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So you want to see more Pheasants?

Ringneck Pheasants have captivated the attention of millions of sportsmen and woman for all walks of life. For many the crisp sound of a cackling rooster brings to mind an annul pilgrimage to the hedges and tall grass prairies specking the Mid-west. Unfortunately for many this tradition passed from father to son over the last 3 generations is becoming less and less available. Pheasant and other gamebird populations have witnessed one of the largest declines of any bird species in North America as reported by the North American Ornithological Society. Reasons behind this downturn are many, and solutions are not always easy or inexpensive. Habitat loss is by most experts the largest problem effecting the once thriving pheasant populations. That coupled with an over abundance of predators, and extra efficient harvesting equipment pheasants and other gamebirds have the survival odds stacked against them.

Over the last 10 or so years landowners have made great strides in restoring damaged and destroyed habitats, and with government subsidized land set aside programs such as CRP, and CP-33. Thousands of acres of “crop field edge” have been restored to suitable pheasant habitat. If you are reading this, and you fall into the group who took on the challenge to redevelop lost habitat I congratulate you on taking the first and biggest step to having your own sustainable pheasant population. However, for many property owners increased bird numbers has not followed even the best restoration efforts. Pheasants like many animals rely of different habitats for different aspects of their lifecycle, and the recourses necessary to survive during one season doesn’t necessarily mean they will have their requirements met during other times of the year.

So what are the 5 most common mistakes made when establishing a pheasant population?

- 1. Failure to honestly assess the quality of habitat available to birds for their entire lifecycle.** Just because you are accustomed to flushing roosters from tall switch grass does not mean this can provide them with all their necessary

requirements. Pheasants need a variety of habitat types in order to thrive.

- 2. Food resources are only seasonally available, and when in most demand (winter-early spring) are greatly reduced.** In most agriculture areas the availability of food from the months of April through October is nearly unlimited. However, during the cold and long winter months

when energy usage sores, many habitats are turned into a desert of black dirt due to fall tillage practices.

3. **Water! Water! Water!** Pheasants like all animals need fresh water daily, without a safe and available place to drink even the very best properties will have severely reduced bird numbers. During the winter months this is less critical especially when snow is present, as the birds are quite adapted to eating the snow for their necessary moisture.
4. **Failure to stock enough birds of the proper age for optimal survival.** Successfully stocking pheasants is a numbers game. In a wild situation with great habitat expected survival rates of a pheasant chick through it's first birthday is about 30%. With released birds 20% survival of your stocked generation is a good starting point. Assuming you released 100 young captive bred birds the following year you could expect to have about 20 individuals make it to their first breeding season. Assuming that half those birds are female, and that only half of their nests will be successful. A best-case scenario would be that 5 hens would successfully hatch out a clutch of about 10-15 chicks or a total of 50-75 chicks to go into the next years breeding pool. It is generally recommended that a stocking effort be planed in 5-year cycles, and a minimum of 100 birds should be released each year for 5 years fully establish a population given all the habitat requirements are being met.

Adult birds raised in captivity make a poor choice for release if your true intention is to establish a population. Adult birds are accustomed to being cared for and have lost many of their natural abilities to survive and avoid predators. Young birds (6-7 weeks) are naturally curious, and quickly learn to forage, and scramble for cover should a predator threaten them.

5. **Birds used in the stocking effort were not properly conditioned prior to release, or were from an inbred flock.** In the wild pheasants generally are not able to completely self regulate their body temperature until the age of 5 weeks. Before this age they need an external heat source to stay warm. They must also be trained to use their uropygial gland to protect their feathers from becoming water logged from rain and dew. To do this starting at 3 weeks of age birds must misted off with water 2-3 times per week. While they look similar phenotypicly, genetically pheasant can be very different. Some strains have been bred for meat, and others have been bred for specific color patterns. When choosing a breeder to purchase stocker birds from make sure they have clean facilities, and healthy breeding stock that resembles what wild birds should look like. Remember just because someone says "direct China import" or "wild type" does not mean anything. Reputation should be your guide.

To better understand why your property does not have or hold pheasants I have constructed the following gamebird requirement checklist. Give a yes or no response to the following criteria about your property.

Yes/No

Roosting cover (at least 3' tall very difficult to penetrate by predators without being noticed). _____

Row Crop Feeding area within 30 yards of cover. _____

Year round water source also assessable within 30 yds of cover. _____

Nesting Cover (thick tall grasses tall enough to somewhat bent over to conceal from view from the sky and in blocks at lease 60' wide). _____

Brooding area (shorter grasses very close to thick edges to allow escape). _____

Lacking any one of these critical habitat features will greatly limit the survivability of gamebirds on a property.

If you have stocked birds on your property previously please answer the following questions.

Are there established pheasant populations on or near the property in question? _____

Have previous attempts at stocking birds been made on the property? _____

If yes to stocking, were the birds stocked as juvenile (6-7 weeks old) ? _____

Were less than 100 birds stocked? _____

Were multiple stocking attempts made over the course of several years? _____

Were the pheasants stocked produced by a reputable breeder of high quality genetics and of a "wild" nature? _____

Thank you for taking the time to read through this article. If you would like more information, or help with planning a restoration and restocking program please contact us.

Thanks,
Cavan Sullivan

QuickTime™ and a Gzip decompressor are needed to see this picture.