

Ring-necked Pheasant Status Report, 2016

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 16-3



photo by Adele Hodde

Ring-necked Pheasant in Illinois

Pheasant hunting in Illinois was very popular in the 1960's and 70's with over 250,000 hunters that 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 that were so common in the 1960's and 70's. The remaining pastures and waterways are mostly planted to cool-season grasses like brome and fescue that get too thick to provide quality habitat for pheasants or quail. Hedgerows and fencerows that separated small fields and provided cover for game are sparse or have been 'cleaned up' with herbicide.

Field size and the size of equipment have increased dramatically in the last 50 years. Larger and more efficient equipment decrease the amount of time it takes to harvest crops and disk fields covering most crop stubble early in the fall. There is very little winter cover left 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.

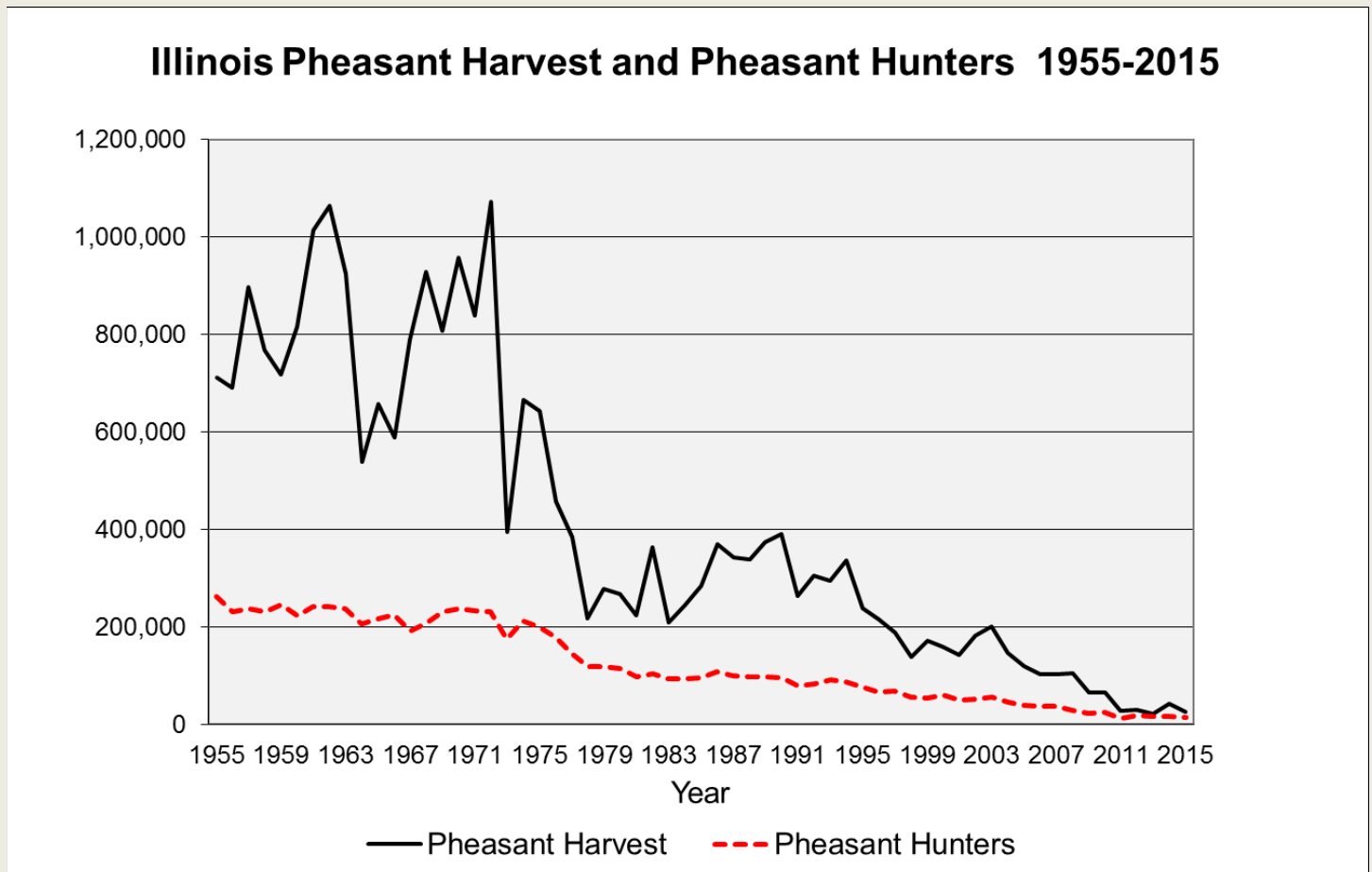


Figure 1 – Ring-necked Pheasant Harvest and Pheasant Hunters 1955 – 2015.

2015-16 Hunter Harvest

Harvest estimates in this report are based on results of the 2015-16 Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey prepared annually by the Illinois Natural History Survey. During the 2015-16 pheasant season, an estimated 13,835 hunters (11% decrease from last year) harvested 24,765 wild pheasant (40% decrease). Hunters averaged 0.55 pheasants per day (8% decrease).

