The American Pheasant

A complete history of this popular game bird

By SETH GORDON

President, American Game Association

"FIVE million pheasants bagged annually? Why man, your adding machine must be crazy!" expostulated a friend of mine when I informed him that, according to the best figures obtainable, that was the bag last fall. "You must be talking about the British Isles and all of Europe combined," he insisted.

I assured him that it all happened right here in the good old U.S.A., and then proceeded to prove it. Unfortunately a lot of states do not yet compile figures on the annual game kill, but here are a few examples:

South Dakota tops the list with 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 cock pheasants annually; next comes Minnesota with 1,000,000 cocks; Nebraska, North Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois trail along, not far behind, in the order named.

In the East, Pennsylvania tops the list with 250,000 cocks; New York, 185,000; New Jersey, 100,000; Connecticut, 50,000; and Massachusetts, almost 40,000.

In the Far West the states of Oregon and Washington, where the ringneck first really got started in America, contribute large kills of cock pheasants every year. And this brings me to an epochal event in American shooting history.

"How much?" asked the Judge as he pointed to some gaudy long-tailed birds in small bamboo cages surrounded by a motley array of dried frogs, fish, poultry and vegetables.

"Him say for two 35 cents, Amelican money," responded the interpreter after what seemed like much talk and many useless gestures between the dark-skinned, slant-eyed man squatting on the ground and the go-between.

"Cheap enough, Judge. I'd take all he has," urged the Admiral.

And thus in a Shanghai public market in 1882 was closed the deal for the first four pairs of Chinese pheasants which Judge Denny shipped to America.

"Yes, sir; we rescued those eight birds from the Chinese cook-pots at 35 cents a pair—17 cents in gold," proudly said that grand old globe-trotting sportsman, Admiral Hugh Rodman, U.S.N., Retired, to me recently while discussing his pheasant-hunting experiences in China. "And now see what has happened in America."

The fine contribution Judge Owen N. Denny of Oregon, then Consul-General at Shanghai, made to the sport of hunting in America is pretty well known, but no one ever knew what the original birds cost.

In the July, 1917, issue of *The Oregon Sportsman,* Carl D. Shoemaker, then State Game Warden of Oregon, said: "In 1882, Judge Denny sent the first live Chinese pheasants to America. The birds all died in Seattle following a rough voyage. The next shipment, about fifty, arrived safely in Portland and were liberated on the old Denny homestead in the Willamette Valley near Peterson's Butte, Linn County. The liberation was the occasion for a big celebration."

By 1892, Denny pheasants, as they were then called, had become so abundant in that part of Oregon that an open season of 75 days was declared, and 50,000 birds were killed on the opening day.

Mr. Shoemaker further stated that "in 1893, 30,000 Chinese pheasants were killed in one county alone, and that year 1,200 dozen were shipped to the San Francisco market."

THE state of Washington also shared Judge Denny's benefactions. He shipped pheasants there in 1883. The first open season was declared in 1903, for 90 days. In Washington, as in Oregon, pheasants have furnished a whale of a lot of good shooting ever since.

Judge Denny also tried to help California. He sent a shipment of between 80 and 90 birds to a game official about 1883. The consignee died before the ship docked. No one else knew about the shipment of birds, and the sailors gave the pheasants away along the San Francisco waterfront.

Judge Denny died in 1900, but the sportsmen of Oregon never forgot their debt of gratitude to him. In 1917 they discovered that his widow, living in Portland, was in need. They raised funds by popular subscription to lift the mortgage on her home and to provide the necessities of life. Later the legislature made an appropriation of $50 per month to Mrs. Denny for life from the Oregon state game fund. She died several years ago, more than ninety years old.

OTHER early experiments with pheasants in the United States can be told briefly. The first public effort to establish pheasants in California began with an appropriation of $2,000 in 1889. An agent went to Oregon and secured 140 birds at $10 per pair from farmers and others. Later, about 400 more birds were obtained from Oregon, but it was not until 1933, after a wait of forty-four years, that California sportsmen enjoyed legal pheasant shooting.

In commenting on that first season, *California Fish and Game* (January, 1934) says: "During the six-day period more men went out to try their luck than in many years. Twenty thousand male birds seems to be a fair estimate of the kill. The cock pheasant surprised many with his speed in flying and running, his deceptive flight, and his ability to hide and back-track on the nimrod."

"Come on, boss! I've got him nailed"

Early attempts to introduce pheasants in the East, birds shipped from England, date back to 1790. Richard Bache, son-in-law of Benjamin Franklin, brought them to his Delaware River estate in New Jersey, probably mostly for aviary purposes. A century later, according to Dr. John C. Phillips in his *Wild Birds Introduced in North America* (1928), Pierre Lorillard imported many pheasants into northern New Jersey to stock his estate, and early in the nineties pheasants were well established in that region.

