

Alberta Conservation Association 2016/17 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Pheasant Release Program

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Partnerships

4-H Alberta
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 26,000 male pheasants on 41 release sites to increase hunting opportunities.
- We partnered with five Fish & Game clubs that played key roles to release pheasants at 24 sites through the season.
- One new site—Whitetail North—was added this year; this is a Ducks Unlimited Canada site located near Grande Prairie. Four sites in the Medicine Hat area were removed from the program because of their small size.
- We partnered with 4-H kids in the Grande Prairie area who raised 1,000 male pheasants that were later released at the Whitetail North site.
- We contracted Macfarlane Pheasants to conduct three releases per week at 16 of the 41 sites.

Introduction

Upland game bird hunting has 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 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, an ad hoc group formed Upland Birds of Alberta and agreed to run the program for that year. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) agreed to take over the program beginning in the 2014 season, with the overall aim to provide greater hunting opportunity for all Albertans.

There are unintentional negative outcomes that could arise from the pheasant release program which may be mitigated with careful planning. First, the widely publicized location of release sites has the potential to vastly increase the number of hunter days at a given site. This influx of hunters will opportunistically harvest additional birds (pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse and grey partridge) that naturally occur at a site but would not receive this elevated harvest pressure were the location not included in the release program. This increased hunting pressure could alter a local population from one that produces a source of pheasants (or sharp-tailed grouse or grey partridge) each year to one that is a sink. This dynamic may have the compounding consequence of 1) increasing mortality rates to a point where a local population on that site is in decline and 2) attracting dispersing individuals from nearby areas to a place with vacant territories where they will almost certainly experience the greatest hunting mortality rates in the area. Sites with existing populations and very good habitat are therefore suboptimal locations for release sites. An ideal site is one that has 1) reasonable holding cover for pheasants but 2) does not have a natural source population of sharp-tailed grouse, grey partridge or pheasants, and is not immediately adjacent to a viable population source for these species. There may be existing historical release sites that have a negative impact on the viability of the 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 on the larger goal of improving habitat conditions necessary to sustain natural populations. The intent of this program is to increase hunting opportunity; it is not a pheasant restocking effort to augment the population. As such, we encourage hunters to harvest all the released pheasants on a site, and ideally these sites 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 2016, we released pheasants on 41 publicly identified open-access hunting sites. Releases occur in wildlife management units (WMUs) in both southern and northern zones, but with an earlier start and end date for those in the north. Releases at sites outside of the 100 WMUs begin by September 15 (first release at least one day prior), with three releases each week for nine weeks. Releases at sites within the 100 series WMUs commence October 15 (first release at least one day prior), with releases for six weeks.

For the past three years, we have contracted MacFarlane Pheasants (Wisconsin) to provide all the male pheasants for this program. As in 2015, we contracted Macfarlane to do three releases per week at 16 (Brooks, Calgary, Red Deer, Edmonton area) of the 41 sites. To facilitate releases, MacFarlane has established a holding facility near Strathmore. Fish & Game clubs are also key

partners. Clubs from Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Strathmore, Picture Butte and Cardston have a long history of assisting with the program, and more recently, the Fort Macleod club has assisted. These clubs readily volunteer to assist with releasing pheasants in their respective areas on a schedule of once per week at 24 of the 41 sites.

In an effort to increase pheasant hunting opportunities in northern Alberta, one new release site—Whitetail North (Ducks Unlimited Canada property)—was added in 2016. This site is located approximately one hour northeast of Grande Prairie. We partnered with 4-H families in the local area to raise 1,000 roosters, specifically to be released at this site. Nine releases occurred between September 14 and October 13. Ducks Unlimited has greatly supported ACA in allowing us to use their sites for pheasant releases.

A big part 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 a couple of new approaches to facilitate this feedback, including survey boxes available at the field sites and an online survey on our website. Feedback from hunters will help us adapt the program over the coming years to improve hunter satisfaction while meeting overall program objectives.

Results

We released 26,000 pheasants among 41 sites in 2016 (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. Transportation was expedited with efficiency; we experienced no prolonged delays, and the condition of the birds was always good to excellent overall. Constant communication was maintained with staff at MacFarlane Pheasants to plan out weekly shipments. MacFarlane staff are efficient and professional, making the entire process predictable through the season. The holding facility near Strathmore once again proved effective. As well as enabling MacFarlane to deliver birds three times per week at 16 sites, this facility also allows birds to be held over for a period of weeks to rehydrate and feed after transport.

Releases at the 24 sites coordinated with volunteers also ran smoothly. Releases occurred on time, with only a few instances where weather or vehicle breakdowns delayed the process 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 high volume of public inquiries were addressed throughout the pheasant hunting season. Phone calls and emails were addressed on a daily basis. Many of the inquiries were in regards to release schedules at specific sites, but there were also many queries about the future of the program and the role ACA will play. Hunters were encouraged that pheasant releases would continue and 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. It also provides insight on hunter interest in pheasants, with demand for hunting opportunities clearly rising over the past two years. It's not uncommon to receive feedback from someone who hunted pheasants for the first time in many years as a result of this program.

Table 1. Pheasant releases by area and number of sites.

Area	Number of release sites	Number of pheasants released
Brooks area	8	4,000
Lethbridge area	7	1,980
Cardston area	4	960
Fort Macleod	2	600
Picture Butte	1	300
Medicine Hat area	10	2,200
Namaka Lake	1	1,000
Frank Lake	1	1,160
Hopewell	1	2,400
South Plain Lake	1	2,400
Bigelow	1	2,400
Buffalo Lake	1	2,400
Connie North/Whiteside	1	800
Daysland	1	2,400
Whitetail North	1	1,000
Total	41	26,000

Conclusions

The Provincial Pheasant Release Program was well received by the pheasant hunting public, and public inquiries and discussions with Fish & Game clubs have been very supportive. An increase in pheasant licence sales also indicates a keen interest in pheasant hunting in Alberta; it appears that advertisements by ACA and several “pheasant festivals” throughout the province have helped create a surge of new pheasant hunters while encouraging past pheasant hunters to purchase a licence and get back into the sport. This interaction with the hunting public, Fish & Game clubs, and landowners will also play an important role in getting support for, and implementing, pheasant habitat projects throughout the province.

Communications

- Attended meetings and maintained communication with all Fish & Game clubs that volunteered to assist with pheasant releases.
- Interacted extensively with the hunting public via phone, one-on-one discussions and email.

Literature Cited

None

Photos



Alberta Conservation Association staff member Kyle Prince releasing pheasants west of Milk River Ridge Reservoir. Photo: Mike Uchikura