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**Author**

Bradley, Francine A.

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# Attempts to Control Peafowl on the Palos Verdes Peninsula

Francine A. Bradley

Department of Animal Science, University of California, Davis, California

**Abstract:** Peafowl are an introduced species on Southern California's Palos Verdes Peninsula. Frank Vanderlip, Sr., the area's developer, brought this non-native species to his Rancho Palos Verdes estate. While the exact year is not known, it is likely that the introduction took place between 1913 and 1937. Following Vanderlip's death, there has been little or no management of the birds. They have wandered off the Vanderlip property and reproduced freely. As the flocks have grown, so has their territory. The birds' range now includes the municipalities of Rancho Palos Verdes, Palos Verdes Estates, Rolling Hills, Rolling Hills Estates, and San Pedro. The birds are responsible for serious property damage to homes, landscaping, and vehicles. During the breeding season, residents must deal with the birds' nocturnal cries and diurnal aggression. Municipalities had enlisted the assistance of humane society, animal control, and police officers. One community legislated the birds' territory to be two neighborhoods. All of these efforts had minimal impact on bird number and territory size. Recently, the cities of Rancho Palos Verdes and Palos Verdes Estates requested the assistance of the University of California, Davis. University researchers initially conducted bird counts. Subsequently they assisted in increasing the number and improving the nature and placement of peafowl traps. These efforts resulted in significant numbers of birds being trapped and relocated to appropriate adoptive homes. Removal of any of the birds is opposed by a small group. These citizens engage in activities that are counterproductive to the trapping efforts. Ongoing trapping, citizen education, and a peninsula-wide approach to peafowl management is needed.

**Key Words:** peafowl, Palos Verdes Peninsula, trapping, *Pavo cristatus*, non-native species, introduced species

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## INTRODUCTION

The blue or Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) is native to India, Pakistan, southern Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Woodard et al. 1993). Humans have long been drawn to the male peafowl. The extravagantly colored peacock with its imperious demeanor is depicted in ancient paintings, sculptures, and tapestries and is even mentioned in the Old Testament (Bergmann 1980).

In their native lands, peafowl have been viewed as sport animals and have often been considered a pest bird, due to their overabundance (Wright 1880). Citizens have thinned native populations by hunting. The Romans, specifically Hortensius the orator, introduced the idea of peafowl as a specialty dish. Young peacocks were sought after for the lavish Roman banquets (Goldsmith 1856).

Peafowl are non-native species that were typically introduced to large estates and ranches in the United States. Such was the case with the blue peafowl and the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The Peninsula is a 22,000-acre landmass bordered on the west and south by the Pacific and on the north and east by metropolitan Los Angeles and the Harbors of Los Angeles and Long Beach. According to Atkinson (1933), the Peninsula was part of the original Spanish land grant in 1784 to Juan Jose Dominguez. Reviews of city, county, and state historical documents, plus personal interviews, suggest that Frank Vanderlip, Sr. introduced the original peafowl (6-16) to the Peninsula. Vanderlip, Sr. was a New York banker who, in 1913, bought 16,000 acres of the Peninsula for development. The peafowl were managed on the Rancho Palos Verdes (RPV) estate by the avid aviculturalist, Vanderlip, Sr. (Bradley and Gallagher 2001).

The peafowl were roaming off the Vanderlip estate by 1960. They first increased their territory by moving north into Johns Canyon. The mayor of the adjacent municipality of Palos Verdes Estates (PVE) introduced peafowl into his city between 1960 and 1965. Residents observed the PVE peafowl moving into the RPV neighborhood of Vista Grande as early as 1974. Homeowners in the RPV enclave known as Portuguese Bend reported that it was not until 1978 that the Vanderlip estate peafowl moved south into bordering Portuguese Bend. Residents of RPV's Crestridge district first observed peafowl in 1978. Crestridge is adjacent to Johns Canyon and undoubtedly the birds of that area spread into Crestridge (Bradley and Gallagher 2001).