But, according to

The pheasant may have been a "furriner" once, but he's a native now

the same author, "not much attention was paid to foreign game birds until after the successful introduction of pheasants in Oregon. After this became known in the East the country went wild over pheasants, without much regard to the actual stock. The nineties saw pheasants more or less established in many parts of the Northeastern States. Palmer says they had been placed in all the states except nine by 1907, and of these five were in the South."

Between 1906 and 1915 something like 80,000 pheasants were imported for brood stock and releasing, but, as Doctor Phillips says, too many of the states, largely to satisfy political demands, at first sent a few pairs to each county, never enough in one place to furnish a conclusive experiment.

Rearing pheasants for stocking purposes in America was given great impetus when, in 1912, the American Game Association established demonstration game farms and published a special bulletin on pheasant rearing. Many state and private game farms were established, mostly to raise pheasants, but in the beginning thousands of birds were utterly wasted by being stocked in forest country, when their natural habitat is grain-farming country interspersed with plenty of dense weed, tall grass, brier, swampy slough and alder patches.

No one ever attempted to give a scientific reason for the failure of most of these widely scattered releases, except that there just weren't enough birds to assure success, until at the 20th Game Conference Dr. A. A. Allen of Cornell University, in discussing sex rhythm, gave an explanation that may be the answer. He said: "If a species is rare, territories large, competition not severe, a lack of synchronized breeding rhythm and resulting infertile eggs is likely to occur. Final extirpation of species on the verge of extinction, such as the heath hen and the passenger pigeon, might well have been accomplished because of a lack of synchronization in the mating cycles of the few males and females left. The failure of introductions of foreign species when few individuals are liberated or the stock widely scattered is likewise explainable on this same basis."

AMERICAN shooters for years argued that ringnecks would never stand up under punishment. Many of them still belittle this gaudy, wily foreigner. They say he isn't game; that he's a dunghill. But I'll wager my best Llewellin setter that they never hunted pheasants where the birds really thrive and are hunted regularly.

The worst they can say about the ringneck is that he runs ahead of bird dogs; but as to gameness, he can take it. Today he is one of the craftiest game birds in America, and he thrives in the very country where native birds, such as prairie chickens, sharptails and quail, have been driven out by intensive agricultural methods.

Pheasants and farming get along together, if the farmers give them half a chance. And when the hunting season opens, the cocks soon get it through their heads that the report of the shotgun means no good to them. They either sit so tight that one must almost step upon them—and I have stepped on a few—or they sneak out or flush wild with their typical cackle of alarm.

Pennsylvania's game officials have been credited with being smart men, but the wily ringneck outsmarted them. No state hunts its farm game coverts harder. The state authorities, even as late as 1919, held that "pheasants will never become established in Pennsylvania because they cannot stand hard winters and hard hunting both." They argued that the only sensible way was to stock pheasants in the springtime, shoot them off in the fall, then repeat the operation.

That state began stocking pheasants in 1915—2,100 of them—and shooting of both sexes was allowed the same fall. Later, hens were protected. So far, Pennsylvania has stocked over 165,000 birds and distributed over 450,000 eggs. Her average annual pheasant kill now greatly exceeds the kill of native ruffed grouse,

and pheasant hunting has become so popular that it has taken much of the load off the native game birds.

Every other state where the ringneck has taken hold reports the same thing. I have hunted pheasants in a number of states, including South Dakota, and they can still outwit me aplenty.

And can the pheasant carry off a lot of lead! Several years ago I knocked a big cock for a loop with a heavy load of 6's in a thick Illinois cornfield. He fell like a plummet. I knew just where he lay.

"Go fetch, Patsy!" I commanded.

Out went the little bitch like a flash. She knew her pheasants, and that bird to me was just as good as in my coat right then.

But Patsy failed me. Finally we hunted that spot together in widening circles for forty minutes, but no pheasant, except two scared hens. Disgusted, I called it quits.

Almost an hour later I swung back into that section, hoping the rascal might still be found. Over two hundred yards from the marked spot the little Llewellin snapped into a stanch point. I walked in, but no bird flushed. Finally, about five feet ahead of her nose, I spied the tip of his tail feathers, his body completely hidden under thick grass. Desiring to give him a chance, I shoved my foot right over him. Nothing doing. Then I grabbed, and picked up my bird—one wing off, the opposite leg dragging, and otherwise hit hard, but still game and fighting for freedom. Right then I vowed never to hunt pheasants without a dog.

Other pheasant hunters have had many similar experiences. Last fall a companion, a considerable distance from me, knocked a high-flying cock right out of the air over a nursery planted to small evergreens. Ground cover was sparse. I marked the spot, stood still, and watched.

