

Alberta Conservation Association (ACA)

Date: 2014-2015

Project Name: Pheasant Hunting Release Program

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leaders: Layne Seward and Mike Uchikura

Primary ACA staff on project:

Marco Fontana, Doug Manzer, Andy Murphy, Jim Potter, Kyle Prince, Amanda Rezanoff, Diana Rung, Blair Seward, Layne Seward and Mike Uchikura

Partnerships

- Bob Byers
- Bob Williams
- Camrose Fish & Game Association
- Cardston Fish & Game Association
- Coulee Game Birds (Harold Fukuda)
- Dirt Willy Game Bird Farm and Hatchery (Rick Wood-Samman)
- Ed and Angela Look
- Fort Macleod Fish & Game Association
- Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
- Medicine Hat Fish & Game Association
- Picture Butte Fish & Game Association
- Steve Potter
- Strathmore Fish & Game Association

Key Findings

- We took over delivery of the Pheasant Hunting Release Program in 2014 with the purpose to increase opportunity for put-and-take pheasant hunting over a broad area.
- Release sites used in previous years were used again in 2014. The 49 sites were roughly grouped in six geographic areas: Medicine Hat (18 sites), Brooks (8 sites), Lethbridge (17 sites), Strathmore (2 sites), Stettler (3 sites) and Camrose (1 site).
- Two types of sites are used in the program: 1) sites with multiple releases each week (approximately 100 to 400 birds each week), and 2) sites with only one release each week (approximately 25 birds per site per week).
- In 2014, we increased the number of released pheasants by 7% compared with 2013.
- A vital component for success of this program is our partnership with Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs, which provided volunteers who helped us release pheasants at many sites.

Introduction

Pheasant hunting has been a long-standing tradition in Alberta, particularly in southern areas of the province. With the introduction of pheasants in 1908, wild naturalized populations have spread across the landscape in southern Alberta. To augment the natural population and provide additional hunting opportunity, the Alberta government created and administered the Provincial Pheasant Release Program in 1932, which annually released thousands of pen-reared birds across the landscape each fall. The government pheasant hatchery in Brooks was privatized in the early 1980s and eventually closed in 2011, and the government cut funding for the release program in 2013. However, due to the dedication of a small group of hunters, a new organization, Upland Birds of Alberta, was formed to administer the release program in 2012 and 2013. It also provided funding for the program in 2013. In 2014, Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) took over the role of funding and administering the program. Release sites used in previous years were used again in 2014, and we established one new site near Edmonton (Camrose area). The 49 sites are roughly grouped in six geographic areas: Medicine Hat (18 sites), Brooks (8 sites), Lethbridge (17 sites), Strathmore (2 sites), Stettler (3 sites) and Camrose (1 site). Two types of sites are used that vary by frequency and number of birds released each week: 1) 14 sites have multiple releases each week with approximately 100 to 400 birds released depending on the specific site, and 2) 35 sites have only one release each week with approximately 25 birds per site per week.

This program is designed for “put-and-take” hunting to increase the opportunity for hunting pheasants at known locations. It is not intended as a means to re-establish pheasant populations in Alberta. However, ACA is undertaking other initiatives designed to improve naturalized pheasant numbers in select areas of Alberta, including efforts to improve upland habitat as well as re-establish breeding populations in areas with suitable habitat (see other reports: Habitat Legacy Partnership, Pheasant Studies, 4-H Raise and Release Program).

A vital component for future success of the program is a committed network of volunteers to help deliver pheasants through the hunting season. Volunteers from Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs commit many hours to pick up, deliver and release birds at many of the sites. ACA staff and contractors complete releases when volunteers are not available. This large effort by a number of individuals and groups is helping to create additional hunting opportunities across the province.

Methods

We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants in Wisconsin to raise and deliver all pheasants for the program. Shipment schedules were arranged to have the birds trucked to Alberta on a weekly basis. These shipments were either unloaded at holding pens for later delivery (to supply the 14 high-frequency release sites) or unloaded onto a fleet of smaller delivery vehicles for release on a weekly basis (to supply the 35 low-frequency sites).

