

HABITATS OF THE HEARTLAND

The Uncertain Future of the Ring-necked Pheasant

written by **Bob McMichael**
original paintings by **Will Nelson**

Ring-necked pheasants, which were introduced to the U.S. from China a little over a century ago, flourish on farmland. They spend cold winters sheltered by a variety of crops, in wooded areas and by streamside plants common on most farms from the eastern woodlands through the Great Plains and into the fertile agricultural plateaus of the intermountain West and Southwest. These gorgeous birds offer us a modern connection to the poultry side of our hunter-gatherer roots. The wild pheasant has symbolized bird hunting in the U.S. Its craftiness and pluck are legendary characteristics that mirror the main ingredients in the success stories of old-time tycoons. We admire the kaleidoscopic ring-necked male as a representative of American freedom. We love this bird.

Ironically, we also love other things that aren't so good for it, things that are equally American. Unfortunately, as is the case with an expanding list of animal (and plant and insect) species, human population growth and "the market"—two mainstays of modern American life—have steadily encroached on and erased the places pheasants live, eat and breed.

Beginning in the late 1970s, "clean farming," a general trend in cultivation

practices intended to optimize every available acre of tillable soil, began removing pheasant and other avian and mammalian habitat across the country. Irrigation ditches were cleared, and some cemented over, eliminating the natural plant cover on which pheasants had relied for moving safely away from natural predators and hunters to other critical habitat. Shelter belts of dense stands of trees were narrowed or cut down entirely to provide more tillable

soil, causing the birds to look for other winter havens, or freeze or suffocate to death in snowdrifts. Farmers began mowing alfalfa (a favorite nesting plant) earlier to maximize hay production, but the first mowing destroys pheasant nests and eggs, and often kills the hen. An adaptable mother, hens can nest several times each spring, although the number of eggs she lays decreases with each new nest. More than 50,000 acres of wetlands each year are now



being drained to increase crop production and buildable land, shrinking critical roosting, loafing and protective cover.

In growing southwest Idaho, residential and commercial development has sprawled onto previously open land, most of it agricultural. The wildlife in those areas, especially those lower on the predator-prey chain, get picked off while looking for replacement habitat. Combined with the changes in farming practices, an expanding economy and population base have replaced pheasants with people.

Bad news for game birds, and there's no avoiding it. Unless Eagle is razed and returned to open space and farmers and ranchers no longer have to worry about making a profit, the pheasant population will never be as robust as it was in the 1960s, when it peaked in Idaho. In 1964, over three-quarters of a million pheasant were "harvested" in the state. Historically, Canyon and western Ada counties enjoyed the highest pheasant numbers in Idaho. But in the 1990s, harvests had dropped statewide to around 130,000, and the southwest Idaho region averaged about 67,000 birds, according to Jeff Gould, a biologist with the Idaho Department of Fish & Game (IDFG) in Boise.

Not everyone agrees, however, that farming changes and development are the main culprits in declining pheasant numbers. Predators, such as skunks, foxes, raccoons, feral cats and some raptors, take their share of the birds. IDFG maintains a predator management policy that attempts to diminish natural predation by trapping and transplanting the animals that feed on pheasants. The success has been limited at best. Utah State University recently concluded a two-year study on predator removal and found no significant increase in pheasant populations in the study area. Andy Ogden, a biologist specializing in upland bird and waterfowl habitat with IDFG in Nampa, says that the predator management programs generally are too expensive and cannot be done on a large enough scale to be very effective in increasing overall pheasant numbers.

Another major and ongoing effort to augment the pheasant population involves stocking and transplanting both farm-raised and wild pheasant. These projects have also been less successful than their proponents had

hoped. Spring pheasant stocking of both wild and farmed birds is intended to increase the number of nesting birds and hatch more chicks that will survive at least until the fall. In Lincoln County last year, of 52 farmed birds stocked in April, just three were alive at the end of June, and none successfully hatched an egg. Of 34 wild pheasants transplanted there in January, only three were left by late June, most having died within two weeks of release. Eighteen more wild birds were released in March, and 11 survived through nesting season, producing 137 eggs, of which nearly half were hatched. Biologists have not concluded, however, that these transplanted birds have produced a spike in overall bird numbers there.



