

# FEATHERED *Fireworks*

That's the bird of paradise when he goes a-wooing: A fiery cascade of color against the jungle background. Here a scientist tells of braving the wilds to watch the strange lovemaking of this finest thing in feathers

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**M**EN have risked their lives in the jungles of New Guinea for a chance to see the sights pictured here and on the cover of this magazine—the brilliant and scintillating fireworks of the bird of paradise in display.

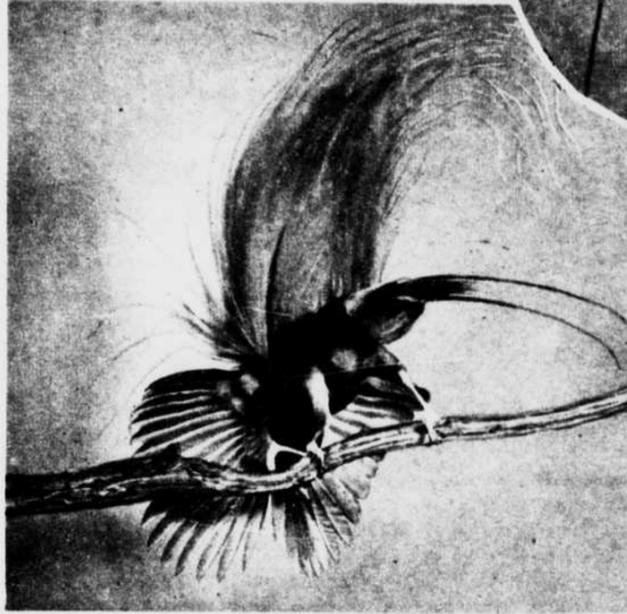
As far as I know, these are the first photographs ever taken of the courtship display of several of these birds of paradise. The birds themselves are in the collections of the New York Zoological Park, the largest exhibition of birds of paradise in the world. Six months of daily watching and waiting went into the making of this series of photographs. We had to be on hand at the magic moment when the male bird was beginning the stiff-legged dance that culminates in a fiery cascade of plumes. These pictures show only a few of the typical display postures; a complete series showing every phase of the birds' antics would run to half a hundred. For the courtship of a bird of paradise is as definitely "set" as the steps of an old-fashioned square dance, with an almost unvarying routine of gorgeous postures lasting from a few seconds to several minutes.

The English sparrow that ruffles his feathers and hops about the lawn while chattering and fighting with every nearby male of his kind is obeying the same urge that causes the birds of paradise to go into display. But what a difference in the effect!

Not only are the birds of paradise generally considered the most beautiful birds in the world, but their beauty reaches its apogee in the courtship display of the males. The pea-

A pair of blue birds of paradise came to us about fifteen years ago, and the male began his moult almost as soon as he arrived. It was some weeks before his plumage returned to its electric blue and mauve. And then, one morning soon after the moult was completed, an excited keeper burst into my office with the news that the male Blue was "in convulsions."

Unbelievable! We had carefully nursed the bird through the critical period of its first moult in captivity, and it had been in the best



LEFT: PECULIAR, BUT GORGEOUS

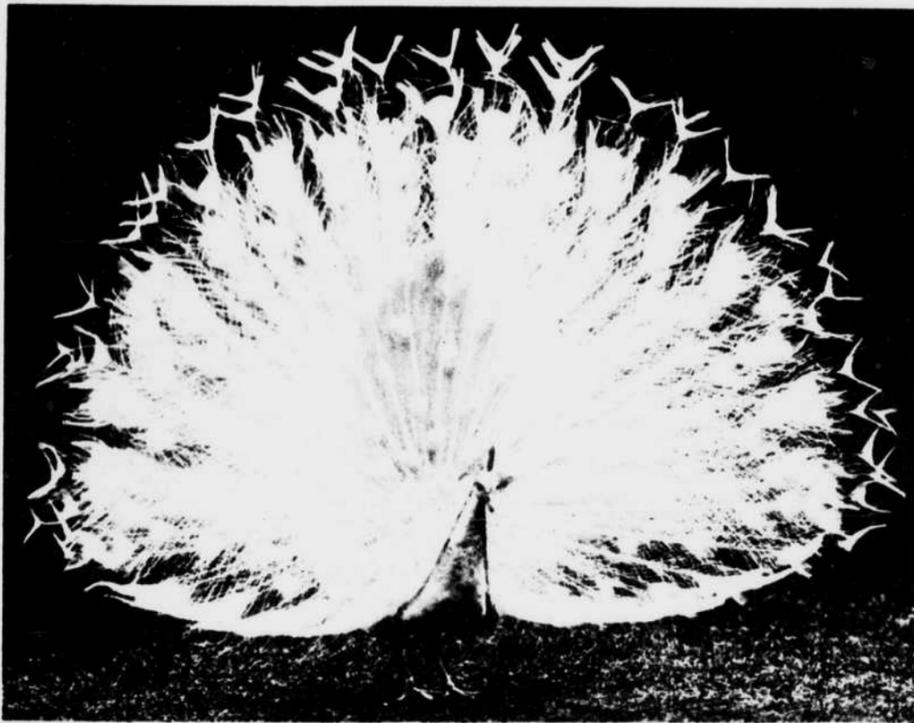
wings. Above the tail feathers the long "wires" rose to half their length and dropped gracefully outward, with their little tabs on the ends dancing as the bird moved its body. Every motion caused waves of color to roll across the breast feathers.

