

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

Project Name: Pheasant Release Program

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Parks

Capital Power

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 28,610 male pheasants on 42 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 in the release of pheasants at 23 southern sites through the season.
- Members of Peace River Fish & Game raised 760 male pheasants 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 17 of the 42 sites.

Abstract

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 saw 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 closed in 2013. However, a small group of keen hunters formed Upland Birds of Alberta and agreed to run the release program in 2013. ACA agreed to take over the release program beginning in 2014, with the overall aim to provide greater hunting opportunity for all Albertans. We released 17,080 male pheasants for the fall hunting season in 2014 and increased this number to 25,000 in 2015. The total increased to 26,000 in both 2016 and 2017, then to 28,173 in 2018, and 28,610 in 2019. We developed a webpage that shows a map and directions to all the sites to make this hunting opportunity more accessible. We operated 42 release sites in the 2019 season. We worked with five Fish & Game clubs in southern Alberta who played a key role with the weekly release of pheasants (6,040 total) at 23 sites from Medicine Hat to Cardston. We also partnered with members of the Peace River Fish & Game club who collectively raised 760 male pheasants for release on the northwest sites. We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants to release birds three times per week at 17 sites and once a week at the Peace River sites (n = 21,810 pheasants). MacFarlane housed these birds in a holding facility near Strathmore. Birds were

released at more northern sites beginning September 1 for nine weeks, while releases at southern sites corresponded with the later opening day for pheasants beginning October 15. The program has been well received with positive feedback from hundreds of hunters annually.

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, until its closure in 2013. However, a 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 in 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 (wild pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and grey partridge) that naturally occur at a site that 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 (or sharp-tailed grouse or grey partridge) each year to one that is a sink. This dynamic may have the compounding consequence of a) increasing mortality rates to a point where a local population on that site is in decline and b) attracting dispersing individuals from nearby areas to a place with vacant territories where they will almost certainly experience greater hunting mortality rates than before. Sites with existing wild populations and very good habitat are therefore not recommended 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 c) 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 2019, we released pheasants on 42 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 begin on September 1 (first release at least one day prior) with three releases each week, for nine weeks. Sites within the 100 series WMU's commence October 15 (first release at least one day prior) with one release each week, for six weeks, excluding the sites in the Brooks area where there is 3 releases a week.

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 17 (Brooks, Calgary, Red Deer, Edmonton area) of the 42 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, we partnered with members of the Peace River Fish & Game club to raise 760 roosters along with 980 McFarlane roosters to 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	5,773
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	620
Frank Lake	1	855
Hopewell	1	2,167
South Plain Lake	1	2,166
Bigelow	1	2,166
Buffalo Lake	1	2,166
Connie North/Whiteside	1	585
Daysland	1	2,166
Whitetail North/Lac Cardinal	2	1,740
Capital Power	1	2,166
Total # of sites	42	
Total # of pheasants released		28,610

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 release 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 28,610 pheasants between 42 sites in 2019 (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. 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 17 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 daily. Many of the inquiries were about 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 regarding 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 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 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 a resurgence of new pheasant hunters while encouraging past pheasant hunters to purchase a licence and get back into this lifestyle. 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 who volunteered to assist with pheasant releases.
- Extensive interaction with the hunting public via phone, one-on-one, and email.

Literature Cited

N/A

Photos



Pheasant release at the Buffalo Lake site—pheasants being released by McFarlane staff member, Jim Clark, showing some of the different habitats that a hunter may encounter.

Photo: Mike Uchikura



Pheasant takes off into its new habitat at the Buffalo Lake site. Photo: Mike Uchikura



Rooster pheasant showing off its beautiful colours and quality of tail feathers.
Photo: Mike Uchikura