

Alberta Conservation Association
2022/23 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Upland Game Bird 4-H Initiative

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Partnerships

4-H Alberta

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas

ConocoPhillips Canada

MacFarlane Pheasants

Private donations

Key Findings

- In all, 33 4-H members participated in the 9th year of the Upland Game Bird 4-H Initiative, successfully raising approximately 2,000 pheasants (mostly hens) and either releasing them into suitable upland habitat or marketing them for sale.
- In collaboration with 4-H, we held a webinar to provide information on pheasant husbandry.

Abstract

Ring-necked 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 game bird 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 certain habitat features are available.

In 2014, we initiated a new partnership with 4-H Alberta, offering clubs the opportunity to raise day-old chicks to adult birds. This year, we had 33 4-H members successfully raise approximately 2,000 pheasants (mostly hens), and either released them into suitable upland habitat or marketed them for sale.

In addition to the 4-H members, other interest groups including private landowners, Alberta Fish & Game Association, and Boy Scout groups also received the opportunity to purchase day-old chicks to raise. We did not record how many birds were successfully raised and released, or marketed for sale, as the growers were free to do what they wanted with their birds.

Introduction

Upland game bird hunting, including for ring-necked pheasant, has been an important feature 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 gamebirds. 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 cropland dominated areas. Pheasants can adapt to areas predominately used for cropland, provided that certain habitat features are available. The widespread loss of habitat, coupled with a decline in upland game 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 since 2014 to reactivate the Upland Game Bird 4-H Initiative Program that was discontinued in the late 1990s. 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 adult birds that can then be released into suitable habitat or marketed for sale. Having 4-H members raise and release or market their 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, Alberta Fish & Game Association, 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 game birds and increase knowledge of the habitat resources necessary for the survival of the birds. 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 that is necessary to raise the birds until they are almost fully grown.

Since 2014, the Upland Game Bird 4-H Initiative Program has continued to evolve to meet the mandates of both ACA and 4-H Alberta. From 2014 to 2019, some of the hens raised by 4-H members were purchased back by ACA and then released into suitable habitat. However, we recognized that pheasant survival is limited because of Alberta's cold winters, especially for pheasants released in central and northern Alberta. As a result, some roosters raised by 4-H members north of the Red Deer River were purchased back by ACA in 2020 and then released onto designated ACA-titled conservation sites to create hunting opportunities. Some of the hens raised by 4-H members south of the Red Deer River were purchased back and then released into suitable habitat. In collaboration with 4-H Alberta in 2021, we decided to move to a market-based system, which is more in line with the traditional livestock 4-H projects. Pheasants were no longer purchased back by ACA, and 4-H members were free to do what they wanted with their raised pheasants, including releasing them into suitable habitat of their choosing or marketing them for sale.

Results

This past summer, we had 33 4-H members who successfully raised approximately 2,000 pheasants (mostly hens) and either released them into suitable upland habitat or marketed them for sale.

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 after release.

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 representative to assess bird health and development prior to their pheasants being released or marketed.

Conclusions

The Upland Game Bird 4-H Initiative 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 six years, we have seen a large increase in participants from central Alberta. Several participants from previous years return the next year, suggesting satisfaction with the program.

Communications

Oral presentations

- 4-H member pheasant participants, *virtual presentation*, April 19, 2022.
- St. Albert Fish & Game Association, *virtual presentation*, October 11, 2022.

Other

- Key sponsors were acknowledged on ACA Facebook and other social media outlets.

Literature Cited

Not applicable

Photos



Photo 1. Private landowner picking up day-old pheasant chicks. Photo: Amanda Rezansoff



Photo 2. 4-H member with raised pheasant. Photo: Allison McCulloch