

Ring-necked Pheasant Status Report, 2020

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 20-1



Ring-necked Pheasant in Illinois

Pheasant hunting in Illinois was very popular in the 1960's and 70's when 250,000 hunters harvested over a million birds per year several times. Due primarily to changes in land use and farming practices, this game bird that had been such an abundant by-product of the agricultural landscape began a dramatic decline in the mid 1970's (Figure 1). By the year 2000, pheasant hunters had declined to 59,000 harvesting only 158,000 birds. The small, diverse farms of the 1950's had abundant small grains (wheat, oats etc.), livestock, and hay fields with lots of fencerows and hedgerows separating small fields. Today, two crops (corn and soybeans) have replaced most of the small grains, pastures, and hayfields so common in the 1960's and 70's. The Hedgerows and fencerows separating small fields and providing cover for game, have been removed or 'cleaned up' with herbicide. Remaining pastures and waterways are often planted to cool-season grasses (brome and fescue). These grass stands lack diversity and become too thick to provide quality habitat for pheasants or quail

Field size and the size of equipment have also increased dramatically in the last 50 years. Larger and more efficient equipment decrease the amount of time it takes to plant and harvest crops. Most fields are disked soon after harvest, covering most crop stubble early in the fall. There is very little cover left for wildlife over the winter and crops get planted quickly in the spring. During the summer, 'recreational' or aesthetic mowing of roadsides and non-crop areas often occurs during prime nesting season (April – August) for the ring-necked pheasant and other grassland birds. The changes to the landscape and the loss of habitat have occurred slowly, over several decades, but the additive effects on pheasant and quail populations are dramatic.

