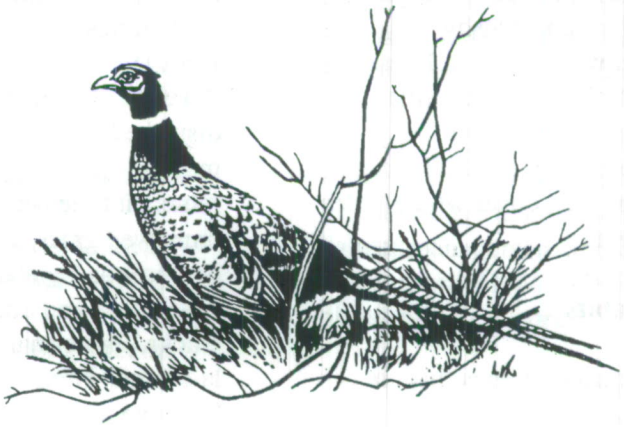
Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*)



Description

Male ring-necked pheasants are large, strikingly colored birds weighing from 2½ -3 pounds that measure up to 30 inches, including tail feathers 18-20 inches long. The combination of large size, bluish-green head, red cheek patch, and usually white neck ring make it impossible to mistake a cock pheasant for any other Illinois bird. Adult males have reddish-brown feathers on the back and copper feathers on the breast. Adult hens are smaller than cocks, weighing about two pounds. Feathers on the female are generally tan, with brown and cream markings, although some melanistic hens are dark reddish brown.

Distribution & Abundance

Ring-necked pheasants are native to Asia. Brought to Europe about the 10th century, they were well established in Greece nearly 1000 years ago. The first successful attempt to establish a population in the United States was in the Willamette Valley in Oregon in 1881. There the birds multiplied rapidly and the first hunting season was held in 1892. Following this success, pheasants were released in North America until they became established in suitable areas in the United States and Canada.

Pheasants are found in parts of the northern states from the East Coast to Montana and from the province of Saskatchewan, and south into the Texas panhandle. They also occur in parts of Oregon, Washington, California, Idaho, and Utah. The first recorded release of pheasants in Illinois was made near Macomb in 1890 by Dr. W. O. Blaisdell. The Illinois Game Commission first released pheasants in 1906.

Pheasants have been released in every county of Illinois and have established self-maintaining populations in the northern, central, and east-central parts of the state. Their numbers peaked in the early 1960's, then declined as land use changes, habitat loss, and severe winter weather took their toll. While down from their historic high, pheasants are still common in their Illinois range.

Habitat

Pheasants are birds of open country and are most common in parts of the state that were originally prairie. Most of these areas are now intensively cultivated to produce grains, leaving scattered roadsides, fencerows, railroad rights-of-way, stream-side filter strips, and idle land as the only safe nesting cover in many parts of the state.

Pheasants need cover for roosting, crowing, nesting, brood-rearing, feeding, loafing, and

escape. They are most common where all cover requirements are close together. Cattail marshes, clumps of willow, unharvested grain plots, switchgrass patches, and brushy fencerows are preferred winter cover. Pheasants prefer to nest in dense fields of either tame grasses and legumes, or native prairie vegetation. Roadside plantings of alfalfa and brome provide substitute nest cover where fields of grass or hay are absent.

Habits

Pheasants have short, rounded wings that are suited for short bursts of speed. On longer flights, they alternately beat their wings and glide. As ground-dwelling birds, they often avoid danger by running. Pheasants move into heavier cover and form flocks in winter.

Foods

Insects make up more than half of the food eaten by pheasant chicks for the first few months of life. Adults eat insects in summer and fall, but not nearly as much as the chicks. Corn is the single most important food item for pheasants in Illinois, but soybeans and small grain seeds are also eaten where available. When planted in food plots, sunflowers and grain sorghum (milo) make a good winter food supply. Ragweed seed is the most important wild seed in the pheasant's diet, but smartweed, foxtail, pigweed and jewelweed seeds are also eaten. Pheasants eat the green leaves of dandelions, clover, dock, and other plants, probably to obtain vitamins and protein. Early morning and late afternoon are favored feeding times.

Reproduction

In spring, cocks establish and defend territories. Fights between the males are sometimes spectacular, but seldom fatal. The size of a flock of hens, or harem, varies from 1 to 10 or more hens per cock. The cock pheasant will strut, partially spread his tail, and fluff out his feathers to impress hens. Males make a two-note "crowing" call to attract females. Since the males are polygamous, most are not needed for successful reproduction.

A few hens begin nesting in mid-April, but the peak of nest establishment occurs during May. Hens lay a clutch of about 11 eggs in a period of 2 weeks. The hen will desert the nest if disturbed early in the nesting cycle. After incubating the eggs for several days, she is reluctant to leave. Hens nest on the ground in unmowed grass, alfalfa, clover, or other dense herbaceous vegetation. Pheasant eggs hatch in 23-24 days and about 9 out of 10 eggs produce chicks. In normal years, peak hatching occurs in late June. Hens that have not succeeded in hatching a clutch of eggs will continue to renest into August. Mowing destroys a large number of nests each year. Delaying mowing until August 1 or later assures safe nesting for most hens.

Although several predators prey on eggs, young, and adult pheasants, predation seldom influences population levels. About half of the adult hens and 65-75 percent of the juvenile hens die between one fall and the next. These deaths occur despite the fact that hens are not hunted.

