

BACK TO THE FOREST

HOW AN INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP IS WORKING TO SAFEGUARD THE VIETNAM PHEASANT AND RESTORE IT TO ITS NATURAL HABITAT

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For more than 25 years, the forests of central Vietnam have been missing one of their most remarkable inhabitants. The Vietnam pheasant (*Lophura edwardsi*), once native to the dense, humid lowland forests of the region, has not been recorded in the wild for decades. But an international alliance of conservation organisations, zoos and Vietnamese partners has come together with a shared goal: to return the Vietnam pheasant to the forests where it once lived.

The Vietnam pheasant is one of the rarest birds in the world and a striking example of the dramatic consequences of human impact on natural ecosystems. The species is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, with the designation 'Possibly Extinct in the Wild', as no bird has been sighted in the wild since 2000, despite intensive camera-trapping efforts.

The disappearance of the pheasant from its natural habitat is due to multiple interacting factors, including habitat loss, the use of defoliants

during the Vietnam War and illegal hunting. Without the efforts of the French ornithologist Jean Delacour, who brought the first pheasants to Europe during his five expeditions to Vietnam between 1924 and 1930, laying the foundation for the entire current species population, this species might have been irretrievably lost. Due to careful management of the species' Studbook, there is now a stable population of Vietnam pheasants under human care. Over the last 100 years or so, the global *ex situ* population has grown to more than 1,000 individuals.

A PHEASANT RECOVERY NETWORK

Developed in 2014, the species conservation action plan provides the foundation for strategically coordinated recovery efforts. The implementation of the actions is driven by an international network, the Vietnam Pheasant Recovery Team (VPRT), and associated partners who bring together expertise in breeding management, veterinary science,

habitat and species conservation, and long-term monitoring across Europe and Vietnam. The network's efforts follow a multi-step approach in line with existing guidance from the IUCN on species reintroductions.

For 30 years, the local NGO Viet Nature Conservation Centre has carried out extensive camera-trapping surveys in historic Vietnam pheasant habitats in search of the bird, and has prepared suitable areas in Dong Chau (Khe Nuoc Trong, Phong Dien and Ke Go nature reserves) for potential reintroductions. As part of its ongoing efforts to secure habitat for the pheasants, Viet Nature holds a 30-year lease on 768 hectares of natural forest in the Dong-Chau Khe Nuoc Trong nature reserve. This milestone agreement guarantees space for scientific research, conservation and the potential release of the species.

To combat the severe threat of snaring, Viet Nature and protected area rangers carry out snare removal in selected areas. The rangers patrolling these sites are recruited

PHONG DIEN NATURE RESERVE
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PHEASANT MALE © MARCEL STAWINOĞA



from local communities, which fosters local engagement and a shared interest in the species and protection of the selected sites. Their efforts in removing traps have considerably reduced the threat, keeping the areas safer for local wildlife. For local communities, participating in the conservation activities offers a suitable alternative to hunting or snaring.

A WORLD FIRST BREEDING CENTRE

In 2021, Viet Nature obtained a 30-year lease of 4.5 hectares of land to build a breeding centre for the species. As the first facility of its kind, in the middle of its historical distribution range, the Rare Pheasants Breeding Centre (RPBC) combines conservation breeding with research and nature education while also engaging local communities in protecting their natural heritage. The first block of breeding aviaries and an exhibition aviary are already built. Construction of the second block is underway and expected to be completed in the autumn of 2026. The goal is to keep 50 breeding pairs and to release their parent-reared offspring to selected forest sites in the future.

In parallel with the construction of the RPBC, significant progress was made towards kick-starting the establishment of a breeding population in Vietnam. Within this collaborative framework, the EEP coordinated by Prague Zoo (Czechia) plays a key role in ensuring the genetic health and long-term viability of the newly established *ex situ* conservation breeding population in Vietnam. 22 birds were selected from the EEP population maintained within EAZA zoos and the World Pheasant Association. The selection process followed clearly defined criteria, including genetic diversity – DNA analysis was done by Antwerp Zoo's Centre for Research and Conservation (Belgium) – minimal relatedness, good health status, appropriate age and natural behavioural traits. This careful selection ensures that the *ex situ* conservation breeding population in Vietnam is built on a strong and viable genetic foundation.

BUILDING A NEW BREEDING POPULATION

Serving as the project's European central quarantine and transportation hub, Tierpark Berlin (Germany) gathered the selected birds and handled all preparations for their



journey. The complex transport was organised jointly with Vinpearl Safari Phu Quoc, the key in-country zoological partner for the transport. Before their overseas departure to Vietnam, all animals underwent extensive preparations, including veterinary examinations, health checks and diagnostic testing and a quarantine period. For the transport, the pheasants were housed in specially designed transport crates, ensuring maximum safety, proper ventilation and minimal stress aboard the cargo aircraft. Throughout the journey, the birds were accompanied by experienced personnel.

The pheasants will be managed and bred at two locations in Vietnam: half of them at the RPBC and the other at Vinpearl Safari Phu Quoc. Further transports are already in preparation, including offspring from the two Asian satellite populations established in Taipei Zoo (Taiwan) and Singapore Zoo (Singapore), and an additional batch of birds from the European region.

NEXT STEP: RELEASE AND MONITOR

While the transport was taking place, a structured decision-making workshop in collaboration with the IUCN SSC Conservation Translocation Specialist Group and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL, UK) was held in Vietnam. It brought 25 national and international experts together to develop recommendations for a trial release of pheasants in central Vietnam. The event focused on three key aspects of the reintroduction programme: pre-release conditioning and husbandry, release methodology and post-release monitoring.

Participants agreed on soft-release methodology combining two release timings and aviary designs. The trial release will evaluate four alternative

treatment combinations, providing valuable information on how release age, release season and pre-release social and housing conditions influence post-release success. Post-release monitoring efforts will include trialling GPS and VHF telemetry devices on the birds in the natural environment along with the use of camera trap networks. Telemetry attachment methods were trialled on Vietnam pheasants at ZSL Whipsnade Zoo and Chester Zoo (both UK) to ensure any impact on behaviour is negligible. Field observations and systematic data collection on behaviour and survival will be part of the post-release monitoring activities and adaptive management of release methods applied where needed.

The recovery efforts for the Vietnam pheasant are carried out in close cooperation with governmental authorities in Vietnam, who officially declared the species a conservation priority for the country in 2025. The involvement of national and regional authorities is essential to ensure the long-term protection of habitats and to integrate the project into existing conservation strategies.

The return of the Vietnam pheasant is a rare opportunity to reverse a loss that once seemed final, with zoos and private breeders from the WPA at the centre of the change-making. It highlights the role that long-term conservation breeding can play in safeguarding species, and it demonstrates the importance of international collaboration in addressing global biodiversity challenges.

Financial and other support for the project is warmly welcomed. Detailed and up-to-date information about the project is available in the Vietnam Pheasant Recovery Project Newsletter.