

Pheasant News and Notes

February 2022



Trivia Question

Who wrote the following:

“By the time I was born, my father hunted only pheasant. When he and the dog took off for the golden autumn fields I could so easily imagine, I longed to be included, to tramp about the fields with him as we did in other seasons, to engage day-long in the crispness of the air, to wade the high, shimmering grasses, to watch the dog work the fields as perfectly as my father always described the point, the flush, my father taking aim, the shot, the dog retrieving in her gentle mouth that beautiful bird of autumn. It seemed so holy an offering on our dinner table, each pheasant we ate, a celebration of the life of wildness, of our connection to it through my father, the hunter.”

Farm Bill and USDA News

The House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry held a hearing this week on 2022 Farm Bill conservation programs. It was mostly a question-and-answer session with FSA Administrator Zach Ducheneaux and NRCS Chief Terry Cosby to start framing potential changes to the 2023 Farm Bill. Predictably, the buzzword during the hearing was “climate,” with Democrats touting the “climate-smart” program incentives now available and Republicans warning that the law needs to remain the “conservation title and not the climate title.” Both sides agreed that producers should be given the flexibility they need to implement locally-led conservation efforts and full credit for the ecological services they provide. Wildlife was mentioned in passing a couple of times but no question was specifically wildlife-oriented. One lawmaker voiced support for the current emergency haying and grazing rules and seemed concerned that CRP may be competing with early career producers. You can watch the hearing [here](#); thanks to Jim Inglis (Management Board, Pheasants Forever) for the link.

USDA-NRCS has made a variety of data dashboards available through their [RCA Data Viewer](#). According to the agency, “users can graph, map, and download customized datasets based on practices applied through NRCS programs and survey data on land use, soil erosion, and prime farmland from the National Resources Inventory (NRI). State and national data on conservation practices cover fiscal years 2005-2020. 2017 National Resources Inventory are also available, at 5-year intervals, for 1982-2017 at the state and national levels.” Lots of good stuff on that page.

FSA is also preparing to calculate and release the [CRP Soil Rental Rates for 2022](#). The 2022 general signup runs from January 31 through March 11, and the Grasslands signup from April 4 through May 13.

Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

The big happening last month was our first in-person meeting of the National Wild Pheasant Technical Committee since 2019. This was officially the 2021 meeting, but we shifted it to coincide with the Western Quail Working Group meeting to help reduce travel costs for joint members – Texas had agreed to host both. Our meeting was held January 12-13 in Lubbock; thanks to John McLaughlin (Technical Committee, Texas) for hosting in fine fashion.

My meeting notes are as follows:

In-person attendees: John McLaughlin (host, Texas), Jeff Prendergast (Kansas), John Laux (Nebraska), R.J. Gross (North Dakota), Tell Judkins (Oklahoma), Joseph Lautenbach (Ohio), Mikal Kline (Oregon), Travis Runia (South Dakota), Avery Cook (Utah), Scott Taylor (National Pheasant Plan Coordinator)

Virtual attendees (list may be incomplete): Katherine Miller and Matt Meshriy (California), Ed Gorman (Colorado), Jeff Knetter (Idaho), Wade Louis (Illinois), Todd Bogenschutz (Iowa), Tim Lyons (Minnesota), Casey Cardinal (New Mexico), Sarah Garrison (Washington), Chris Pollentier, Allicyn Nelson, and Taylor Finger (Wisconsin), Zach Deines and Adam Janke (Iowa State University)

Welcome and Introductions – John McLaughlin

John called the meeting to order and welcomed us to Texas. John also thanked Dustin McNabb (Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever Regional Field Representative) for all the support he provided to the meeting, which was very much appreciated by the participants and their agencies.

Pheasants in Texas – John McLaughlin (Texas)

The first pheasant introduction occurred at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf Coast, with natural immigration from Oklahoma and Kansas likely responsible for ancestral populations in the current northern Texas range. Population surveys began in the 1950s, with populations likely peaking in the 1980s. Recent indices are about an order of magnitude below the peak. Thirty-seven counties are currently open to hunting during a 30-day December season, with a daily bag limit of three roosters. Important programs providing pheasant habitat in the Panhandle include the Texas Playa Conservation Initiative (TPWD), Working Lands for Wildlife (USDA), and Pastures for Upland Birds (USFWS).

