

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Ring-necked Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus

Background

The ring-necked pheasant was introduced in the United States nearly two centuries ago, but its first successful introduction was in 1881 in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Imported from its native range in Asia and China, today's pheasant is actually a hybrid, resulting from crossbreeding between the English, Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese varieties. In the early 1900s, Connecticut began introducing ring-necked pheasants with the hope that they would reproduce in the wild and be a "buffer" for native populations of grouse and quail which had declined as a result of habitat loss and subsistence hunting. Today, throughout Connecticut, pheasant habitat is marginal at best, and the population of ring-necked pheasants cannot maintain itself naturally in sufficient numbers to withstand current hunting pressure. As a result, yearly replacement through stocking, which continues on a level of approximately 15,000 to 20,000 birds annually, is necessary.

Range

The ring-necked pheasant's native range includes central and eastern Asia, China, and Japan. In the United States, the ring-necked pheasant has been released in practically every state. The most substantial populations have been established in the grain-producing regions of the Midwest and agricultural areas north of Virginia.

Description

The pheasant, or "ring-neck" as it is commonly called, belongs to the order of fowl-like birds called Galliformes. It is a large game bird with short, rounded wings and a long, tapered tail. The male, or "cock," is brilliantly-colored with a greenish-blue head, white ring about the neck, rusty breast, yellow flanks, and bluish-green rump. The female, or "hen," is comparatively smaller, mottled-brown, and dull in overall appearance.



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Habitat and Diet

Ring-necked pheasants are usually found in fertile croplands and cultivated grain fields interspersed with fallow weed lots, pastures, small wetlands, and occasional woody areas with underbrush.

Adult pheasants feed primarily on waste grains, weed seeds, soft mast, and insects which are located by scratching. Harsh winter conditions can make it difficult for these ground feeding birds to find food.

Life History

The ring-necked pheasant is polygamous, and one male will support a harem of as many as 12 hens. Beginning in March, the male establishes a territorial "crowing ground" in or near protective cover. The cock bird will defend this area, and the hens he has attracted, through vicious fighting with other aggressive males. In April and May, the hens select a nearby nest site in an open hay field, fence row, or, less frequently, in a woodland border. The hen will lay up to 15 olive-brown eggs at a rate of 1 egg per day in a shallow depression lined with bits of grass or leaves. During this period, nests may be destroyed by predators, farm machinery, or spring flooding. Once disturbed, a hen pheasant may abandon the nest but will

usually make an attempt to renest and produce a second clutch of eggs. The incubation period lasts about 23 days with no assistance given by the male. Hatching usually occurs around the middle of June.

Ring-necked pheasants are precocial and the young, upon hatching, will leave the nest permanently and begin to feed primarily upon a protein-rich, insect diet. Pheasant chicks grow rapidly and are capable of short flights at about 2 weeks of age. They remain with the hen for about 6 to 7 weeks. During the brooding period, the hen pheasant will provide protection from the elements and safety from predators, in addition to helping the young find food.

Young pheasants molt their juvenile feathers at 7 weeks of age and begin to develop adult plumage and coloration. Family groups begin to break up shortly after the brooding period and are completely dispersed by September. Cock pheasants do not exhibit a full display of colors and the characteristic white neck-ring until they are about 18 weeks old.

Interesting Facts

The ring-necked pheasant is well adapted for life on the ground and will take to flight only when there is no other means of escape. Powerful leg muscles enable this beautiful game bird to swiftly retreat to cover, taking 18 to 24-inch strides. When threatened, a pheasant will burst into flight with a rapid flurry of short wing beats, rise a short distance, lock its wings, and glide into protective cover. Upon landing, a few quick strides will usually complete the escape.

A hardy, wily, game bird, the pheasant possesses keen survival instincts and an uncanny ability to escape; these attributes make it a favorite quarry among sportsmen.

Enhancement Practices

In general, agricultural practices will have the greatest impact on pheasant survival as they affect winter food, winter cover, and nesting cover. Private landowners in agricultural areas can make habitat conditions favorable for pheasants by providing an arrangement of seasonal cover that will supply feeding, nesting, brooding, and roosting sites throughout the year. Some suggestions are as follows:

- Establish cereal plantings of oats, buckwheat, millet, or sorghum.
- Leave a portion of existing crops (corn, etc.) standing near field edges to provide additional winter food items.
- Plant native, fruiting shrubs.
- Provide travel lanes, brushy fence rows, windbreaks, or other uncultivated areas for protective and nesting cover.
- Delay mowing operations until after the nesting season.
- Plant evergreens in small groups to provide winter roosting cover.
- Establish a buffer zone around drainage ditches, farm ponds, and wetland areas, and fence it to prevent grazing.
- Leave roadsides or brushy fence rows unburned or ungrazed.

