



Conserving Europe's one true pheasant

The Nestos Delta in Greece harbours the last true wild European population of common pheasant, the black-necked. A project has been launched to save them

WRITTEN BY RICHARD CARDEN

In the north-east of mainland Greece, on the border between the provinces of Macedonia and Thrace, the River Nestos flows out into the Thracian Gulf opposite the island of Thasos. It has wound down from the high (just short of 2,000 metres) ridge of the Rhodope Mountains that separate Greece from Bulgaria, through foothills and across farmland, to its wet, wooded delta. This small cross-section of habitats harbours an unusually rich mix of galliformes – birds of the pheasant family. Seven or maybe eight species can be found here, including capercaillie and hazel grouse – both at the southern limit of their range – chukar and rock partridge.

The World Pheasant Association (WPA) has just launched a conservation project in the Nestos Delta, in partnership with the Hunting Federation of Macedonia and Thrace (KOMATH) and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT). The project agreement was signed in Thessaloniki last December; its aim is to conserve a perilously small population of the black-necked pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus colchicus*), a sub-species of the common pheasant. With other much more unusual species in the area, why focus on the common pheasant?

The black-necked are common pheasants of the type that shows no white neck ring. The common pheasant is found from the far east of China all across Asia to the Caucasus and the Black Sea in the west, with variations in plumage from one area to another across this vast range. Ring-necked are typical in the east; the black-necked occurs in the western part of the range, in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Jean Delacour, in his classic work *The Pheasants of the World*, recognised 31 subspecies of our familiar game pheasant.

The Greek birds form part of the population that Delacour called the southern Caucasus pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus colchicus*. The subspecific name *colchicus*, after Colchis, an ancient kingdom and region now in Georgia, echoes a legend that Jason brought back pheasants from there to Greece, along with the Golden Fleece. It seems little known that up until 100 years ago this form was widespread in Greece, on the mainland as far south as the Gulf of Corinth. Here we have the most westerly outpost of common pheasant and the only true wild pheasants to have occurred naturally in Europe.

These birds are not recent arrivals. Ancient Greek authors, Aristophanes and Aristotle among them, refer to pheasants – although on closer reading some of



Aristotle's references probably relate to birds brought back by Alexander's army from their campaigns further east. Archaeology gives us secure evidence that the common pheasant lived this far west (and in Romania and Bulgaria) several thousand years ago. As for recent history, there was certainly a large population in Greece early in the 20th century but it was slowly reduced by shooting pressure and simultaneously diluted by the massive numbers of hybrids released annually for this purpose. The Nestos birds are the remnant. The number here may now be no more than 200 individuals, though numbers seem to have been stable at this level for the past 10 years or more.

DOMINANT IN BRITAIN

British guns of earlier generations used to refer fondly to the "Old English black-neck". Legend has it that those were introduced into Britain by the Romans. They could well have been. The pure black-necked was the dominant type in Britain up to 1900, after which other forms, notably the ring-necked (introduced from around 1850 because they laid more eggs), began to dominate.

Top: clearing away thick vegetation in the Nestos Delta (left); a KOMATH scientist evaluating the habitat (right). **Above:** a *Phasianus colchicus colchicus* hen bird

Sentimental value to shooters aside, there is also a scientific value in conserving the black-necked in the wild – and the little population in the Nestos Delta is a rare pool of genetic purity. Black-necked can be found in greater numbers in the countries to the east of the Black Sea but those are countries of the former Soviet empire and their pheasant populations were supplemented hugely in the second half of the 20th century by hybrids. The Soviet troops had to be kept amused in their time off. For purity, the neglected Greek population has the edge.

Scientists have not decided whether *Phasianus colchicus colchicus* should be regarded as a full species. If it was, it would qualify for a high level of protection for being threatened or vulnerable. The WPA's scientific advisers are firmly in favour of precautionary action in the meantime. Full species or subspecies, this distinctive form deserves protection in its pure state. →

The project that has just been launched by the WPA with Greek partners is due to run for six years. The main strand of action will be improvement of habitat. These pheasants live in riverine forest (their preferred habitat in antiquity, as we are told by one ancient author) and the present forest is a shrunken remnant of what it was 50 years ago; much has been lost to agriculture. What is left of the forest is becoming too dense with undergrowth to be suitable breeding habitat. But the GWCT with its skills in marrying gamebirds with farming activities sees good scope for creating more of the mosaic of field-edge and thinned woodland in which pheasants can thrive. Winning the cooperation of the Forestry Service will be crucial for the necessary groundwork to be carried out.

PREDATORS PROTECTED

A second important aim will be to curb losses through predation. The whole area is under strict protection, with a comprehensive ban on hunting and shooting animals as well as birds. This is a plus and a minus. The hunters respect the shooting ban but the pheasants face some heavyweight predators: fox, badger, jackal and wild boar, not to mention assorted raptors. Boar numbers have been increasing alarmingly, to the point where they are perhaps the worst of the threats to nesting pheasants. But the boars may get their comeuppance, because they are now causing more damage to crops as well. Farmers are ready to join forces with KOMATH to make the case for a curb on the boar population.

Action against predators, which would be routine in Britain, is firmly against the law here in Greece, which may come as a surprise. However, hunters and shooters do not enjoy much support from the largely town-bred Greek public of today, the Tsipras

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government has little time for rural pursuits (no surprise there), the laws on protection of wildlife are strict and strictly enforced. So one aim of our project has to be to collect photographic evidence of predation, using camera traps, in the hope of obtaining a dispensation.

We hope also to win public acceptance that a hunters' organisation can be both interested in and effective at conserving species, where conservation is needed. Our Greek partners, KOMATH, are one of the largest hunters' federations in the country with some 45,000 members and resources

enough to pay a small permanent scientific staff. Conservation work is a minority interest for the members but KOMATH has worked for the past 15 years to conserve the Nestos Delta birds, with some habitat management, a meticulous annual census and public appeals for help. Linking them in through the new project with the GWCT, whose reputation is well-recognised in Greece, should, we hope, shift public attitudes in the hunters' favour.

Action on the ground is still in its first season but we can already notch up some success in relationship building. The WPA may not be the biggest hitter among the world's conservation organisations but its distinctive way of working with local partners and personal contacts, and training up local professionals, has 40 years of track record and conservation achievements with pheasants and their sister species in China, India, Nepal and elsewhere. The international interest that the WPA is bringing to bear in Greece has already triggered much-needed liaison between KOMATH and two

public bodies, the Management of the Nestos National Park and the Forestry Service of the region. Official recognition has been given to the project and permissions are being granted for the first steps in habitat management – much more quickly than KOMATH had expected. A ban on the use of sheepdogs during the nesting season has been negotiated.

All being well, we should be able to stabilise and slowly increase the number of black-necked pheasants over the next five years, bring about a more harmonious relationship between the region's hunters and the public – and the taxonomists will have a pool of pure-bred *Phasianus colchicus colchicus* to deliberate over for as long as they need. As for the hunters, some of them dream of the day when they might be allowed a small quota, just a very small quota, of black-necked to shoot but that is a distant vision. The black-necked that I have seen, or rather glimpsed, were shy and wild, and flew fast and low for cover. Not the ideal gamebird. But a challenging target for conservation with the constraints that we are finding in Greece. ■



Top: improving the habitat along forest boundaries. Above: there are around 200 black-necked pheasants in the region