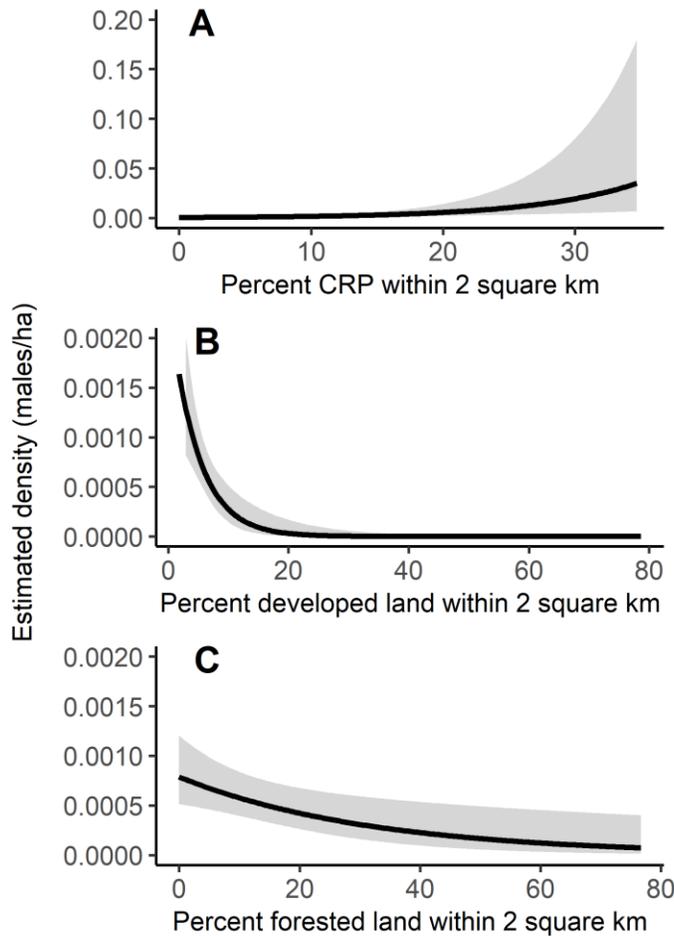
Multi-state Brood Survey Project Update – Zach Deines and Adam Janke (Iowa State University)

Zach reported analyses completed to date with data contributed by 13 states. Overall detection probabilities associated with summer brood counts were about 36% for pheasants and 21% for bobwhites. Soil moisture appeared to be the most influential factor on detection and was somewhat decoupled from dew estimates; the group discussed this apparent quirk at length. Probabilities varied among states, generally with lower values in the west. Zach and Adam continue to examine if and how their models can help develop more accurate fall hunting forecasts.

Estimating Statewide Pheasant Population Size and Distribution in Ohio – Joseph Lautenbach (Ohio)

Joseph used counts of crowing males collecting in 2020 and 2021 in his analyses, with stratified random survey points located within Ohio's pheasant range as defined by their latest (2010) Breeding Bird Atlas. He used distance sampling techniques and a hierarchical modeling framework to estimate male density related to land cover covariates as estimated by the 2019 National Land Cover Database (NLCD) and USDA's CRP spatial data layer. Significant covariates influencing density included CRP (positive relation), developed and forested land (both negative relations; Figure 1). He used the resulting model to estimate density within contiguous hexagonal grid cells fitted across the potential range and estimated a current population size of 6,612 male pheasants in Ohio. Lacking a contemporary spring sex ratio estimate, total population size was not estimated. Joseph also was able to use the model in a scenario planning context, estimating the additional CRP acres required to increase populations by a given level.

Figure 1. Estimated ring-necked pheasant abundance for percent CRP (A), developed land (B), and forest land (C) in Ohio, while holding the other variables constant at the mean value. Gray shading indicates the 95% confidence interval.



Evaluating Iowa's CP-38 Pheasant SAFE Practice – Todd Bogenschutz (Iowa)

Iowa DNR evaluated this state-specific practice, which includes provision of both breeding and non-breeding habitat components by measuring pheasant abundance at 41 pairs of treatment and control sites. Sample site choices were stratified by land cover (percent CRP, forest, and grassland) and abundance was measured by distance sampling with spring crow counts. After accounting for differences in detection probabilities, pheasant densities were 135% higher on treatment than control sites.