We contacted Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs near the traditional release sites and asked for their continued help with delivering and releasing birds. Clubs from Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Strathmore, Picture Butte, Cardston and Fort McLeod have a history of assisting

with the program and readily volunteered once again. The Camrose club volunteered to release pheasants at the site near Camrose, which was initiated in 2014 to provide greater opportunity for hunters in the Edmonton area.

Private pheasant pen owners were contracted to care and store birds for the 14 sites that required multiple releases per week. The five contract holding pens were located near Sherwood Park (Daysland site), Stettler (Buffalo Lake/Whiteside sites), Olds (Bigelow site), Strathmore (Frank Lake/Namaka sites) and Patricia (eight sites near Brooks). Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Cardston, Picture Butte and Fort Macleod areas received one shipment per week directly from Wisconsin, with the birds released on the day of arrival.

We posted an online survey on our website to receive feedback from hunters using the release sites. Feedback from hunters will be valuable for determining the future direction of the program.

Results

We increased the number of pheasants for put-and-take hunting by 7% over 2013. One of our goals was to improve awareness of these hunting opportunities, which we did through our monthly newsletter (>90,000 recipients) as well as through an interactive map and detailed directions to each hunting site posted on our website.

We received shipments of pheasants from Wisconsin on a weekly basis from late September to mid-November. Shipments arrived as planned, and the condition of the birds was always good to excellent. Communication with staff at MacFarlane Pheasants was very good throughout the season, which helped tremendously as we coordinated many volunteers and contractors. Coordination with Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs also went smoothly. Deliveries to the designated pheasant holding pens kept a reliable supply of birds available for the 14 sites requiring multiple releases each week. In a few instances, weather delayed delivery by a day or two.

We initiated a new high-frequency release site within a one-hour drive from Edmonton to provide greater hunting opportunity in that area. The site was well used through the season, and we have received considerable positive feedback from hunters in the Edmonton area.

A large number of public inquiries were addressed throughout the pheasant hunting season. Phone calls and e-mails were addressed on a daily basis. Many inquiries regarded release schedules at specific sites, but many other queries regarded the future of the program and the role ACA would play. Hunters were pleased that pheasant releases will continue and provided positive feedback regarding ACA's role in the program. Pheasant licence sales increased by 26% from 2013, although we are unsure whether this increase related to the program.

Conclusions

The Pheasant Hunting Release Program is intended to increase opportunity for hunting pheasants and provide a positive experience for those participating. Our initial feedback from pheasant hunters and Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs has been very positive. An increase in

pheasant licence sales also indicates a keen and growing interest in pheasant hunting in Alberta. Our work to raise the profile of pheasant hunting and awareness of put-and-take release sites, as well as growing awareness and success of “pheasant festivals,” has created a surge in new pheasant hunters while encouraging past pheasant hunters to return to the sport. Our interaction with the hunting public, Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs, and landowners is also playing an important role in increasing support for upland habitat conservation and stewardship projects.

Communications

- Presented the Pheasant Hunting Release Program to the Camrose Fish and Game Association.
- Interviewed by *The Country Booster* (a local Camrose paper) for an article on the Pheasant Hunting Release Program (October 7, 2014 issue).
- Interviewed by *The Brooks Bulletin* (a local Brooks paper) for information on pheasant release sites in the Brooks area and the Pheasant Hunting Release Program (November 18, 2014 issue).
- Attended meetings and maintained communication with Alberta Fish & Game Association clubs that volunteered to assist with pheasant releases.
- Attended meetings with Ken Bailey from Upland Birds of Alberta to gather information regarding his experience with the release program in 2013.