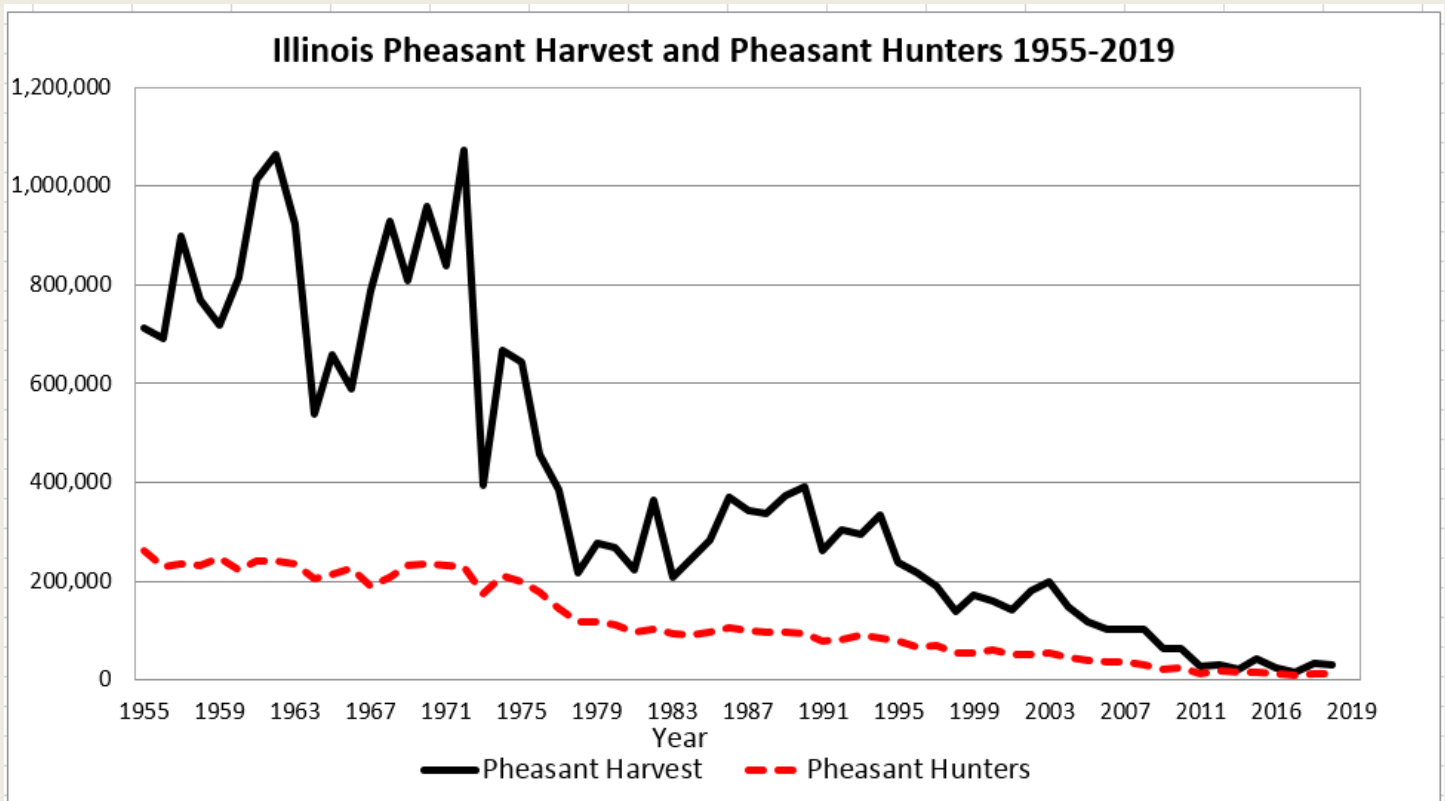


Figure 1 – Ring-necked Pheasant Harvest and Pheasant Hunters 1955 – 2019.

2018-19 Hunter Harvest

The 2018-19 survey estimated that 12,241 hunters (3% decrease) shot 31,066 wild pheasants in Illinois (8% decrease), compared to the 2017-18 totals of 12,575 hunters and 33,876 wild birds.

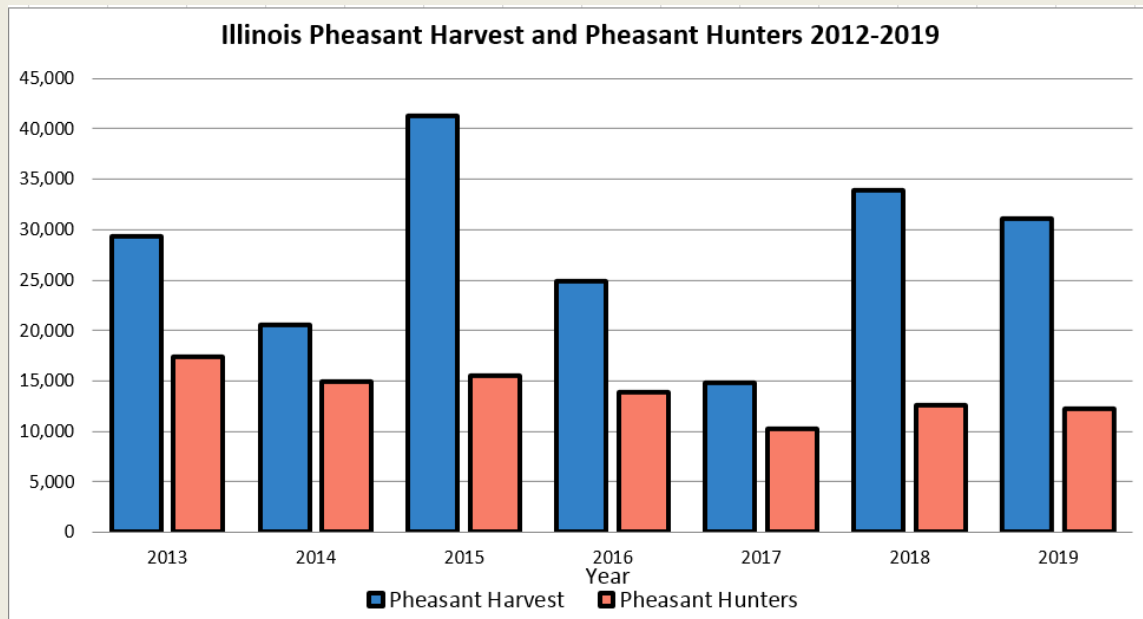


Figure 2 – Pheasant Harvest and Hunters 2013 – 2019.

Pheasant Population Index

There are established survey routes across the state and biologists run these routes two times annually during the breeding season. The first run is completed during the peak breeding window for ring-necked pheasant (May 10 – June 10). Each route has 20 stops, where biologists stop for 3 minutes each to record individual birds heard or seen. The number of routes surveyed annually depends on staff availability, but as many of the surveys are completed as possible. Statewide, observers recorded an average of 0.51 pheasants per stop/route (down 5% from 2019) with pheasants occurring at 20% of the stops (5% increase from 2019). Overall, the number of pheasants counted and the number of stops where pheasants were seen or heard were similar to the numbers from the 2019 surveys.