Playa Lake Farm & Ranch, LP – David Bateman (Owner)

David is the co-founder and co-CEO of SitePro, a company that designs software and related products for remote monitoring and control of engineered systems in the energy, municipal water, and irrigated agriculture sectors. As a hunter, he started PLF&R as a way to develop recreational lands for himself and others while conserving playas and associated uplands. David's approach is to purchase parcels that contain historic and/or functioning playas, then enroll portions of those lands into CRP and other conservation programs while continuing to farm other portions. Hunting rights are leased to a 10-member club, which make up less than 10% of the company's income. Not every parcel produces a

positive cash flow, but the goal is for the entire portfolio of properties to remain profitable. David encourages others to apply his business model, which could result in more acres in conservation throughout the region.

National Habitat Model Planning and Execution – Scott Taylor (National Pheasant Plan Coordinator)

The three highest ranking new work items in the new version of the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan involve developing a range-wide, spatially explicit decision support tool to aid habitat investment decisions. Since outside funding for this tool has not been forthcoming, Scott presented some initial plans to produce the tool (and the models it will be based on) internally, i.e., with work done by the Coordinator and Technical Committee members with relevant experience and a willingness to participate. We discussed the decision-related questions such a tool should address, steps to acquire the point count and land cover data necessary to produce the models, cooperative data analyses, and what the outputs and utility of the tool should ideally encompass. Members from several states (Ohio, South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota) volunteered to help Scott with various technical aspects of this work.

Using National Plan Data to Estimate Birds/Habitat-Acre Relations – Scott Taylor

Scott reported that Pheasants Forever is trying to better translate the work they do into relevant outcomes (e.g., pheasants produced, tons of carbon sequestered, etc.) beyond the traditionally reported outputs (e.g., acres of habitat, etc.). He has been asked to help estimate the number of pheasants produced per habitat acre gained; his first approximation of this relation uses the habitat-specific productivity estimates in the new National Plan, as well as estimates of statewide rooster harvest, harvest rate, and pre-hunt sex ratios in a method similar to that found in the 2013 National Plan. Harvest rate and sex ratio data from South Dakota was initially applied to all states in the model; North Dakota and Iowa said they have winter sex ratio data that could also be used. This model's state-specific "birds produced per acre added" approximation is a stopgap approach until our spatially explicit model can be developed.

National Plan Data Dashboard – Scott Taylor

Scott produced an Excel-based dashboard as a way of organizing the data and reproducing the state-specific figures in the new National Plan, as well as tracking future changes in habitat relative to state goals. This would be more user-friendly if it was available on the web, but that functionality hasn't been developed yet. The Excel version was functional for everyone who tried using it so far. Scott also developed a separate dashboard to track some CRP metrics. He will continue updating both as more data become available.

Regarding CRP, Jeff Prendergast (Kansas) also noted that tracking these metrics needs to be coupled with communication with policymakers regarding what the changes mean to wildlife and hunters. The group discussed emergency haying and grazing, including thresholds for triggering activities (e.g., drought designations at any point in the federal fiscal year), the percentage of the field that can be impacted by the activity (now 100%), the timing of the activity, and the ability to profit off those activities (e.g., selling CRP-derived hay) during these emergency periods. Todd Bogenschutz noted a letter was sent last spring from AFWA and key partners to USDA last spring that detailed most of these and other issues. Todd noted that USDA subsequently addressed several key issues (particularly moving SAFE practices back into the continuous signup), and that AFWA, PF, and other partners look forward to making progress on the outstanding issues.

State Updates – All

Each state present provided an update of current population and hunter trends, habitat initiatives of note, ongoing research, and other pertinent issues. Written summaries will be available as part of the final meeting notes.

R3 Discussion – All

The group discussed two main questions: 1) what evidence is being accrued regarding the efficacy of current approaches to recruit and retain pheasant hunters (particularly the release of pen-raised birds?); and 2) how certain are we that recruiting or reactivating hunters isn't negatively impacting the retention of our current hunter base? It appears that objective assessments of pheasant releases on R3 objectives are lacking, but effects almost certainly vary by state. Avery Cook (Utah) suggested that if possible, tracking the trend in hunters per unit area of available habitat would be a more informative R3 metric than simple hunter numbers.