While it was a city official who had introduced peafowl to PVE, by the 1980s elected officials and residents alike realized that the peafowl had become a problem. In 1982 PVE adopted a peafowl management plan. Two neighborhoods were to be zoned for peafowl and each neighborhood allocated 22 birds each. The two neighborhoods were Lunada Bay and Malaga Cove. Peafowl were not to be permitted in any other part of PVE. The peafowl management plan, which included annual surveys by the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and trapping by the PVE Police Department, was not successful in controlling PVE's peafowl (Bradley and Gallagher 2001).

As the RPV birds increased their territory and no control measures were developed, the number of birds in that city increased dramatically. Although complaint calls were received up and through 1998, city staff reported a dramatic increase in citizen complaints in 1999.

## METHODS

The cities of RPV and PVE contacted the University of California at Davis in 1999, requesting help with the peafowl overpopulation problem. The two cities and the University entered into a contract. For both cities, University staff were to meet with citizens, assess the peafowl populations, develop management plans, and advise on trapping procedures.

Community meetings were held in order to collect information from citizens and to allow them the opportunity to voice their concerns. Foot and vehicular surveys were conducted in order to obtain meaningful population estimates. Information on flock number, size, and territory was obtained for each neighborhood. Management plans were presented to the City Councils of both RPV and PVE. These plans included the development of a master list of suitable adoptive homes for the trapped birds. University staff advised and participated in trapping and relocation of the peafowl.

## RESULTS

Citizens with passionate opinions on both sides of the issue attended the community meetings. The noise generated by reproductively active peafowl in the months of April to September was a major complaint. Many said that sleeping was nearly impossible because of the birds' screams. Another frequently voiced concern was the birds' consumption of new plantings and their destruction of landscaping meant to prevent erosion. In addition to damaging landscaping, the birds were reported to constantly soil lawns and walkways. Residents said they had given up on seeding lawns and could only use the more expensive sod. Over and over homeowners told of their roofs being destroyed, tiles broken, and roof surfaces soiled. Some citizens were especially concerned about the peafowl's aggressive behavior. Birds were reported to come up to doors and windows and agitate household pets. A peacock broke through a sliding glass door during our study period. A common complaint was the birds' penchant for admiring themselves in auto windshields and in so doing, destroying expensive auto paint jobs. There were also reports dealing with the impact of the birds on property values. Individuals told of losing tenants because of the birds and of wanting to move out themselves. However, the homeowners were convinced that the resale value of their property would decrease if they were honest with potential buyers and disclosed information on the peafowl.

Through the community meetings and neighborhood visits, information was obtained on residents' personal efforts to repel the peafowl from their properties. Use of bamboo stakes and white string around new plantings was popular. Some homeowners have experimented with products designed to repel deer and reported some success against the peafowl. Others have armed themselves with water guns that have 50-foot trajectories. Still others have invested in motion detector systems around prized landscaping. When the detector is

triggered, a high powered stream of water is directed at whatever creature created the motion.

It must be noted that each community meeting drew a handful of residents who were adamantly opposed to any peafowl control efforts. The common refrain from these individuals was, "The birds were here first." Some said they moved to PVE or RPV because of the birds. Several of the meetings became quite contentious, with peafowl supporters verbally attacking city and University staff, as well as their neighbors who favored thinning of the population. Some who had long spoken out in favor reducing the birds numbers reported that they had been physically threatened and some had been embroiled in litigation brought by the pro-peafowl residents.

University staff solicited information from residents on peafowl roosting and feeding sites, as well as times of day the birds were seen in the various neighborhoods. Using this information, plus information collected by city staff via mail surveys and phone complaint records, University staff planned the surveys for both RPV and PVE. Five peafowl population centers were identified for RPV: Portuguese Bend, Vista Grande, Crestridge, Grandview, and the Marymount College area. Of the five regions known to have peafowl, city staff had received the most complaints from the first three regions.