Apparently the pheasant was stone-dead when he fell. Two friends hunted, with the help of a dog, until disgusted. Then I joined them. After thirty or more minutes we gave up. Evidently that bird was only stunned or had a broken wing, and used his strong legs to streak out unnoticed.

I HAVE often seen pheasant hunters fail to bag birds because they hunted and rehunted fields or swales of heavy cover only, and did not hunt to the very edges. Or they overlooked the adjacent sparse stubbles, open ditches and little islands of cover near by.

On the same trip last fall I persuaded my friends to accompany me on two different forays into a little patch of briers, weeds and grass along a steep bank, less than a tenth of an acre, a considerable distance from the cover we had been combing hard without results. Each time we flushed cocks, one time three. One companion dropped a high-climbing Chink right over a bare field and shouted, "He's mine!" I rushed up the steep bank just in time to see that bird running back into the brier patch. Had it not been for my action, that friend would have lost another "dead" cock.

Nowhere in America has the ring-necked pheasant made more remarkable increases than in the Middle West. Ohio and Indiana did not give the pheasant much attention until comparatively recent years, but Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska and South Dakota all began stocking pheasants on a considerable scale along about 1912 to 1917.

The premier pheasant state of the Union today is South Dakota. The first public stocking there occurred in 1912, with 300 birds. The total number stocked up to 1919 was 7,000. The first open season was 1919. The total kill of pheasants in South Dakota is now estimated at 1,000,000 to 1,500,000 birds annually. Something like 23,000 birds have since been trapped from sections where they were abundant and shipped to other sections of the state. This past winter 1,000 pheasants were trapped and exchanged with the province of Alberta for a like number of Hungarian partridges.

THE eastern part of South Dakota seems to be the ideal pheasant habitat. That section is covered with vast cornfields, from which the corn is husked from the stalks, leaving the fodder and the corn missed in harvesting in the fields for winter cover and food. Adjacent to the cornfields are large swamps and sloughs covered with heavy grass and reeds of the kind which pheasants crave for added shelter and roosting cover. Predators, except crows, seem to be scarce in that state.

While the neighboring states stocked pheasants, several of them have benefited greatly from South Dakota's overflow. Parts of Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota, with equally favorable food and cover conditions, are now almost as heavily stocked with pheasants as eastern South Dakota.

North Dakota has trapped and transferred a considerable number of pheasants to stock sections not heavily populated, and so far has trapped and shipped 3,700 pheasants to the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba for an equal number of Hungarian partridges.

Nebraska began stocking pheasants in 1920, the total stocking consisting of 500 pairs, but 5,000 pairs of birds have since been trapped and transferred to other sections. Nebraska now kills about 200,000 pheasants annually.

In Wisconsin, Gustave Pabst was the good angel to the sportsmen. He stocked 2,500 pheasants in 1910, and later the state began rearing and stocking them on a considerable scale. To date 128,000 birds have been released, and 300,000 eggs distributed. Wisconsin's first open season was declared in 1925; last year the estimated kill was 150,000 pheasants.

The Prairie States were formerly the great prairie-chicken country of North America. Today chickens are scarce, but some of them boast as many ringnecks as they used to have prairie chickens. Minnesota, one of the greatest duck states in the Union, in 1931 killed only 518,000 ducks, but had a total kill of over 1,000,000 cock pheasants.

Anyone who has never hunted pheasants in these Prairie States has no conception of the almost bewildering numbers of birds which are to be found in many sections. Ethan W. Thompson, who hunted in South Dakota last fall, says (*The Northern Sportsman,* March, 1934): "Wherever there is a cornfield there are birds galore. Seven of us went through one cornfield of thirty or forty acres, and when we reached the end over five hundred birds took wing. Fourteen men at the end of the drive bagged over thirty birds. In another ten acres of canebrakes we flushed over three hundred birds. Never were we over two hours securing all the law permitted, five per day, shooting being permitted in the afternoon only to make the sport more difficult." The limit for the season in South Dakota is 25 pheasants.

LAST fall, August Maier of Linton, South Dakota, killed a banded cock pheasant that was one of the original birds released in 1913, a wise old fellow with a charmed life that escaped for twenty years. This proves that the pheasant is not such a dumb-bell as many people think.

Aldo Leopold, in his game surveys, found that in the Middle West pheasants rarely average more than one bird to the acre, and quite often, even in good pheasant-hunting territory, not more than one bird to every three to seven acres. In one county in northern Iowa he found 1,000 pheasants on 320 acres, an exceptional case, just as was an area in Ohio where 140 to 210 birds were flushed from a patch of twelve rows of corn about 400 yards long each time it was visited by investigators.

