

**Alberta Conservation Association**  
**2022/23 Project Summary Report**

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

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**Partnerships**

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas

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**

- To increase hunting opportunities, we released male ring-necked pheasants, and a small portion of melanistic pheasants, on 41 release sites across Alberta.
- 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 Alberta sites throughout the season.
- Local growers in the Peace River area raised several hundred male pheasants that were released at the Lac Cardinal Point Uplands and Whitetail North sites in northwestern Alberta.
- We worked with two new growers in central and southern Alberta to provide opportunity for locally raised pheasant operations to participate at a few select sites.
- We contracted MacFarlane Pheasants to increase the number of releases at 17 of the 41 sites to three per week.

## **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. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) took over the release program in 2014, with the overall goal of providing greater hunting opportunity for Albertans.

We developed a web page that shows a map with directions to release sites and expanded the number of sites to 41, from Lac Cardinal near Peace River in the northwest to several sites south and east of Medicine Hat. We continue to partner with five Fish & Game clubs in southern Alberta who play key roles in the weekly release of pheasants at 22 sites from Medicine Hat to Cardston.

We also partnered with several local growers within Alberta who raised male pheasants for release at several of our sites. MacFarlane Pheasants continues to be our main supplier of adult

birds for release; they deliver birds multiple times per week at 17 sites, as well as supplying some of the birds for the Peace River area. The more northern sites initiate releases September 1 for nine weeks, while those further south correspond with the later opening day for pheasants beginning October 15.

We continue to receive strong support from those participating in this hunting opportunity. These release sites are an excellent opportunity to introduce someone new to upland hunting, and a nice addition to the opportunities for wild hunts on a variety of game birds throughout the province.

## **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 created the Provincial Pheasant Release Program in 1945. The initiative saw tens of thousands of hatchery-raised pheasants released onto the landscape each fall. After the hatchery closed in 2013, the group Upland Birds of Alberta agreed to run the program. In 2014, Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) assumed responsibility for the program, 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 2022, 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, with an earlier start and end date at the more northern sites. Releases at sites outside of the 100 series WMUs begun on September 1 (first release at least one day prior) with three releases each week for nine weeks. Sites within the 100 series WMUs commenced 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 were three releases a week.

For the past nine years, we have contracted MacFarlane Pheasants (Wisconsin, USA) to provide male pheasants for this program. In addition, we contracted 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 established a holding facility near Strathmore. Fish & Game clubs in southern Alberta were key partners. Clubs from Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Picture Butte, Fort Macleod, and Cardston have a history of assisting with the program. These clubs readily volunteered to assist with releasing pheasants in their respective areas. The clubs released pheasants 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, the roosters were released at the Lac Cardinal Point Uplands and Whitetail North sites. Nine releases occurred at both sites. We also partnered with two private growers who raised pheasants that, along with roosters from MacFarlane's, were released on the South Plain Lake site and other various sites in the Medicine Hat area. Melanistic pheasants were opportunistically released throughout the province during 2022.

We initiated new approaches to facilitate feedback, including survey boxes available at the release sites as well as an online survey on ACA's website.

## **Results**

The year 2022 marks the ninth year that ACA has delivered the pheasant release program. Since ACA's involvement in 2014, the number of pheasants released has increased dramatically. We established a detailed schedule for each release site, and timelines were carried out as planned through the season. The available hunter days varied between the 41 sites during the release season, with a provincial average of 37 days. Therefore, the aggregate total in the province was 1,517 available hunter days.

Since ACA assumed responsibility for releases, the total cost of the program has ranged from approximately \$300K in 2014 to \$800K in 2020 (Figure 1). Yearly differences are predominately a reflection of the number of birds purchased and the US dollar exchange rate.

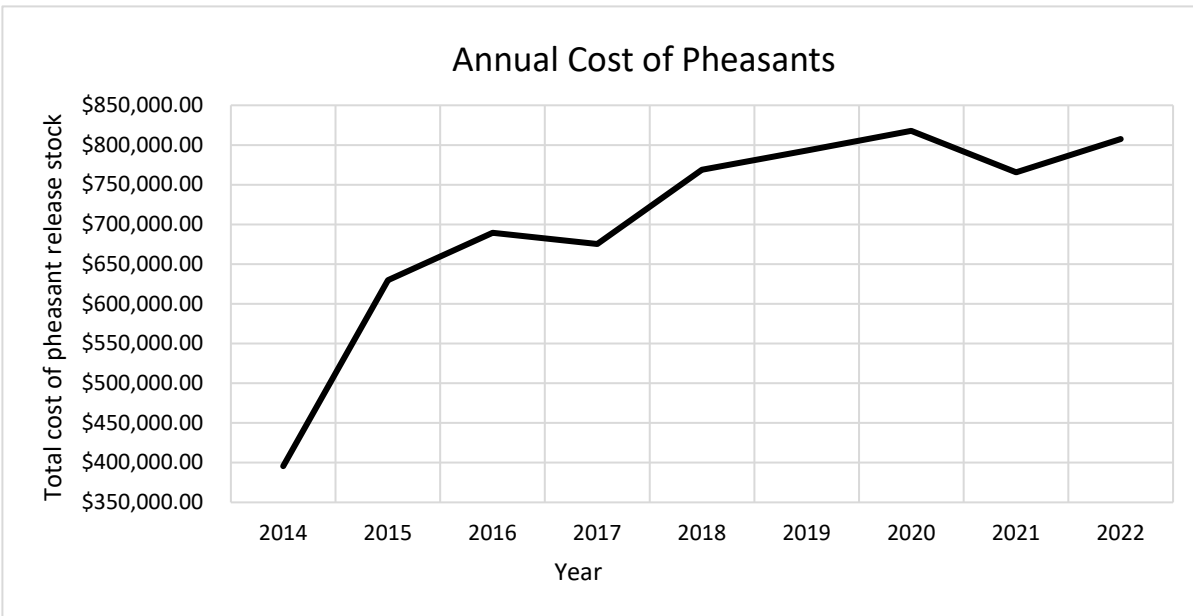


Figure 1. Total annual cost of pheasant release stock needed to deliver ACA’s Provincial Pheasant Release Program between 2014 and 2022.

A big part of the Pheasant Release 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. Additionally, a high volume of public inquiries (phone calls and emails) were addressed throughout the pheasant hunting season. Many of the often daily inquiries were about release schedules at specific sites, but also 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, or not for many years, as a result of this program.

## **Conclusions**

The Provincial Pheasant Release Program has been well received by the pheasant hunting community. Fish & Game clubs have been very supportive with positive discussions and inquiries from members. We have observed an increase in pheasant licence sales indicating a renewed interest in pheasant hunting in Alberta; it appears that ACA's provincial release program and several "pheasant festivals" throughout the province have helped create a resurgence of new pheasant hunters while encouraging past pheasant hunters to return to their hunting heritage. Feedback from hunters will help us adapt the program over the coming years to further improve hunter satisfaction while meeting overall program objectives. Interaction with 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.
- Interacted extensively with the hunting public via phone, in person, and email.
- Michael Short *Let's Go Outdoors* created a short video of the program, titled: Creating new hunting opportunities with the pheasant release program.
- Used social media 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

## Photos



Photo 1. The entrance to one of our pheasant release sites (Capital Power), showing the signage that is displayed at the parking areas. Photo: Meagan Butler



Photo 2. Rooster pheasants prior to release showing off their beautiful colours and length of tail feathers. Photo: Jalen Hulit