

**Alberta Conservation Association**  
**2021/22 Project Summary Report**

**Project Name:** Pheasant Releases to Enhance Hunting Opportunities

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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 28,598 male ring-necked pheasants, including 1,000 melanistic 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 in the release of pheasants at 22 southern sites throughout the season.
- Local growers in the Peace River area raised 583 male pheasants that were released at the Lac Cardinal Point Uplands and Whitetail North sites in northwestern Alberta.
- We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants to do three releases per week at 17 of the 41 sites.

## **Abstract**

Upland game bird hunting is a long-standing tradition in Alberta. Following the introduction of the 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 Government of Alberta 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 goal 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 28,598 in 2021, including 1,000 melanistic pheasants.

We developed a webpage that shows a map and directions to all the sites to make this hunting opportunity more accessible. We operated 41 release sites in the 2021 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 22 sites from Medicine Hat to Cardston. We also partnered with local growers from the Peace River area, who collectively raised 583 male pheasants for release on the northwestern sites. We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants to release birds three times per week at 17 sites and once a week at the Peace River sites. 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 on 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 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 Government of Alberta 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 restocking 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 2021, we released pheasants on 41 publicly identified open access hunting sites. Releases occur in Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) in both the southern and northern zones, but with an earlier start and end date for those in the north. Sites outside of the 100 series 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 WMUs commence on 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 eight years, we have contracted MacFarlane Pheasants (Wisconsin, USA) to provide male pheasants for this program. We contract MacFarlane Pheasants to do three releases per week at 17 of the 41 sites in the Brooks, Calgary, Red Deer, and Edmonton areas. 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 22 of the southern sites. To increase pheasant hunting opportunities in northern Alberta, we partnered with local growers in the Peace River area to raise roosters, and along with additional roosters from MacFarlane's, roosters were released at the Lac Cardinal Point Uplands and Whitetail North sites. Nine releases occurred at both sites. We also opportunistically released melanistic pheasants throughout the province during 2021.

A big part of this program is communicating with hunters. We received feedback from hundreds of hunters with some simply asking for more details about the program 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**

This past year was the 8<sup>th</sup> year that ACA has delivered the pheasant release program, where the number of pheasants being released has slowly increasing from year to year (Figure 1). We set out a detailed schedule for each release site, and these timelines were carried out as planned through the season. We released 28,598 pheasants, of which 1,000 were melanistic, across 41 release sites in 2021 (Figure 1). The melanistic pheasants were randomly released throughout all 41 release sites. With the help of hunters, we identified several sites over a period of 2 to 3 weeks where the condition of birds had declined. This was quickly remedied with good communication with MacFarlane Pheasants with no further issues. The MacFarlane staff are efficient and professional, making the entire process predictable through the season.

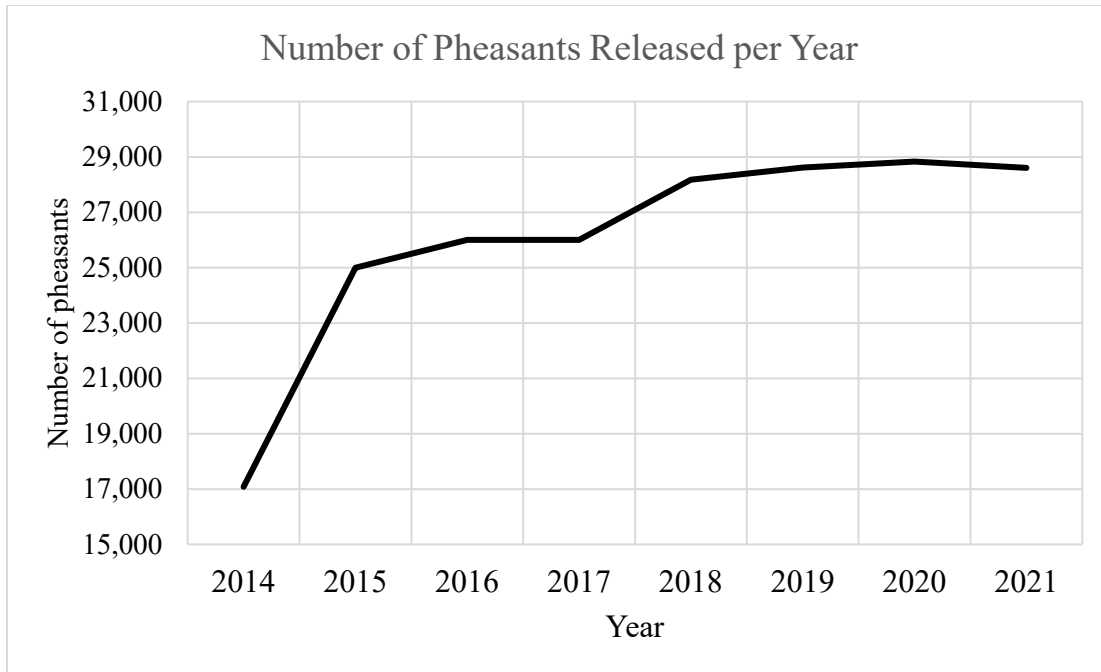


Figure 1. The number of pheasants released across the province has slowly increased over the past eight years.

