

Alberta Conservation Association 2017/18 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
4-H Alberta
Lethbridge Fish & Game Association
MacFarlane Pheasants
Medicine Hat Fish & Game Association
Peace River Fish & Game Association
Picture Butte Fish & Game Association

Key Findings

- We released 26,000 male pheasants on 41 release sites across Alberta to increase hunting opportunities.
- We partnered with five Fish & Game clubs south of the Red Deer River who played key roles to release pheasants at 23 southern sites through the season.
- One new site was added this year – Lac Cardinal Uplands located by Peace River.
- The South Plain Lake site was expanded by a quarter section to include the Vandenberg Ducks Unlimited site located directly to the east.
- 4-H kids raised 750 male pheasants and Peace River Fish & Game raised 350 which were released at the Whitetail North and Lac Cardinal sites in northwestern Alberta.
- We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants to do 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. This initiative saw tens of thousands of hatchery-raised pheasants released onto the landscape each fall. In more recent years, the hatchery was privatized due to government cutbacks and was finally closed in 2013. However, an adhoc group formed Upland Birds of Alberta and agreed to run the program for that year. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) agreed to take over the release program beginning with the 2014 season with the overall aim to provide greater hunting opportunity for all Albertans.

There are unintentional negative outcomes that may arise from the Pheasant Release Program that with careful planning may be mitigated. 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 wouldn't receive this elevated harvest pressure were the location not in the release program. This could alter a local population from one that produces a source of pheasants (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) by 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 on site are therefore suboptimal locations for release sites. An ideal site is one that has a) reasonable holding cover for pheasants but b) 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 historic 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 and not a pheasant re-stocking effort to augment the population. As such, we encourage hunters to harvest all the released pheasants on a site while ideally these sites will also 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 2017, we released pheasants on 41 publicly identified open-access hunting sites. Releases occur in WMUs in both southern and northern zones, but with an earlier start and end date for those in the north. Sites outside of the 100 WMUs began on September 1 (first release at least one day prior) with three releases each week, for nine weeks. Sites within the 100 series WM's commenced October 15 (first release at least one day prior) with one release each week, for six weeks.

For the past four years, we've contracted MacFarlane Pheasants (Wisconsin) to provide male pheasants for this program (excluding the Grande Prairie/Peace River sites). We contract MacFarlane Pheasants to do three releases per week at 16 (Brooks, Calgary, Red Deer, Edmonton area) of the 41 sites. To facilitate this, MacFarlane has established a holding facility

near Strathmore. Fish & Game clubs in southern Alberta are also key partners. Clubs from Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Picture Butte, Fort Macleod, and Cardston have a history of assisting with the program. These clubs readily volunteer to assist with releasing pheasants in their respective areas. The clubs release once per week at 23 of the southern sites.

To increase pheasant hunting opportunities in northern Alberta, another new release site—Lac Cardinal Point Uplands—was added in 2017. This site is located approximately half an hour east of Peace River. We partnered with local 4-H families and Peace River Fish & Game to raise 1,350 roosters for release at the Lac Cardinal and Whitetail North sites. Nine releases occurred at both these sites (Table 1).

Table 1: Breakdown of pheasant numbers per site/area:

Area	# of release sites	# of pheasants released
Brooks area	8	4,000
Lethbridge area	7	1,980
Cardston area	3	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/Lac Cardinal	2	1,000
Total # sites	41	
Total # of pheasants released		26,000

A big part of this program is communicating with hunters. We received feedback from hundreds of hunters with some asking for more information while others were keen on providing feedback. We initiated a couple of new approaches to facilitate this feedback including survey boxes available at the field sites, as well as 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 2017. Birds were raised in Wisconsin and shipped to Alberta in a timely manner with many housed at the MacFarlane holding facility near Strathmore. Bird releases were expedited with efficiency without prolonged delays. The condition of pheasants was consistently reported as good to excellent overall. Constant communication was maintained with staff at MacFarlane Pheasants in order to plan out weekly shipments. The MacFarlane staff are efficient and professional making the entire process predictable through the season. The holding facility near Strathmore once again proved effective. This allows birds to be held over for a period of weeks to re-hydrate and feed after transport from Wisconsin, as well as enable MacFarlane to deliver birds three times per week at 16 sites.

Releases at the 23 southern sites and two northern 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 was 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 with regards to ACA's administration of the program. This interaction plays an important role for tailoring current and future plans. It also provides insight on hunter interest for pheasants with demand clearly rising over the past two years. It's not uncommon to receive feedback from someone that 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 the pheasant hunting public—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 ACA advertising and several “pheasant festivals” throughout the province have helped create an insurgence 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.
- Extensive interaction with the hunting public via phone, one-on-one, and email.

Photos



Alberta Conservation staff, Kyle Prince releasing pheasants at Lac Cardinal Release Site.
Photo: Scott Seward