Chicks weigh less than an ounce when hatched. The hen and brood leave the nest as soon as the chicks have dried off and can walk. Chicks can fly in short hops when they are 10 days old, but prefer to avoid danger by running and hiding. By 40 days of age, their "down" feathers have been replaced with juvenile plumage. By 8 weeks, cocks become larger than hens and show a crimson tinge in the cheeks. At 14 weeks of age, hens will weigh about 2 pounds and cocks over 2 ½ pounds. By 16-17 weeks adults and juveniles look alike.

Conservation

Providing safe, undisturbed nesting cover is the most important management practice for increasing the numbers of pheasants. Mowing during the last half of June is especially destructive since large numbers of hens are in late stages of incubation and refuse to leave the nest in time to avoid being killed by the mower. Pheasant habitat management also benefits the

dickcissel, eastern meadowlark, redwing blackbird, brown thrasher, mallard, sedge wren, vesper sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, song sparrow, American kestrel, and eastern cottontail.

Pheasants benefit from the following practices:
✔ Delay mowing roadsides, hay and idle areas until August.
✔ Seed roadsides, ditchbanks and odd areas with brome and alfalfa or with native prairie grasses.
✔ Plant vegetative filter strips along streams and drainage ditches.
✔ Plant shelterbelts of 3 or more rows of trees and shrubs and leave brushy areas and marshes for winter cover.
✔ Establish winter food and cover plots 2-5 acres in size using corn and grain sorghum (milo).
✔ Practice conservation tillage, preferably no-till.

DNR's Division of Wildlife Resources offers technical assistance to landowners who are interested in establishing pheasant habitat on their properties. Call 217/782-6384 for the name of a District Wildlife Habitat Biologist in your area.

Roadside rights-of-way can provide valuable pheasant nest habitat if unmowed until August. Call 217/784-4730 for information about DNR's Roadside & Farmland Wildlife Habitat Project which operates in east-central Illinois.

Local Pheasants Forever chapters will assist landowners with pheasant habitat management. To learn more about Pheasants Forever, request habitat management assistance, or join a chapter, call 217/446-2958, or visit http://www.pheasantsforever.org/.

The USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) offer assistance to landowners with planning and establishing filter strips and riparian buffers. Vegetative buffers provide habitat for pheasants and other grassland wildlife. There is a SWCD office in nearly every county.

Private non-profit organizations can apply for grants from the Illinois Pheasant Fund for habitat projects that benefit wild pheasant populations. Contact the Division of Wildlife Resources at 217/782-6384 for an application.

Selected References

North American Game Birds *by P. A. Johnsgard. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London. 1975. ISBN 0-8032-5811-9*

Game Birds of North America *by L. L. Rue III. Outdoor Life Book. Harper and Row, New York. 1973. ISBN: 0-06-013714-2*

The Birds of Illinois *by H. D. Bohlen. Illustrated by W. Zimmerman. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis. 1989. ISBN 0-253-31560-3*

http://www.fsa.usda.gov (agricultural conservation programs)

http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/pheasant/pheasant.htm *(pheasants in North Dakota)*

http://www.conservation.state.mo.us/manag/pheasman/index.shtml *(pheasant management)*

Wildlife Conservation in Illinois - Ten Ways to Make a Difference

- Hunters and trappers contribute millions of dollars toward habitat conservation. Areas purchased or managed with these funds provide homes for hundreds of species. Even if you don't hunt or trap, you can join in by purchasing a **Habitat Stamp** ($5.50) or **State Migratory Waterfowl Stamp** ($10.50) at the sporting goods section of most discount stores. Sporting a "Sporting Series" license plate on your car or truck is another way to support habitat conservation. For information, contact the Secretary of State at 1-800-252-8980 or visit **http://www.sos.state.il.us** and select the "Online Facility".

- Turn your backyard into a more friendly place for wildlife. For tips on how to put out the welcome mat, order **"Backyard Conservation"** by dialing 1-888-LANDCARE.

- Hundreds of laws help protect wildlife and their habitat. You can assist your local Conservation Police Officer in keeping an eye out for poaching, pollution and other threats to the environment by participating in DNR's **Resource Watch Program** (217-782-6431).

- Participate in DNR's **Acres for Wildlife Program**. A wildlife biologist will visit your property, prepare a management plan tailored to your goals and help you get started by providing access to planting equipment and no-cost or low-cost grass, trees and shrubs. Call 217-782-6384 to get the name and phone number of your local biologist.

- Help monitor Illinois' streams and forests by becoming a trained Citizen Scientist. For information about the **EcoWatch Network**, call 312-814-4747.

- Illinois law requires young people to take a special training course and pass a test before they can purchase a license for hunting or trapping. You can help teach them about laws, safety, ethics and wildlife conservation by becoming a certified instructor in DNR's **Safety Education Programs** (1-800-832-2599).

- Teach others about the environment. Be a **volunteer facilitator** for Project WILD, Project WILD Aquatic, Project Learning Tree or Project WET (217-524-4126).

- Contribute to the **Wildlife Preservation Fund** on your state income tax form. Interested in making a donation for a specific project? Contact the **Illinois Conservation Foundation** (1-312-814-7237).

- Join a **conservation organization** like Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, or the National Wild Turkey Federation. Membership fees support wildlife conservation and some local chapters offer a chance to get involved with "on the ground" projects in your area.

- Take someone with you the next time you go **hunting or trapping**. These activities are highly regulated and can help keep wildlife numbers at acceptable levels, reduce damage to human property, provide funds for conservation, and obtain many different materials and products for human use.

Gettin' Wild in Illinois is a series produced by the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife Resources.
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