

Alberta Conservation Association 2015/16 Project Summary Report

Project Name: ACA/4-H Pheasant Raise and Release Program

Wildlife Program Manager: Doug Manzer

Project Leaders: Blair Seward and Layne Seward

Primary ACA staff on project:

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Partnerships

4-H Alberta
Committed Ag Supply
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
Pheasants Forever – Lethbridge Chapter
Red Deer Fish & Game Association

Key Findings

- Sixty-three 4-H kids participated in the second year of this program and raised 5,350 pheasants from day-old chicks into 14-week-old hens and then released them into suitable habitat.
- We held a workshop for the 4-H kids to discuss pheasant husbandry and pheasant habitat requirements once the birds are released into the wild.
- We visited many of the kids at their respective farms to discuss pen design, bird health and pheasant habitat needs.

Introduction

Upland hunting and pheasants have been important features of rural life across much of southern Alberta for more than a century. Many of Alberta's residents have fond memories of either viewing or hunting upland gamebirds. However, changes in agricultural practices and the conversion of prairie into cropland have dramatically modified the landscape to the point where native gamebirds are nearly eliminated from areas dominated by cropland. Pheasants can adapt to areas predominately used for cropland provided that a suite of habitat features are also available. The widespread loss of habitat coupled with a decline in upland bird numbers has led to a disconnect between younger generations and the habitat needs of gamebirds, such as pheasants. We are partnering with 4-H Alberta to reactivate a raise and release program that was discontinued more than 20 years ago. This initiative aims to reconnect young rural kids with the habitat needs of upland gamebirds and give them practical experience with raising pheasants from day-old chicks into hens that are then released into quality habitat. Furthermore, it allows participants to experience first-hand the recreational enjoyment pheasants are able to provide.

Methods

We developed the goals of this initiative in collaboration with the leadership of 4-H Alberta. The 4-H network identifies the clubs with kids who want to participate in the program. We provide advice on how to raise pheasants, and the kids are responsible for all daily husbandry, including the construction of a brood house and a flight pen. The kids effectively raise the golf-ball-sized chicks into nearly full-grown hens. When the pheasants are ready for release, their condition is verified and the birds are purchased back by Alberta Conservation Association (ACA). We work with the kids to select suitable habitat for their release into the wild.

Results

In the summer of 2015, 63 kids raised 5,350 pheasant chicks for release into quality habitat. Participants gained first-hand experience with the challenges experienced by pheasants in those critical first days when they require near constant warmth and high-protein food to survive. They also learned about the economics of raising pheasants and were able to identify the best habitat types to release their pheasants to give them the greatest chance of survival. Each member kept updated records of pheasant development, food intake and mortality rates. Members from each club also completed “tour days” to visit each other’s pheasant pens and assess bird health and development.

Conclusions

The raise and release program has generated a lot of interest and is continuing to expand throughout Alberta. Previously, almost all participants were from southern Alberta, but this past year we saw an increase in participants from central and northern Alberta. Almost all participants from previous years returned to the program, which is a good indicator of participant satisfaction.

Communications

- In collaboration with 4-H, ACA biologists delivered a presentation to participants on pheasant husbandry, pheasant habitat needs and general pheasant biology.
- We provided participants with pamphlets and resources for information on raising pheasants and the species’ habitat needs.
- *4-H Alberta Magazine* highlighted the program.
- 4-H members presented the program at the Taber Pheasant Festival and Southern Regional 4-H Learning Day.
- 4-H presented the program at the national level in Ontario.
- Three local newspaper articles highlighted the program.

Photos



Day-old pheasant chicks delivered to 4-H members. Photo: Kyle Prince



Milk River Multi 4-H club member Tasha King with pheasant chicks. Photo: Rodger King



Milk River Multi 4-H club member Marly King releasing pheasants. Photo: Rodger King