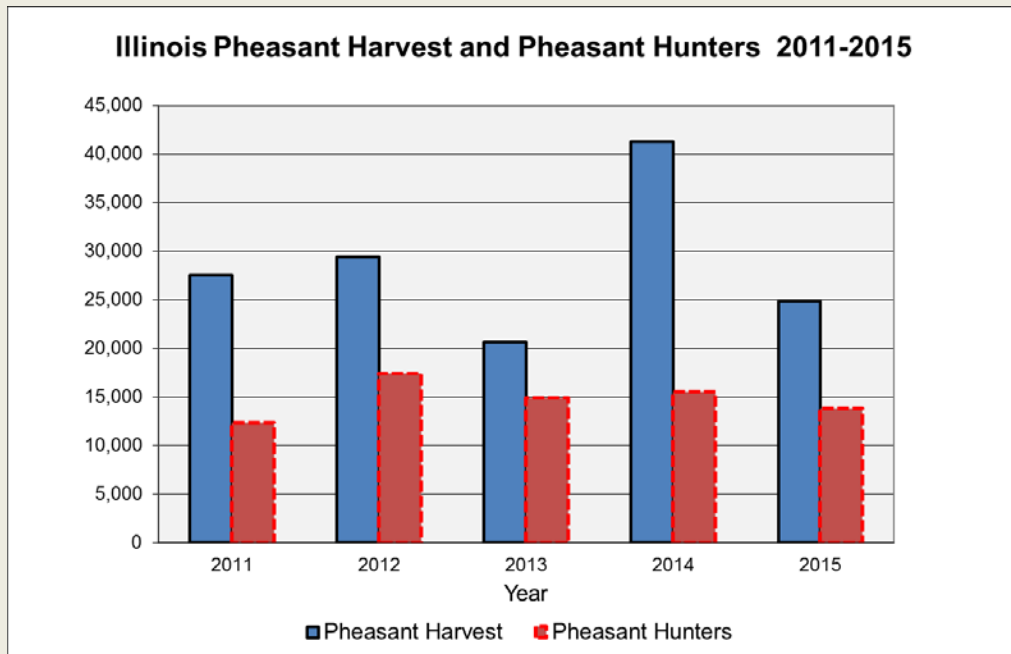
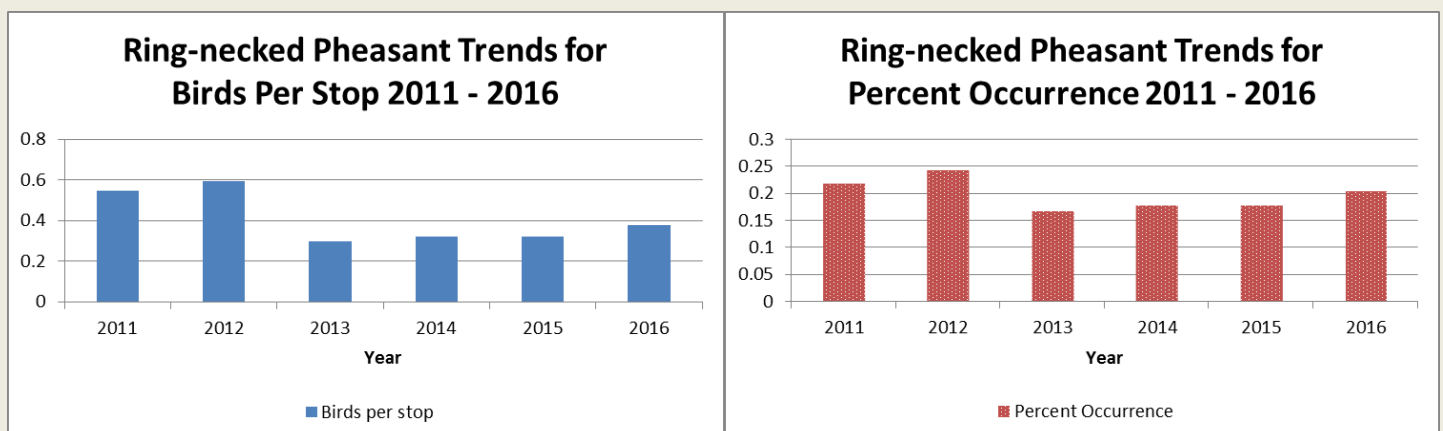


Figure 2 – Pheasant Harvest and Hunters 2011 - 2015

Pheasant Population Index

There are established routes across the state and biologists run the 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 for 3 minutes each to record individuals heard or seen. The number of routes surveyed annually depends on staff availability, but as many of the surveys are completed as possible.

During 2016, observers recorded an average of 0.38 pheasants per stop on the 70 survey routes (3% increase). Ring-necked pheasants were recorded at 21% of the stops (percent occurrence) on the routes (15% increase). The number of pheasants counted and the number of stops where pheasants were seen or heard in 2016 were higher than the numbers from the 2015 surveys.



Figures 3 and 4 – Birds per Stop and Percent Occurrence for Pheasant on Upland Routes

Weather 2015-16

The fall of 2015 was mild and wetter than average. Except for some flooding at the end of December, winter weather brought above average temperatures and below average precipitation. This trend continued through spring and into the summer. However, July and August were also warmer than average, and heavy rains fell on much of the state during these months. Despite the heavy rains, a pheasant study being 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 was still good. The research on these sites found that the areas hen pheasants seek for nesting and raising their broods are often the same areas that are used to take cover in 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.

2016-17 Season Outlook

The key to a successful 2016-17 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. Based on the good survival in the current study and slightly higher number of birds detected in our annual survey, hunters should expect things to be a little better than last year's season.

Management Tips

- An important management tip to benefit pheasant (as well as many other grassland birds) is to delay mowing (roadsides, waterways, etc.) from the end of April until the beginning of August - through the peak of nesting season. Mowing during this time frame kills not only the eggs in the nest, but often 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.

Thank you for your interest in the ring-necked pheasant. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2016!

Season Dates

November 5, 2016 – January 8, 2017 (North)

November 5, 2016 – January 15, 2017 (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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Division of Wildlife Resources

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