In the fall, IDFG stocks game farm-raised pheasants on the state's Wildlife Management Areas expressly for hunter harvest and expects all to be taken within several days of release. This fall IDFG will release over 12,000 pheasant, twice what the agency has stocked in the past. Gould said that stocked birds probably would be gone within two weeks. Those not taken by hunters either leave the public area or die of other causes. Approximately five percent will survive through the hunting season. Hunters claim the farm-raised birds are poor representatives of the species with no idea how to survive in the wild. Many do not bother hunting them because it's too easy and bad training for their dogs.

Lest it sound as though pheasants are mere objects for slaughter, consider that the most hopeful scenario for improving the bird's situation is restoring suitable habitat. This means reconstructing ecosystems hosting the complex array of life of which pheasants are only one species. Rather than simply creating more animals to kill, these projects have

a general social benefit in addition to what they do for wildlife.

In conjunction with IDFG, other state and federal agencies, and conservation organizations like The Nature Conservancy and Wildlife Management Institute, groups comprised of hunters and fishermen have led the way for decades in recovering and maintaining vital natural habitat for game and non-game species alike. Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation, Izaak Walton League, Trout Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, Idaho Bird Hunters, and other hunting- and fishing-oriented organizations work year-round to raise money for habitat improvement projects, and supply the volunteer labor to carry them out. Last year, the Treasure Valley chapter of Pheasants Forever spent nearly \$30,000 to improve pheasant habitat on about 11,000 acres of local land, both public and private.

IDFG's Habitat Improvement Program (HIP) has worked with private landowners since 1987 to help stabilize the pheasant population and is making a difference, according to Ogden, one of the most active biologists in the program. Last year alone, over 200 HIP projects were initiated in southwest Idaho began, reimbursing landowners for three-quarters of what they spend on upland and waterfowl habitat improvement, typically \$2,000 per year, with some projects garnering up to \$20,000. In 2000, IDFG spent a total of \$35,000 on HIP projects, whose funds come exclusively from hunting and fishing license fees. On many projects the department gets matching funds from federal or non-profit entities.

Participants, Ogden says, have been pleased with the results. Ogden convinced an area farmer to plant a small food plot on his farm. After the plot was established, Ogden headed up to Council for a Pheasants Forever banquet and stopped on the way to check on the plot to see if there were any birds there. He took his dog out and found just seven pheasants, whereas on a plot that size—a couple of acres—he'd expect to see 200-300. He thought it was a bust and headed up to the banquet. Before he began his scheduled speech, someone interrupted him. It was the farmer. Ogden worried the guy was going to complain about the lack of birds in his food plot. Instead, he said, "Listen to Andy because whatever he

says will work! Before I planted the food plot I had no birds, and now I have seven!"

Another landowner working with Ogden has devoted half of his 500-acre farm to HIP projects, beginning six or seven years ago, working to improve upland and waterfowl habitat. He built ponds, re-established cover on ditches and dikes, and planted cattails and other bird-friendly shrubs. He's pleased with the HIP and its effect on his land. "We have our share of birds down there."

The habitat improvement program of biologists like Gould and Ogden, along with concerned landowners, could help ensure equal opportunity for the ring-necked pheasant. One farmer summed up this fundamental approach. "All the wildlife needs to make a living."

Bob McMichael lives in Boise and writes about the outdoors and conservation issues. His article on sturgeon fishing in the Columbia gorge appeared in National Geographic Traveler's April, 2001 issue.

Federal programs resulting in helping pheasant habitat have included the Conservation Reserve Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Environmental Quality Incentive Program, and Wetland Reserve Program. Many of these programs were initially aimed at water quality and soil erosion, but each showed impressive benefits for wildlife populations, including pheasant. The fact that these programs continue to be voluntary and provide financial incentives (mostly in the form of reimbursement for planting and seeding) circumvents the tendency in Idaho and other western states to resent the regulations imposed by the federal government on state land and citizens. Only those who want to participate in these programs do. And those who do are generally pleased. For more information on all of these programs, see IDFG's Web site: www2.state.id.us/fishgame/hip.htm.

Will Nelson's limited edition, signed prints of both the pheasant pair and the chick are available from the artist at 208.884.3227 or at nw-art.com



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