Since ACA took over releases, the total cost of the program has ranged from approximately \$300K in 2014 to \$800K in 2020 (Figure 2). Yearly differences are pronominally a reflection of the number of birds purchased and the US dollar exchange rate.

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 ACA would continue pheasant releases. Hunters also 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 is not uncommon to receive feedback from someone who hunted pheasants for the first time in many years as a result of this program.

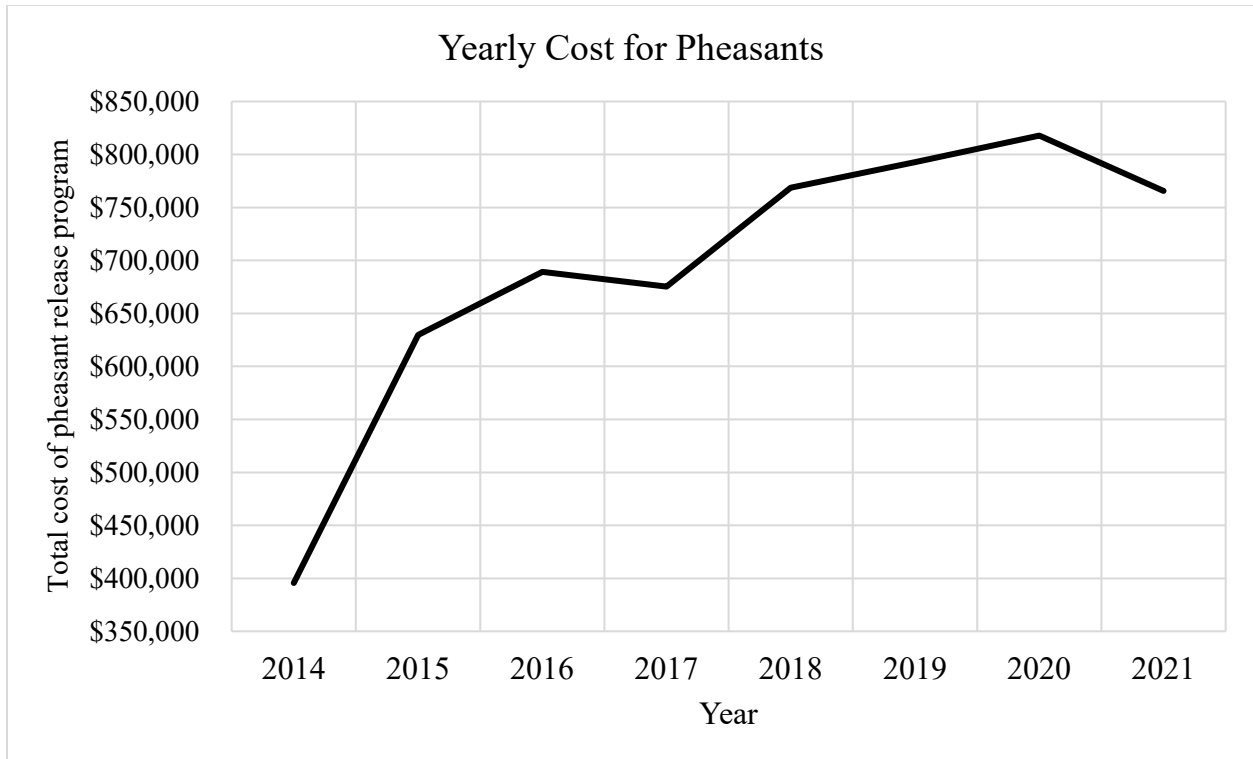


Figure 2. Yearly total program costs for ACA to deliver provincial pheasant release program, 2014-2015 to 2021-2022.

### 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 indicate 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 return to their hunting heritage. 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.
- Social media was used to promote the pheasant season and the release of melanistic pheasants.
- Maintained website with information of sites and release start and end dates.

## **Literature Cited**

Not applicable

**Photo**



Photo 1. The diverse types of cover that are used by pheasants at the Whitetail North release site. Photo: Jalen Hulit



Photo 2. A dozen rooster pheasants showing off their beautiful colours and length of tail feathers. Photo: Ed Kolodychuk