Literature Cited

Interactive map of release sites:

<http://www.ab-conservation.com/go/default/index.cfm/programs/wildlife/wildlife-projects/provincial-pheasant-release-program/pheasant-release-sites/>

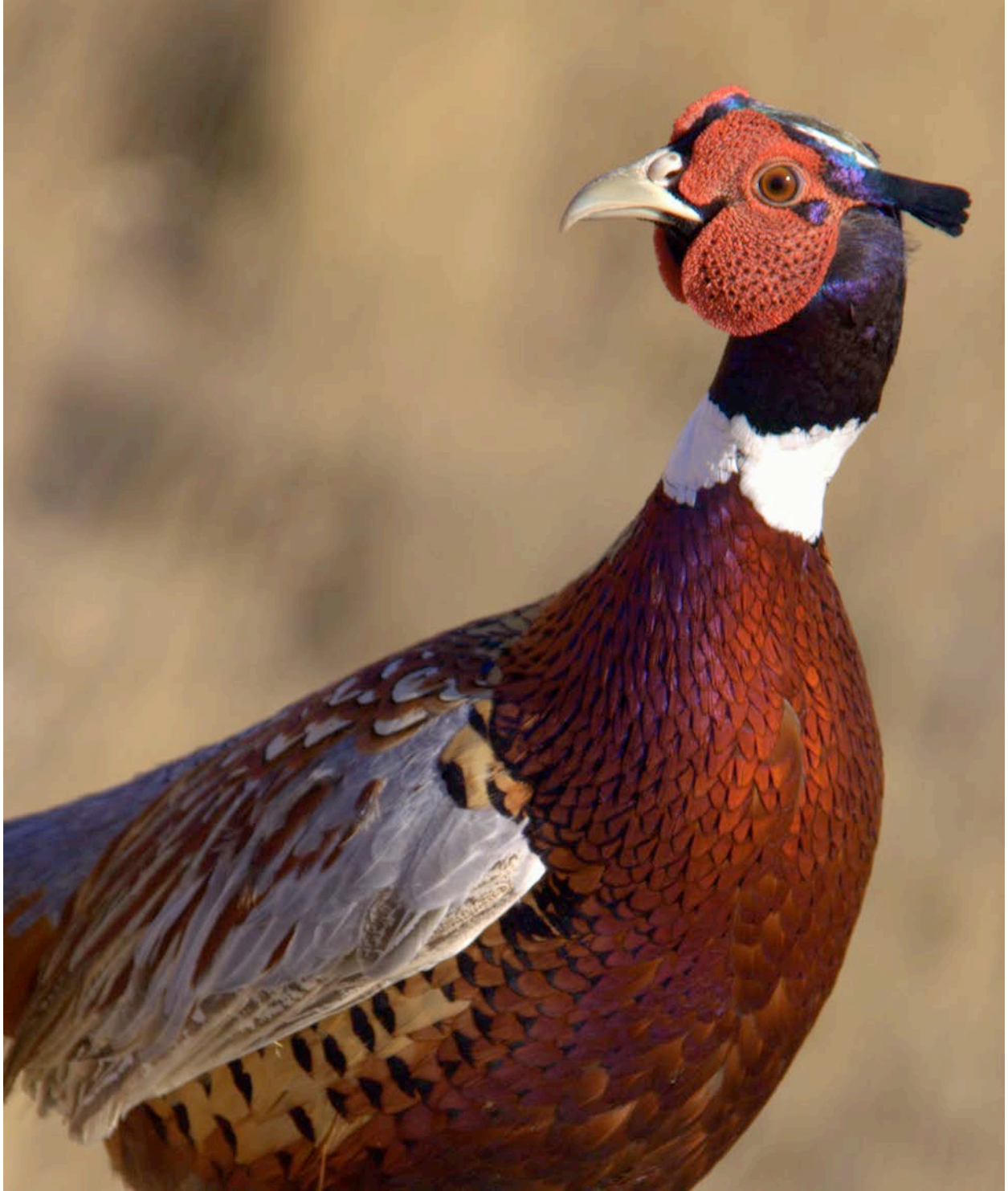
Photos



A release site located at CPR Lake north of Coaldale. Photo: Blair Seward



Milford Colony release site. Photo: Mike Uchikura



Ring-necked pheasant. Photo: Doug Manzer