Four distinct flocks were identified in Portuguese Bend and the potential exists for a fifth flock. In decreasing order of size, the flocks consisted of 34, 19, 10, and 8 birds. A fifth flock of 9 birds was observed near the private Vanderlip Road property during the first count. This flock could not be located at the time of the second count, but the suspicion was that the birds were on the private Vanderlip Road property, to which University staff did not have access. Portuguese Bend is the most open of all the RPV neighborhoods, with many of the properties encompassing several acres. Private and public stables are found throughout the area and peafowl can be seen foraging in stock feeders and hay storage areas. Portuguese Bend has many established trees, including large eucalyptus stands. The pine trees, however, attract most of the peafowl at roosting time. The acreage includes hillsides and canyons with thick underbrush. Given the abundant habitat and the limited access areas, a conservative peafowl estimate of 70-80 birds was given for Portuguese Bend.

Two main flocks of 24 and 5 birds were observed in the Vista Grande neighborhood. Vista Grande is a traditional suburban neighborhood. However, there are significant areas of open hillside. The neighborhood has many large pines and these attract the peafowl and provide roosting sites.

The Crestridge area was found to have two main flocks of 28 and 8 birds, respectively. In addition there are 2 peacocks that remain separate from the other two flocks. Again, pine trees attract most of these birds at dusk.

While no peafowl were observed during site visits to the Grandview and Marymount College areas, the

complaints received from residents of both areas would suggest that at least a small flock exists in each of the two neighborhoods.

The City of PVE requested bird counts in the two neighborhoods of Lunada Bay and Malaga Cove, where a specified number of peafowl are allowed. The Lunada Bay peafowl were observed in five major flocks, ranging in size from 8 to 26 birds. A total of 88 birds were counted. Lunada Bay is an older neighborhood with many established trees, including pines. The homeowners with pine trees suffered with the largest number of birds.

In Malaga Cove a total of 31 peafowl were counted. The birds are grouped into two flocks of 20 and 11 birds. Each of the two flocks has a small grove of pine tree roosts. Part of the Malaga Cove area includes a high hillside with thick underbrush above one residential section. It was not possible to gain access to that area.

In an open City Council meeting, RPV officials agreed to have the University develop a list of adoptive homes, trap, and relocate birds from the regions of Portuguese Bend, Vista Grande, and Crestridge. Pressured by those present who were opposed to the trapping, city officials promised that the location of all traps and the times of the trapping would be made public. They also agreed that the trapping opponents could be present to view the trapping.

Officials in PVE did not hold any public meetings prior to enlisting the University's services in trapping and relocation. Beleaguered residents volunteered their backyards as trapping sites and those location and trapping times were not publicized.

Prior to any trap construction, University staff compiled a list of suitable adoptive homes. The media's coverage of the issue had precipitated numerous calls from residents across Southern California who offered to provide new homes for any birds that needed to be relocated. Those individuals were interviewed to assess their bird experience and the suitability of their property for housing relocated birds. In addition, poultry fanciers, 4-H poultry families, and game bird hobbyists in the southern part of the state were contacted in order to develop a large list for both municipalities.

The City of RPV contracts out all its services and has no "city" crews. The City of PVE, on the other hand, has a good-sized city park crew. The University facilitated a joint contract with the two cities that allowed for sharing of trapping costs and use of the PVE crews in RPV. PVE officials decided that the trapping would be restricted to Lunada Bay and they wanted 50 birds removed. The City Council of RPV also agreed to the trapping and removal of 50 birds. They also were supportive of University staff conducting a demonstration project on the grounds outside City Hall. Using the information on the birds' roosting areas and travel patterns in Lunada Bay, 4 backyard sites were selected as trapping sites. Using similar information for RPV, 4 locations were selected in Portuguese Bend, Vista

Grande, and Crestridge. In addition, a demonstration trap was constructed outside the RPV City Hall and the process filmed for local cable television. More backyards were offered than were needed for trapping locations. There was disappointment among the homeowners whose yards were not chosen.

Simple traps were constructed using lightweight T-posts and barrier fencing for the perimeter and a protective, safe-for-birds mesh for the top of the trap. All trap parts were connected using cable ties. For several days prior to trapping, the homeowner was instructed to place food in the back of the trap. The food used was based on the owner's experience of what the birds typically ate in the yard. Effectively used were cat food, brightly colored children's dry cereal, grapes, and flats of young flowering plants. Disposable blue lab coats were given to the participating owners and they were requested to wear the coats when putting food in the trap. The birds were allowed to enter the trap, eat, and leave at will for several days.

