

**Alberta Conservation Association
2020/21 Project Summary Report**

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

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Partnerships

4-H Alberta

Alberta Environment and Parks

ConocoPhillips Canada

Lethbridge Fish & Game Association

MacFarlane Pheasants

Private donations

Key Findings

- Eighty-four 4-H members participated in the seventh year of this program, successfully raising and releasing 2,628 pheasants (mostly hens) into suitable upland habitat. In central and northern Alberta where pheasant survival is limited due to Alberta's cold winters, 4-H members also released 500 roosters onto three designated ACA titled conservation sites to provide a hunting opportunity for hunters.

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 we partner with stakeholders to improve the future of upland hunting 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 84 4-H members who successfully raised and released 2,628 pheasants (mostly hens) into suitable upland habitat. In central and northern Alberta where pheasant survival is limited due to Alberta's cold winters, 4-H members also released 500 roosters onto three designated ACA titled conservation sites to provide a hunting opportunity for hunters. 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.

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 seeing 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 seven 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 can provide.

We also work with other special interest groups, such as Boy Scouts, 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. Having several interest groups raising pheasants and wanting them to survive 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 also 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 hens raised by each 4-H member south of the Red Deer River were purchased back by ACA and then released into suitable habitat. In central and northern Alberta where pheasant survival is limited due to Alberta's cold winters, a portion of roosters raised by each 4-H member north of the Red Deer River were purchased back in 2020 and then released onto designated ACA-titled conservation sites to create hunting opportunities.

Results

This past summer, we had 84 4-H members who successfully raised and released 2,628 pheasants (mostly hens) into suitable upland habitat, and 500 roosters onto three designated ACA-titled conservation sites to provide a hunting opportunity for hunters.

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. Participants also had their pheasants evaluated by a 4-H or ACA representative to assess bird health and development prior to their pheasants being released.

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 four years, we have seen a large increase in participants from central and northern Alberta. Most of the participants from previous years return the next year, suggesting satisfaction with the program.

Communications

- We provided participants with pamphlets, feedback, and a manual on pheasant husbandry.
- Global News highlighted the project in an article on September 4, 2020.
- We posted on ACA Facebook and Twitter when 4-H raised roosters were released on designated ACA titled conservation sites and available for hunting.
- Key sponsors acknowledged on ACA Facebook and other social media outlets.

Photos



4-H member, Tyson Kotowich, with his day-old pheasant. Photo: Tyson Kotowich



4-H member releasing roosters at designated ACA-titled conservation site. Photo: Meagan Butler