

Alberta Conservation Association 2015/16 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Pheasant Release Program

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Partnerships

Cardston Fish & Game Association
Ducks Unlimited Canada
Fort Macleod Fish & Game Association
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
MacFarlane Pheasants
Medicine Hat Fish & Game Association
Picture Butte Fish & Game Association

Key Findings

- We released 25,000 male pheasants at 43 release sites to increase hunting opportunities.
- We partnered with five Fish & Game clubs, which played a key role in the program by releasing pheasants at 27 sites through the season.
- We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants to release pheasants three times per week at 16 sites.
- Two new sites were added this year: South Plain Lake located east of Edmonton and Hopewell located east of Calgary.
- We initiated two new approaches to gain feedback from hunters, including installing survey boxes at field sites and hosting an online survey on our website. Feedback from hunters will help us adapt the program to improve overall hunter satisfaction.

Introduction

Upland gamebird hunting is a long-standing tradition in Alberta. Since the introduction of the Chinese ring-necked pheasant in the early 1900s, wild populations became established in select areas of southern Alberta. To accommodate the high demand for hunting opportunities, the Alberta government started a hatchery in 1945 and created the Provincial Pheasant Release Program, which released thousands of hatchery-raised pheasants onto the landscape each fall. In more recent years, the hatchery was privatized due to government cutbacks and was on the brink of being lost entirely in 2013. However, a group of hunters formed Upland Birds of Alberta and

agreed to run the program for that year. Alberta Conservation Association agreed to take over the program in 2014, with the overall goal to provide greater hunting opportunity for all Albertans.

Several unintentional negative outcomes could arise from the pheasant release program, but these can be mitigated with careful planning. First, the widely publicized locations of release sites could vastly increase the number of hunters at the sites, and these hunters will opportunistically harvest additional birds (pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and grey partridge) that naturally occur at the sites but would otherwise not receive this elevated hunting pressure if the locations were not included in the program. Consequently, these populations could be altered from source populations of pheasants (or sharp-tailed grouse or grey partridge) to sink populations, which could have the compounding consequences of 1) increasing mortality rates to a point where local populations at the sites decline and 2) attracting dispersing individuals from nearby areas to the vacant territories at the sites where they will almost certainly experience the highest hunting mortality rates in the area. Sites with existing populations and very good habitat are therefore suboptimal locations for release sites, and ideal sites are those that 1) have reasonable holding cover for pheasants but 2) do not have natural source populations of sharp-tailed grouse, grey partridge or pheasants, and do not occur immediately adjacent to viable population sources for these species. There may be existing historical release sites that negatively impact the viability of surrounding naturalized populations of these three species.

Second, since the program is essentially a put-and-take hunting opportunity, there is potential for the public to lose focus of the larger goal of improving habitat conditions necessary to sustain natural populations. The intent of this program is to increase hunting opportunity (put-and-take); it is not a pheasant restocking effort to augment the population. Therefore, we encourage hunters to harvest all the released pheasants on these sites so that they ideally will shift hunting pressure away from areas with naturalized populations. We have other projects within our Upland Bird Enhancement Program that are designed to improve pheasant habitat and increase pheasant density in select areas over the long term.

Methods

In 2015, we released pheasants at 43 hunting sites advertised to the public. Releases occurred in wildlife management units (WMUs) in both southern and northern zones, but releases at northern sites started and ended earlier than at southern sites. Releases in the 200-series WMUs began by September 15 (first release at least one day prior) with releases continuing for nine weeks. Releases in the 100-series WMUs began by October 15 (first release at least one day prior) with releases continuing for six weeks.

For the past two years, we have contracted MacFarlane Pheasants (Wisconsin) to provide all male pheasants for this program. In 2015, MacFarlane Pheasants released pheasants three times per week at 16 of the 43 sites. To facilitate these releases, the company established a holding facility near Strathmore.

Fish & Game clubs are also key partners in this program. Clubs from Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Picture Butte and Cardston have a long history of assisting with the program, and more recently the Fort Macleod club has participated. These clubs readily volunteer to assist with releasing

pheasants in their respective areas, and in 2015, they released pheasants once per week at 27 of the 43 sites.

