

**Alberta Conservation Association
2020/21 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

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 28,830 male ring-necked pheasants, including 1,000 melanistic pheasants, on 42 release sites across Alberta to increase hunting opportunities.
- For the first time we released 300 grey partridge at three different central release sites.

- 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 throughout the season.
- Local growers in the Peace River area raised 760 male pheasants that 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 is a long-standing tradition in Alberta. Following 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. The hatchery was eventually privatized due to government cutbacks and 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 have increased this number annually to a total of 28,830 in 2020, including 1,000 melanistic pheasants. In addition, we released 300 grey partridge for the first time in 2020. 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 2020 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 local growers from the Peace River area, 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 ($n = 22,330$ pheasants and partridge). 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 is a long-standing tradition in Alberta. Following 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. The hatchery closed in 2013. However, a group formed Upland Birds of Alberta and agreed to run the program in 2013. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) agreed to take over the release program beginning in the 2014 season, with the overall objective of providing greater hunting opportunity for all Albertans, as opposed to a pheasant re-stocking effort to augment the population. As such, we encourage hunters to harvest all the released pheasants on a site, ideally shifting 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 2020, 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 are three releases a week.

For the past seven years, we've contracted MacFarlane Pheasants (Wisconsin) to provide male pheasants for this program. 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 Alberta, we partnered with local growers in the Peace River area to raise 760 roosters along with 1200 McFarlane roosters to release at the Lac Cardinal and Whitetail North sites. Nine releases occurred at both of these sites. We also added the release of 1,000 melanistic pheasants and 300 grey partridge to the 2020 season to further increase hunting opportunities.

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 new approaches to facilitate this feedback, including survey boxes available at the release sites as well as an online survey on ACA's 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 28,830 pheasants of which 1,000 were melanistic across 42 release sites in 2020. In addition, for the first time we released 300 grey partridge. The melanistic pheasants were randomly released throughout all 42 release sites, while the 300 partridge were released evenly over three different sites (Table 1). This past year was the 7th year that ACA has delivered the provincial release program, with the number of pheasants being released slowly increasing from year to year (Figure 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 enables 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 and by the end of the season, the allotted number of birds scheduled to be released at each site every week was attained.

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

Area	# of release sites	# of pheasants released	# of partridge 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	100
Bigelow	1	2,166	100
Buffalo Lake	1	2,166	
Connie North/Whiteside	1	585	
Daysland	1	2,166	
Whitetail North/Lac Cardinal	2	1,960	
Capital Power	1	2,166	100
Total	42	28,830	300

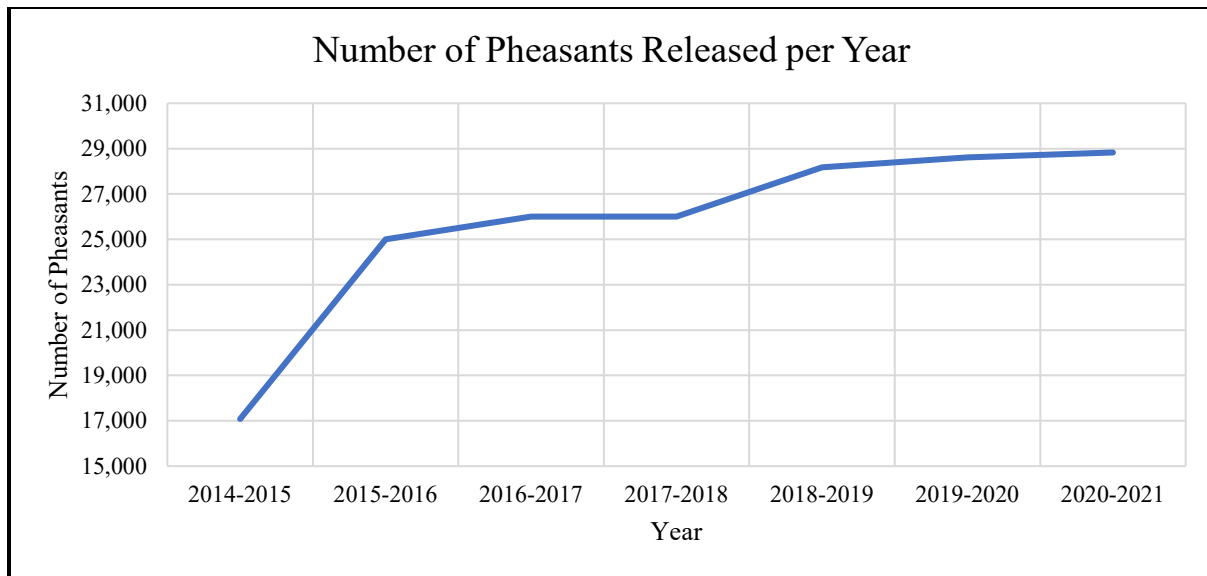


Figure 1. The number of pheasants being released across the province has slowly increased over the past 7 years.

A high volume of public inquiries was addressed throughout the pheasant hunting season. Phone calls and emails were addressed 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.
- Michael Short of *Let's Go Outdoors* created a short video of the program focused on the release of the melanistic pheasants.
- Social media was used to promote the pheasant season and the release of melanistic pheasants.

Literature Cited

Not applicable

Photos



Melanistic pheasant being released at the South Plain Lake site—pheasant is being released by ACA staff member, Stefanie Fenson, showing some of the unique colouration of these birds.
Photo: Charmaine Brunes



Partridge in a transport crate waiting to be released into its new habitat at South Plain Lake.

Photo: Charmaine Brunes



Three rooster pheasants showing off their beautiful colours and quality of tail feathers. Photo:

Charmaine Brunes