In several marshy sections of New York and New Jersey adjacent to farm lands, very heavy winter concentrations of pheasants occur, but one estate in eastern Pennsylvania—about 1,400 acres of farm land, brushy ravines, unmown hayfields and woodlots—boasts the heaviest concentration yet recorded in the East. In 1932 on that estate 1,500 eggs were salvaged ahead of the mowing machine by using a flushing device while cutting 123 acres of alfalfa. That winter, over 1,800 pheasants lived on that property. The following spring, around 1,200 pheasant eggs were salvaged, and during the winter of 1933-34 the pheasant population was estimated at more than 2,000 birds.

All the territory around this estate is excellent pheasant country with plenty of birds, but heavily hunted, while on the estate hunting is limited to about 150 birds annually. The real answer is favorable food and cover, with ideal nesting and range conditions.

ON this property the corn crop is harvested exactly as it is in Illinois, Iowa and South Dakota—from the stalk without cutting. If the farmers of the East could all be induced to harvest their corn crop in the same way, there is every reason to believe that in corn-growing sections, especially where there are ungrazed marshy ravines and uncut hay and weed fields adjacent thereto, pheasants would become as abundant as they are in South Dakota.

Prof. H. M. Wight of the University of Michigan has devoted more time to studying the environmental needs of ringnecks than any other man in America. Speaking of southern Michigan, he says, "Although we cannot hope to develop a pheasant population equaling that of certain sections of South Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota, where vast cornfields are left standing throughout the winter, the present population can be greatly increased by the adoption of improved management practices."

On a demonstration area there, Professor Wight increased the pheasant population over 400 per cent within two years by proper cover and food management. The American Game Association, Washington, D. C. will gladly tell you how Professor Wight achieved this remarkable result.

Experiments with ringnecks in the Southern States have always been discouraging. Virginia, for example, released 2,200 birds in 1917. In the report of the Game Commission the following spring it is recorded that "The live pheasants liberated in the fall of 1917 suffered severely from hawks during the protracted snows of the winter (1917-18), and the reports coming in are very discouraging. To establish the ringneck as a game bird in this state would take years and constant restocking until it acquired the shrewdness necessary to cope with its natural enemies."

Since pheasants thrive in states where snow lies on the ground for months at a time, there must have been some other reason for the failure in Virginia. I am inclined to suspect that the birds were scattered over too much territory, and that the ground cover was not dense enough for

them; also, that pheasants should never be expected to thrive in a country where darky huts dot the landscape. They are too near the size of chickens.

Last fall, Dwight L. Armstrong of Pennsylvania told me about a pheasant experiment which he and some friends made in Georgia, near Warm Springs. That is an excellent quail country, about the only farming being patches of cotton, cowpeas, corn, and in some instances wheat, grown by negro tenant farmers.

"My theory was that perhaps pheasants raised in the South would be better for stocking purposes," says Mr. Armstrong. "So early in 1929 ten hens and four cocks were shipped to one of my friends in Georgia. He had very little difficulty in rearing the birds, and that fall released about 275 grown birds. He put out another 150 in 1930, and a few more in 1931.

"They strayed all over the countryside. Lately they seem to have disappeared entirely. The climate may be unsuited to pheasants. There seems to be plenty of the same kind of cover we have here in Pennsylvania where pheasants have done very well.

"In that section of Georgia there are a good many gray foxes; the pheasant is a good-sized bird and relatively easy meat for the negro hunter; and probably we did not continue our stocking operations long enough. On the other hand, there is not anywhere nearly as much grain, such as corn, as in Western States where the pheasant has thrived."

It is very evident that a lot more research work should be done before more pheasants are stocked in the Southern States, where the bob-white is king.

Apparently there is no state in the Union where pheasants have not been released, either privately or publicly, and they are now being stocked in a number of Canadian provinces, where reports indicate that they are getting nicely started. Pheasants have become firmly established in not less than twenty-seven states, and in at least twenty of these the gaudy foreigner is destined to furnish a major part of the upland wing-shooting of the future.

Not only is the ringneck game unto death, but his popularity is growing rapidly. In many sections of the country he has served as a shock-absorber par excellence for our native game birds. If he continues to grow in favor, and our duck supply continues at a low ebb, thousands of duck hunters may turn to ringneck shooting.

As a table bird, the Chink is a most delectable morsel. I'll take a juicy ringneck on the table any day in preference to grouse or quail. And that is another reason why he is gaining in favor.

Little did Judge Denny realize that within a half century his purchases of pheasants in a Shanghai market would inspire such nationwide interest, or that they would furnish so much pleasure to hundreds of thousands of American sportsmen.

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