

**Alberta Conservation Association  
2019/20 Project Summary Report**

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

**Wildlife Program Manager:** Doug Manzer

**Project Leader:** Amanda Rezansoff

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**Partnerships**

4-H Alberta

Alberta Environment and Parks

Cabela's Canada Outdoor Fund

ConocoPhillips Canada

Innisfree & District Fish and Game Association

Lethbridge Fish & Game Association

MacFarlane Pheasants

Private donations

Wheatland Conservation & Wildlife Association

**Key Findings**

- Ninety-three 4-H members participated in the sixth year of this program, successfully raising and releasing 4,687 hens (and a few roosters) into suitable habitat.
- We held a webinar for participants to discuss the habitat resources needed by pheasants to be successful in Alberta.

## **Abstract**

Pheasants were first introduced into Alberta in 1908 by a group of recreational enthusiasts to provide enhanced upland hunting opportunities. Now, more than 100 years later, the tradition continues as ACA partners with stakeholders to improve upland hunting opportunities in Alberta. Changes in agricultural practices and the conversion of native prairie into cropland have dramatically modified the landscape to the point where native game birds are nearly eliminated from areas dedicated to cropland. Pheasants can adapt to areas predominately used for cropland provided that a suite of habitat features are also available. In 2014, we initiated a new partnership with 4-H Alberta offering them the opportunity to raise pheasants from day-old chicks to adult birds for release. This year, we had 93 4-H members who successfully raised and released 4,687 hen pheasants into suitable upland habitat. In addition to the 4-H members, other interest groups including private landowners, Fish & Game Associations, and Boy Scout groups also received the opportunity to raise pheasants from day-old chicks. We did not record how many birds were successfully raised and released from these interest groups as they are free to do what they want with their birds. We held a webinar for 4-H members to discuss habitat features important for improving the odds of survival for pheasants in Alberta.

## **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 game birds. However, changes in agricultural practices and the conversion of prairie into cropland have dramatically modified the landscape to the point where native game birds are nearly eliminated from areas dominated by cropland. Pheasants can adapt to areas predominately used for cropland provided that a suite of habitat features is 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 needed by game birds, such as pheasants. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) has been partnering with 4-H Alberta over the last six years to reactivate the Pheasant Raise and Release Program that was discontinued more than 20 years ago. This initiative aims to reconnect 4-H members with the habitat needs of

upland game birds and gives them practical experience raising pheasants from day-old chicks into adults that can then be released into suitable habitat. Having 4-H members raise and release birds offers them the opportunity to experience first-hand the recreational enjoyment pheasants are able to provide.

We also work with other special interest groups, such as Boy Scout groups, Fish & Game associations, and private landowners who are interested in raising pheasants. This allows us to reach a larger audience and help spread interest in pheasants and the habitat they require to survive. By having a large number of interest groups raising pheasants and wanting them to survive, it helps us ensure the longevity of pheasants and their associated habitat.

## **Methods**

We developed the goals of this initiative in collaboration with the leadership of 4-H Alberta to inspire an interest in gamebirds, and the habitat resources that are important for their success in Alberta. The 4-H network identifies clubs with members who would like to participate in the program, and we provide day-old chicks and detailed advice on raising pheasants, and the habitat needs of pheasants in the wild. After chicks are delivered to the 4-H participants, the members are responsible for the daily needs of the birds, including constructing a brood house and a flight pen, and for raising them until they are almost fully grown. When the pheasants are ready for release, a portion of the birds raised by each 4-H member are purchased back by ACA. We then work with the 4-H members to select suitable habitat for release locations. We held a webinar for participants to provide guidance on habitat features needed by pheasants to be successful in Alberta. Participants were asked to complete a habitat map of their selected release location to identify the different habitat types needed for pheasants through the seasons, and what changes they could make on their farm to improve habitat conditions for pheasants and other upland birds without adversely affecting their farming operation.

## **Results**

This past summer, 93 4-H members successfully raised and released 4,687 hens into suitable habitat. Participants gained first-hand knowledge about 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 how to identify habitat types that improved the odds for survival.

As part of the 4-H program, members kept updated records of pheasant development, food intake, and mortality rates. Some participants 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 continues to be a popular program throughout Alberta. Previously, almost all participants were from southern Alberta, but in the last three years, we have seen a large increase in participants from central and northern Alberta. The majority of participants from previous years are returning, providing a good indicator of project satisfaction.

## **Communications**

- In collaboration with 4-H, we held a webinar for participants to discuss pheasant habitat needs and general pheasant biology.
- We provided participants with pamphlets, feedback, and an updated manual on pheasant husbandry.
- Key sponsors acknowledged on ACA Facebook and other social media outlets.

## Photos



4-H member picking up his day-old pheasants. Photo: Rhianna Wrubleski



4-H member, Mark Norregaard's, flight pen. Photo: Phil Norregaard



ACA employee, Jalen Hulit, releasing pheasants. Photo: Aiden Bateman