Once trapping started in PVE, the homeowner was told to drop the trap door when one or more birds were in the trap. PVE crew members carried pagers and homeowners were instructed to page the crew when they had trapped peafowl. The homeowner entered the street address as the numeric message and the crew knew which trap was ready to be emptied. All those involved in trapping wore the blue coats. In many instances, by the time crews arrived to remove a bird or birds from the closed trap, more peafowl were standing outside the trap. It was possible to remove the trapped birds, reset the trap, and have more birds enter in a short time. The system worked extremely well and the desired 50 birds were caught in less than a week's time, with more than 30 birds removed from one yard.

Trapping in RPV was much less successful. Fewer than 10 birds were trapped on each of the two trap dates. RPV neighborhoods where large numbers of peafowl were traditionally seen wandering unafraid down the street had no peafowl in sight on trapping day. However, large numbers of birds could be heard vocalizing in one or two backyards. When the occasional bird was trapped, the crew had to wait to physically catch the bird. City staff had promised project opponents that they could observe all the bird handling. The opponents chose to stay at home and had to be reached by phone when a bird was caught. This was followed by a waiting period until the individuals drove from their homes to the trap site. Once at the trap site, the individuals condemned every aspect of the operation, in spite of the presence of poultry experts and a board certified veterinarian. In addition to verbally abusing staff, the opponents were physically in the way.

## **DISCUSSION**

More education is needed for local government officials and residents alike. Peafowl are not feathered native sons and daughters of the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

They are introduced birds and their presence cannot be accurately defended with statements such as, "They were here first." Citizens need to appreciate that while these birds may have been attractive additions to the large ranchos and estates of yesteryear, they are not suitable for the suburban backyard. Peafowl numbers were traditionally kept under control as long as the birds were managed by individuals such as Vanderlip, Sr. Also, the predators that once helped keep the peafowl population down have been pushed out by development. While there are few creatures left that can harm the peafowl, the peafowl can in fact damage the habitat of native species.

Trapping in RPV was greatly hindered by the interference of the citizens opposed to the project. With the public information on trapping dates and locations, it was easy for opponents to sabotage the trapping efforts. It appeared that certain residents put out large quantities of food for the birds prior to the trapping dates. Making public the trapping dates and locations, plus giving critics access to the operation, placed unnecessary burdens on all involved and reduced the program's effectiveness in RPV.

The construction of the demonstration trap in RPV, the filming of its construction, and the frequent airing of that film on a Peninsula cable television station has provided residents with the information to construct their own traps. Using that knowledge along with the list of adoptive homes developed by the University, Peninsula residents have been able to trap and relocate birds on their own.

While only the municipalities of RPV and PVE entered into an agreement with the University of California, in the course of the study it became obvious that the Peninsula's peafowl problem extended well beyond the two cities. University staff either viewed first-hand or received legitimate reports of peafowl in the Peninsula communities of Rolling Hills, Rolling Hills Estates, and San Pedro. The cooperation between RPV and PVE is merely a start toward what is needed. If there is not a concerted effort among all the Peninsula communities, depopulation efforts will not be effective.

Education is also needed in terms of what can legally be done with the peafowl. According to Title 10.32.040 of the Los Angeles County Code, it is a misdemeanor for the owner of an animal to fail to control her/his animal. That includes allowing the animal to run

at large on any street, public place, etc. and allowing the animal to remain on the private property of another (Anon. 2002). This means that if anyone were to claim ownership of the peafowl, that individual would be in violation of the County Code and would be required to properly control the birds on her/his property. Since no one claims ownership of the birds, it would seem that the respective municipalities have the obligation to take care of the violation. The birds are an introduced domestic species and are not protected. It would seem most expeditious for the Peninsula communities to have a coordinated, well-planned but unpublicized depopulation effort to humanely deal with the problem. Given the size of the Peninsula and the abundant habitat, the census numbers reported here are minimum verifiable numbers for the regions surveyed. Due to the size and nature of the Peninsula, along with the prolific nature of the peafowl and the absence of natural predators, ongoing control efforts will be required.

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