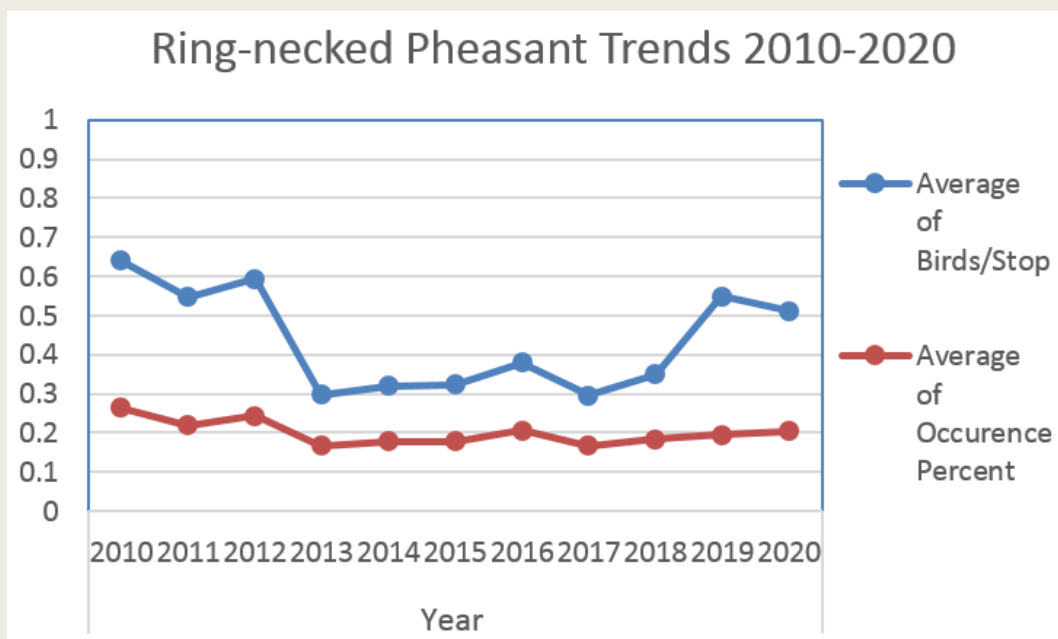


Figure 3 – Birds per Stop and Percent Occurrence for Pheasant on Upland Routes

Weather 2019-2020

The winter of 2019-2020 was relatively mild and winter mortality due to weather was likely low for pheasants. Spring brought above-average to record breaking rainfall over a large portion of the State potentially impacting early nesting attempts. From late June through most of August, weather conditions improved across much of the state. Overall, 2020 weather conditions were a little wet for pheasant during their peak nesting season, but good for hens that attempted a second nest.

Despite some heavy rains early, a recent pheasant study conducted in east-central Illinois highlights the importance of having high-quality habitat to encourage recruitment into the pheasant population. Despite some inclement weather, nesting effort, nest success and brood survival on some of the state-owned Pheasant Habitat Areas and other, high-quality private grasslands has been good in years with similar weather. The research on these sites found the areas hen pheasants seek for nesting and raising their broods are often the same areas used to take cover during heavy snow events. The presence of thick-stemmed and hardy forbs keeps grasses upright during the winter when winds, rains and snow can often lay solid stands of native grasses flat.

2020-2021 Season Outlook

The key to a successful 2019-20 pheasant season is finding high-quality habitat. Focus on areas with relatively new CRP plantings, or recently managed grasslands, with hay and/or small grains nearby. Within these areas, look for abundant forbs (broad-leafed, flowering plants) mixed in with scattered clumps of grasses. Hunters may find a few more roosters across Illinois this fall based on slight higher survey numbers this summer.