In an effort to increase pheasant hunting opportunities, two additional high-frequency (at least three releases per week) release sites were added in 2015. The South Plain Lake site is located one hour east of Edmonton, and the Hopewell site (Ducks Unlimited Canada property) is located only half an hour southeast of Calgary. Ducks Unlimited Canada has been very generous in allowing us to use their sites for pheasant releases.

A key activity of this program is communicating with hunters. We received feedback from hundreds of hunters, with some looking for information and others keen on providing feedback. We initiated two new approaches to facilitate feedback, including installing survey boxes at field sites and hosting an online survey on our website. Feedback from hunters will help us adapt the program to improve hunter satisfaction while meeting overall program objectives.

Results

We released 25,000 pheasants across 43 sites in 2015 (Table 1). Birds were raised in Wisconsin and shipped to Alberta in a timely manner, with many housed at the MacFarlane holding facility near Strathmore. Transport of birds was quick and efficient, although there was a short delay at the border crossing associated with media coverage on avian influenza within domestic poultry flocks. Overall, we experienced no prolonged delays, and the condition of the birds was always good to excellent. We maintained constant communication with staff at MacFarlane Pheasants to plan weekly shipments; they were efficient and professional, which made the process predictable through the season. The creation of the holding facility near Strathmore was a valuable addition to the program. This facility allowed birds to be held for a period of weeks to rehydrate and feed after transport and enabled MacFarlane to deliver birds three times per week at 16 sites.

Table 1. Number of pheasants released at each of the release sites or areas.

Area	No. of release sites	No. of pheasants released
Brooks area	8	4,305
Lethbridge area	7	1,950
Cardston area	4	1,000
Fort Macleod	2	610
Picture Butte	1	280
Medicine Hat area	12	2,200
Namaka Lake	1	840
Frank Lake	1	1,015
Hopewell	1	2,400
South Plain Lake	1	2,400
Bigelow	1	2,400
Buffalo Lake	1	2,400
Connie North/Whiteside	2	800
Daysland	1	2,400
Total	43	25,000

The releases at 27 sites conducted by volunteers also ran smoothly. These releases occurred on time, except for a few instances when weather or vehicle breakdowns delayed releases by a day or two. By the end of the season, the allotted number of birds scheduled to be released at each site every week was attained.

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 were in regards to release schedules at specific sites, but there also were many inquiries about the future of the program and the role ACA will play. Hunters were encouraged to hear that pheasant releases would continue, and they provided positive feedback in regards to ACA administering the program. This interaction plays an important role for tailoring current and future plans for the program, and it also provides insight into public interest in pheasant hunting, with interest clearly rising over the past two years. Pheasant licence sales increased markedly in both the 2014 and 2015 hunting seasons, and it was common to receive feedback from someone who hunted pheasants for the first time in many years as a result of this program.

Conclusions

The Provincial Pheasant Release Program was well received by pheasant hunters, and public feedback and discussions with Fish & Game clubs have been very supportive. An increase in sales of pheasant licences also indicates a keen interest in pheasant hunting in Alberta. ACA's efforts to advertise the program and the existence of several "pheasant festivals" throughout the province have supported an influx of new pheasant hunters while encouraging past pheasant hunters to return to the sport. This interaction with the hunting public, Fish & Game clubs, and landowners will also be important for garnering support for and implementing pheasant habitat projects throughout the province.

Communications

- *The Calgary Sun* published an article on the release program in its hunting column (October 7, 2015).
- *Metro Calgary* published information on pheasant release sites and the release program (September 24, 2015).
- We attended meetings and maintained communication with Fish & Game clubs that volunteered to assist with pheasant releases.
- We interacted extensively with the hunting public (in person, phone and e-mail).

Photos



One of the release site locations at the west end of Milk River Ridge Reservoir. Photo: Mike Uchikura



The Hopewell Ducks Unlimited Canada release site. Photo: Mike Uchikura