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# *Beauty* & THE BEASTS

The Palos Verdes peacocks flamboyantly strut their stuff, to the delight—and sometimes anger—of residents and visitors.

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Peacocks. Peahens. Peachicks. Collectively peafowl, though most commonly referred to as the bold and colorful male “peacocks.” According to *National Geographic*, they are one of the most adorned creatures on earth and have been admired for thousands of years, particularly the India blue species, which lives on the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

Historically and globally, peacocks have been considered a significant symbol of beauty, protection, nobility, watchfulness, guidance and holiness. Ancient Christianity heralded them as representing eternal life. In Hinduism, they signify benevolence, patience, kindness, compassion and knowledge. Greek mythology believed the eyes of the tail feathers were the eyes of heaven.

So how did the sacred national bird of its native India travel across oceans to Southern California? The first Palos Verdes peacocks date back to the early 1900s and the estate of Frank A. Vanderlip, Sr., a prominent New York banker who purchased and developed the peninsula. As the story goes, Vanderlip admired the peacocks of a fellow land baron, Elias Jackson “Lucky” Baldwin of Arcadia, who imported them from India in 1879. The Baldwin family later gifted six pairs of blue peacocks and a pair of rare white peacocks to Vanderlip. According to Vanderlip’s granddaughter, Narcissa Vanderlip, he had an extensive bird collection that included swans, geese, ducks, chickens and many small birds.

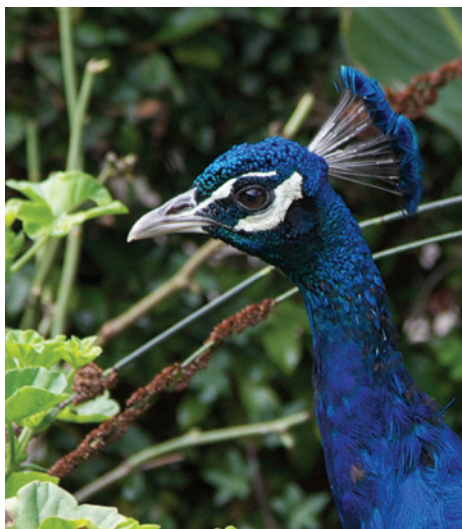
Speaking fondly of playing as a child in room-sized aviaries outfitted with small pools and extravagant perches, Narcissa smilingly recalls, “My grandfather just loved the peacocks! So did everyone who came to visit. It was wonderful growing up with such beautiful creatures. After the Great Depression, my grandfather gave all of the birds, except the peacocks, to the Wrigley family, and they were moved to Catalina Island. The peacocks he kept and let roam free. The white birds did not survive, but the blue ones did.”

## WALK THIS WAY

The peafowl not only survived, they thrived. “The best flock of India peafowl in the U.S. is in Palos Verdes,” says Dennis Frett, an Iowa-based peafowl expert who has consulted with city officials and estimates there are now more than 200 birds. Though not indigenous to the Peninsula, they have found their way into the hearts of many South Bay residents and have become the unofficial mascot of the community, while greatly influencing local culture.

There is a Palos Verdes Peacocks Facebook page and a Friends of the Peacocks website, which is dedicated to protecting and preserving them. There is a street named Peacock Ridge, and hiking on the trails at Peacock Flats is a nature lover’s bliss. Local charities have raised money with peacock-themed events. Linda Navarro, a member of the Palos Verdes Junior Women’s Club, says, “We raised more money than we ever have with our peacock Christmas ornaments last year!”





The Rolling Hills Country Club, with glass entry doors donned with peacock etchings, holds an annual Men's Peacock Tournament and Ladies' Peacock Invitational. "The peacock has been in all four versions of the club's logo since it began and is a part of our history," says general manager Greg Sullivan.

The birds have also played an important role in education and the arts. Mary Jo Hazard, a local psychotherapist, authored a popular children's book, *The Peacocks of Palos Verdes*, and has readings at schools, stores and libraries to encourage literacy and teach children about peafowl. The Palos Verdes Library District collaborated with Mary Jo and held a 2011 peacock poster contest that was sponsored by Terranea Resort. Its tremendous success spawned the March 2012 peacock bookmark contest to promote reading, in conjunction with the spring release of Mary Jo's new peacock book, *Palos World*.

## FOWL PLAY

Though beauty, grace, elegance and mysticism are synonymous with peacocks, the birds are unabashedly loathed by a large contingent of residents. Living as long as 20 years and typically weighing 8 to 13 pounds, peacocks ruffle the feathers of many residents and have divided neighborhoods and households.

How can a creature so magnificent cause so much strife? For starters, they are extremely loud, particularly during the spring mating season, and often audaciously blur the line between the wild and domestic worlds. They roost on rooftops and fences as commonly as trees, dine on prized gardens, overrun yards, disrupt traffic, wreak havoc

on beauty sleep, and leave behind what is an understatement to call "droppings."

Mention the word "peacock" in casual conversation on the peninsula, and their foes quickly speak up. Haley Harrington, a local equestrian, says, "I don't like the peacocks! They scare my horse on the trails." An onlooker says, "And what can they possibly be doing at 5 a.m.? They wake me up, and I can't get back to sleep!" One homeowner who echoes the sentiments of many others retorts, "They ruined our gardens and part of our roof. And they make such a mess." This loving and loathing polarization has led to ongoing litigation, peafowl relocation efforts and numerous civic meetings.

On the flip side of the angst, Barbara Moore, who lived for 18 years on one of the peacocks' favorite streets, says, "They never bothered us, because we never fed them and neither did our neighbors. I think they are a unique added value to Palos Verdes."

When Narcissa Vanderlip was asked about the local controversy around the peacocks, she said, "I think it is a great privilege to have their exotic beauty in the community. It's sad that they bother people. They survive in the wild, so it's best not to feed them, not to harm them and to educate everyone, especially the children, about them."


## CHILD'S PLAY

The jagged edges of controversy in a complex and often unforgiving adult world can be easily softened through the eyes of children. So I interviewed a local third-grade boy named Trent and a fourth-grade girl named Lily about the Palos Verdes peacocks, which they joyfully

spoke about. Trent even shared his perfectly practiced peacock call with me, after gleefully saying that his favorite thing about them is the way the peacocks dance to attract the females.

When I ask both children, "If the peacocks could talk, what do you think they would say to people?" Trent thoughtfully quips, "Hi, I am just a peacock. I won't harm anyone!" Lily smilingly responds, "Look at me! Look at me! I am so pretty!" Then she pauses and earnestly says, "And can everyone just look at the good things about me instead of the bad things?"

Dogs bark, ravens screech, sirens and gardeners' blowers pierce the quietude, impatient car horns blare, and . . . peacocks squawk. As for the mess the birds notoriously make, it seems that mankind tends to make a much bigger mess of our fragile ecosystem and environment than the animal world that gifts us with so much beauty, wonder and joy. Education and kindness can go a long way with peacock coexistence and deterring them from undesirable behavior. As lovely, young Lily suggested, maybe we should try to look at the good instead of the bad in them. Perhaps then we can turn our attention to celebrating our wonderful community that we share with the legendary peafowl that were here long before we were. ●

 To learn more about the Palos Verdes peacocks, contact your local city hall and following websites:  
[friendsofthepeacock.org](http://friendsofthepeacock.org)  
[peacocksofpalosverdes.com](http://peacocksofpalosverdes.com)  
[peafowl.com](http://peafowl.com)  
[pvld.org](http://pvld.org)