Management Tips

- An important management tip to benefit pheasant (as well as many other grassland birds) is to break up mowing times to leave some quality habitat throughout the year. Do not mow more than 1/3 or 1/4 of any field, waterway or fallow area at any one time. This strategy is also important to provide nectar sources for pollinators like monarch butterflies, as well as habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife from early spring to late fall.
- Avoid mowing during peak nesting season, from April 15 – August 1. Mowing during the nesting season can destroy nests and often kills the hen as well.
- It is important to ensure there will always be quality nesting, brood-rearing and escape cover in your grassland. This means only managing a portion (1/3 or 1/4) of your habitat at any one time and planning ahead for which types of cover you are managing for on each part of your grassland.
- Fall mowing or burning in September or early October can clear away thatch and stimulate vigorous regrowth of cool-season grasses that invade stands of native grasses. Once this new growth reaches 6” – 12” in the fall, read and follow label directions for a foliar application of herbicide like glyphosate to set back areas of tall fescue, brome, bluegrass or reed-canary grass. A second herbicide application may be needed the following spring/summer before native grasses begin growing.
- Early fall is also a good time to spray and/or disc small blocks in existing grasslands that have become too thick. These blocks should provide good brood habitat the following summer.

Thank you for your interest in the ring-necked pheasant. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2020!

Season Dates Update

November 7, 2020 – January 8, 2021 (North)

November 7, 2020 – January 15, 2021 (South)

Hours

Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limits

2 per day with 6 in possession after the 3rd day

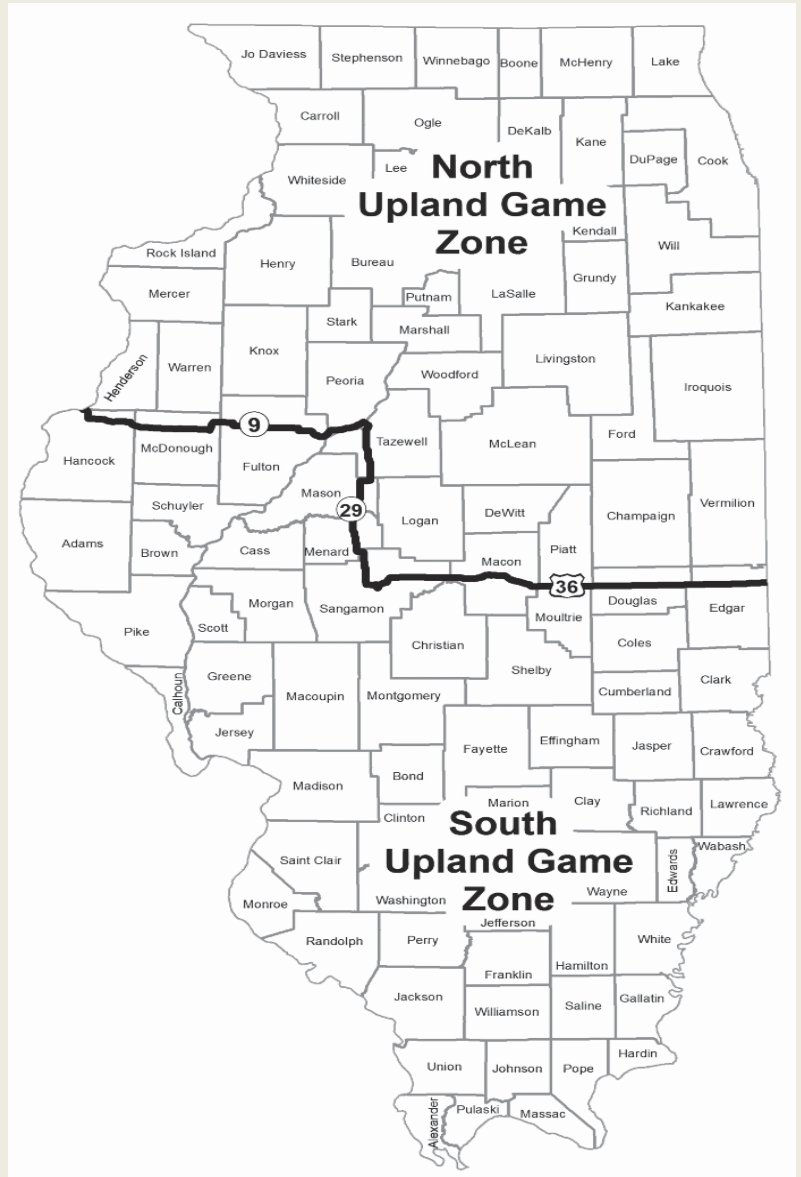


Photo by Adele Hodde

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Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife Resources*

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