two declensions: one to the west *P.insignis*, *P.mongolicus* and *P.colchicus* and the other to the east *P.sladeni*, *P.decollatus*, *P.torquatus* and *P.versicolor*. D.G.Elliot states that this proposal will be validated or questioned by the discoveries coming of new subspecies. We know today what has become of it.

Among the 4 skins, he allots that of the female to *P.insignis* because of its relative similarity with that of *P.mongolicus*, but also because the singularity to *P.shawii* suggesting that the skin of the female must also be more characteristic.

## Changing the name:

The dispute over the descriptions and drawings of Elliot appears in the 7th volume of "Birds of Asia", by John Gould. There was a publication of an article of J.Scully in "Stray Feathers" on occasion of his stay in the east of Turkestan. He observed many living pheasants (30 to 40 individuals) and 24 skins. Some belonged to him (9) and the others



*Phasianus insignis* - D.G.Elliot (Faisan du Yarkand)



*Phasianus shawii* - D.G.Elliot (Faisan du Tarim)

were from the collection of R.B.Shaw. He tried in vain to find two species in the Kâshgharia. Thus he deduced that there is only one pheasant in Yarkand, after taking advice from Hume.

We are entitled to think that J.Scully has not seen the same skins that Elliot. His exploration in the field was limited to Kashgar, the habitat of the Yarkand pheasant, far removed from the known habitat for the Tarim pheasant.

Finally, J.Scully thinks there is only one species at Yarkand, (what is correct) and decides to name it *P.shawii* in 1875 in honor of R.B.Shaw, who was the first to make these pheasants known to Europeans. He is sure that Elliot will be the first to accept the new name. So curiously, J.Scully introduces a confusion that would not have occurred if Elliot had reversed its initial denominations. In this case *P.shawii* pheasant would have remained the Yarkand pheasant and *P.insignis*, not recognized by J.Scully, would become the Tarim pheasant.



*Phasianus shawi* - John Gould (Faisan du Yarkand)

Yet it is not at all proven that Elliot has enjoyed the dispossession of the names of the pheasants he had chosen. When Severtoff described *P.chrysomelas* in Ibis in 1875, Elliot quickly reports the following year, the great similarities with pheasant *P.insignis*. This suggests that Elliot continues to distinguish these two new subspecies, what the future will give him right. There were no them the same titles that History has not retained. There have been no discussions between the two ornithologists since John Gould died in 1881, two years before the publication of the 7th volume of "*Birds of Asia*".

#### *Conclusion:*

The discovery of *P.tarimensis* is given to Pleske in 1888, according to the "*Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London*", and taken up by literature. However the reading of this document surprises by the brief description that he made. There is every reason to believe that he restores with the world close that of Przewalski in 1883, behind this discovery. He states that *P.shawii* closely resembles to *P.tarimensis*, which is incorrect, unless to compare the subject to the plate Elliot painted, and then he validates his work. Jean Delacour clearly indicates the proximity of *Phasianus c.shawii* with *Phasianus c.bianchii* about the 'upper parts' and 'golden orange sides and flanks, with broad black tips to the feathers.' This corresponds perfectly to Elliot descriptions pheasant he calls *P.insignis* as he described the Tarim pheasant giving it the name of Mr.R.B. Shaw, *P.shawii*. Therefore it seems legitimate to consider Elliot as the true discoverer of *Phasianus c.tarimensis*.

We may add that the discussion is no longer necessary to be whether these two subspecies are a group, as some authors have proposed (Philip Wayre, 1969. Madge and McGowan, 2002) because *Phasianus c.shawii* has the characters of white-winged pheasants, while *Phasianus c.tarimensis* stands out clearly and is unclassifiable, constituting alone a singular group.

If the Elliot's assumptions are now outdated, Tarim pheasant do remains very intriguing. Work on genetic analyzes of all common pheasants undertaken by Yang Liu, School of Life Sciences, Sun Yat-sen University, China, should provide valuable answers about the phylogenetic relationships of this amazing pheasant with its immediate neighbors that they are east or west of the Tarim.

#### *Sources:*

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Faisan du Tarim et Faisan du Yarkand - British Museum, Tring UK.

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