Political Pressures in Game Bird Management – Avery Cook (Utah) and All

The group discussed some of the non-biological factors that are influencing and impacting pheasant management. Motivations for the discussion included diminishing support for long-term data collection activities and increased pressure by some NGOs for pen-reared pheasant releases. Discussion included general approaches being taken to deal with external and internal influences on management decisions (shortening or lengthening hunting seasons, releasing pen-raised birds, lethal predator management, etc.). These issues often involve dimensions of human values that are not well addressed with the biological facts and figures we normally concern ourselves with. However, being familiar with some of the issues faced in other states may better prepare biologist to address these questions as they arise. Discussion pointed to a lack of solid data and research on how non-habitat related measures impact hunter participation and wild populations.

Science Advisory Committee Proposal – Scott Taylor

New peer-reviewed pheasant research publications have become rare relative to those for some other resident game birds (e.g., sage grouse, lesser prairie-chicken, northern bobwhite). How do we keep academics involved with pheasant research as the species becomes less relevant as a game bird in many states, making research funding more scarce? The group discussed creating a Science Advisory Committee of outside researchers to develop more engagement, using access to our long-term data sets as an incentive to participate. Although there was general support for the idea, we would first need to seek approval by the data donors before sharing their data with others. Members also suggested forming a review panel to vet outside data requests.

Business Meeting – All

We briefly discussed the current state of the Steering Committee (recent members had retired or changed jobs and were no longer part of the Technical Committee). In the past, the 3-person Steering Committee has been made up of the members that have hosted the most recent meeting and those that will host the upcoming two meetings. The geographic rotation called for in the bylaws suggests our next meeting should be in the western range, and the one following should be in a state east of the Mississippi River. Jeff Knetter (Idaho) volunteered to host the Fall 2022 meeting, and Joseph Lautenbach (Ohio) volunteered to host the Fall 2023 meeting. Prospects for meeting dates will be forthcoming from Jeff. The group thanked John McLaughlin for hosting a great meeting in Lubbock, and we were adjourned.

Pheasant-relevant Media

[Montana wildlife commission proposes extending pheasant season by a month](#)
[Montana FWP seeks comment on draft EA for annual pheasant release](#)
[Minnesota man arrested for shooting at pheasant hunters](#)
[Iowa PF chapter gets national nod](#)
[Revisit pheasant hunt cancellation, Ontario hunters ask](#)
[Pheasants lose their cool after fighting](#)
[Squirrel and pheasant fight over food and territory in amazing images](#)
[Building a better mousetrap: a different approach for evaluating the efficacy of state fish and wildlife agency recruitment programs](#)
[New survey reveals “COVID Bump” hunters’ motivations and impacts](#)
[Remembering two luminaries of conservation](#)
[Why are wild turkey populations diminishing?](#)
[UK gamekeeper filmed ‘brutally’ killing buzzards avoids jail](#)

Recent Literature

[Knoch, S., M. A. Whiteside, J. R. Madden, P. E. Rose, and T. W. Fawcett. 2022. Hot-headed peckers: thermographic changes during aggression among juvenile pheasants \(*Phasianus colchicus*\). Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B 377:20200442.](#)

[Fischer, L., et al. 2022. Occurrence and relevance of *Mycoplasma* spp. in free-ranging pheasants from northwestern Germany. European Journal of Wildlife Research \(early online version\).](#)

[Wilson, B. S., et al. 2022. Cattle grazing in CRP grasslands during the nesting season: effects on avian abundance and diversity. Journal of Wildlife Management \(early online version\).](#)

[Ford, J. K., S. J. Riley, J. A. Van Fossen, and E. F. Pomeranz. 2022. Exploring transformational change in a state wildlife agency. Human Dimensions of Wildlife \(early online version\).](#)

[Schilder, L. J., et al. 2022. Structural and functional landscape connectivity for lesser prairie-chickens in the Sand Shinnery Oak Ecoregion. Journal of Wildlife Management \(early online version\).](#)

[Smith, O. M., et al. 2022. Complex landscapes stabilize farm bird communities and their expected ecosystem services. Journal of Applied Ecology \(early online version\).](#)

[Caro, T., Z. Rowe, J. Berger, P. Wholey, and A. Dobson. 2022. An inconvenient misconception: climate change is not the principal driver of biodiversity loss. Conservation Letters \(early online version\).](#)

Trivia Answer:

Ruth Rudner, in her short story *The Call of the Climb*.

This update is brought to you by the National Wild Pheasant Conservation Plan and Partnerships. Our mission is to foster science-based, socially-supported policies and programs that enhance wild pheasant populations, provide recreational opportunities to pheasant hunters, and support the economics and social values of communities. You can find us on the web at <http://nationalpheasantplan.org>.