While that inverted form is typical of the blue bird of paradise

and some others, the displays of most of the birds in our collection are quite different. One of the handsomest is that of Count Salvadori's Bird of Paradise, which we have in the collection. I shall never forget the first time I saw that species displaying.

It was in 1929, when the New York Zoological Society's New Guinea expedition was on the way back to Mekeo from the mountain regions where most of our present collection had been captured. We were crossing the slope of a hill when I heard the harsh calls of Count Salvadori's Bird of Paradise somewhere close

A WHITE PEACOCK (AT LEFT) IN DISPLAY



cock, when he spreads his train and shakes it until every "eye" dances and shimmers, is the only close rival of its beauty. However, long familiarity has staled the peacock's show for most of us, and there is nothing else in nature to approach the eccentricity and loveliness of the bird of paradise display.

The loveliest of all, and one that has been photographed with only partial success, is that of Prince Rudolph's Blue Bird of Paradise. Our first sight of it at the Zoological Park, incidentally, was accompanied by a minor sensation in the Bird House.

of health the day before. I hurried to the cage outside my door, and the first glance was completely reassuring. I was seeing something that civilized man had probably never seen before—for the "convulsions" were the intricate gyrations of the bird's full display.

It was hanging head downward from its perch, its head at the apex of an inverted triangle of shimmering, rippling blue. An oval patch of velvet black on the abdomen was crowned by a mulberry row of feathers and a glowing aureole of blue and white, flanked by the brownish-mauve inner surface of the



Courtesy N. Y. Zoological Society

THE COUNT SALVADORI BIRD OF PARADISE IN A STRIKING POSE

IN OVAL: A JUNGLE BEAUTY



by. My only companion was Koi, a native boy. We were well behind the rest of the party and Koi was impatiently trying to hurry me along; but I insisted on turning aside from the trail for one last look at the bird in its native haunts.

I was rewarded with one of the greatest thrills of the expedition.

Below me on the slope a tree some fifty feet tall reared its bare trunk, with a dense canopy of green leaves at the very top. A few dead limbs jutted from the trunk, and on them were four of the Salvadori Birds of Paradise in full blaze of color. They were working up to the height of their courtship dance as I crept through the bush and stared down at them from a distance of only a few yards.

Their bodies stiff and horizontal, their red-brown wings spread in gracefully curved fans, their plumes of wine and red arching above their backs and falling in a tremulous cascade, they hopped in staccato time back and forth along the branches and pecked at imaginary enemies. For a few seconds each would become quiet and then, with a sudden outburst of harsh calls, expand its wings and resume its dance.

I could have stood there for hours, oblivious to the heat and my utter fatigue; but Koi would not lag behind an instant longer, and reluctantly I tore myself away.

Many times since then I have seen our Count Salvadori's Bird of Paradise ecstatically treading the measures of its courtship dance in its solitary cage in the Zoological Park. It is always a marvelous sight, but it will never seem as lovely as that first and only glimpse of the four birds in the heart of the jungle.

For a time that chance vision provided me with a major mystery. I knew that the courtship season was over for the birds of paradise of that particular group—and yet they were certainly going through their courtship dance

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A SOUTH AFRICAN OSTRICH GOES A-COURTING

