Pheasant News and Notes

June 2023

Trivia Question

Who wrote the following?

"The pheasant … is peculiarly exposed to the attacks of four-footed or ground vermin, and the escape of any of the sitting birds and their eggs … appears at first sight almost impossible. This escape is attributed by many … to the alleged fact that in the birds when sitting the scent which is given out by the animal at other times is suppressed ... By others this circumstance is denied ... I believe, however, that the peculiar specific odour of the bird is suppressed during incubation … in a manner which is capable of being accounted for physiologically ... [T]he excreta of a common fowl or pheasant, when the bird is not sitting, have … no odour akin to the smell of the bird itself. On the other hand, the excreta of a sitting hen have a most remarkable odour of the fowl ... I believe the explanation … to be as follows: the suppression of the natural scent is essential to the safety of the bird during incubation; that at such time vicarious secretion of the odoriferous particles takes place into the intestinal canal, so that the bird becomes scentless, and in this manner her safety and that of her eggs is secured."

USDA and Legislative News

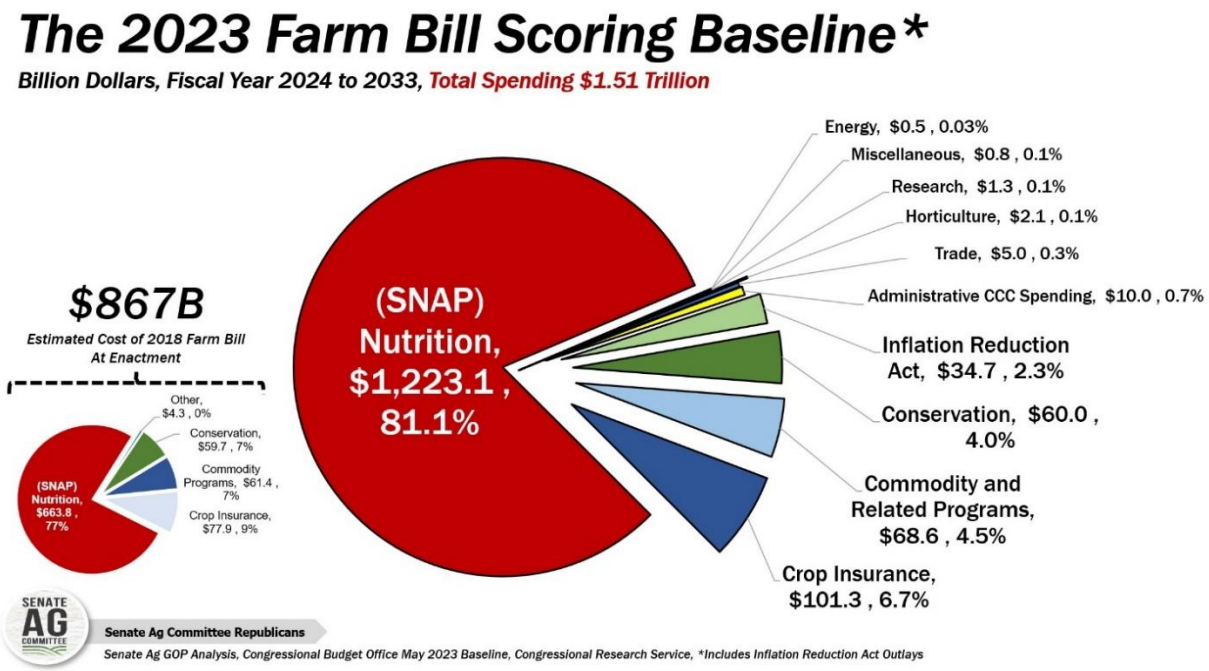
Now that the debt ceiling kerfuffle is over, at least some of the lawmakers can turn their attention back to getting a Farm Bill over the finish line by the end of the fiscal year. The debt ceiling law puts some sideboards on spending that weren't there before, so presumably these will need to be dealt with as the final bill comes together. On the bright side, changes in work requirements for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility have now already been addressed, so the ag committees will not need to haggle over any new provisions there.

Senators Thune (R-SD) and Klobuchar (D-MN) introduced the American Prairie Conservation Act last month, which would strengthen the Farm Bill's disincentives against converting native grass to cropland collectively known as the "Sodsaver" provisions. According to the press release, the bill's primary changes would 1) apply Sodsaver's prohibition to substitute crop insurance yields on native sod that is converted to cropland nationwide; 2) make crop insurance assistance more reflective of production capabilities on all native sod that is converted to cropland nationwide; and 3) require producers who convert native sod to cropland to certify to the Farm Service Agency the number and location of acres of native sod that are converted in an existing automated crop certification system so the converted acres would be accurately tracked. Those certainly sound like positive steps for grassland birds.

The CRP Reform Act introduced by Senators Grassley (R-IA) and Booker (D-NJ) is more of a mixed bag. The bill would boost acreage caps for both the Continuous and Grassland signups and increase payments for Continuous practice enrollment from 90% to 110% of average county rental rates. On the downside, payment rates for General signup acreage would be cut from 85% to 75% of average rental rates, pretty much dealing a death blow to those practices that are already hemorrhaging acres. The overall national acreage cap would be cut from 27 to 24 million acres. Jim Inglis (Management Board, Pheasants Forever) sent along a related link to an Agri-Pulse article with several lawmakers and stakeholders (including Jim) providing their thoughts on this approach.

My knee-jerk reaction is to oppose anything that would reduce the overall acreage cap and diminish large-block enrollment options. But life is about trade-offs – what could we get in return? Could the states (and state wildlife agencies in particular) get more control over where at least some of the enrolled acres go? Could we still design Continuous SAFE practices that include the judicious use of whole field enrollments (at 110% of SRRs!) without drawing the ire of Senator Grassley and his ilk? General CRP seems to be going down in flames under the status quo anyway, so unless we can go back to early 2000s-level incentives for those practices, maybe we can pull something more useful out of fire.

Todd Bogenschutz (Technical Committee, Iowa) sent around an interesting document put out by Republicans in the Senate Ag Committee that includes CBO figures likely to form the scoring baseline for the upcoming Farm Bill. If their numbers are correct, current spending levels are below.



The graphic really drives the point home that SNAP payments dominate Farm Bill spending. The document subtly laments that with the additional funding provided by the Inflation Reduction Act, conservation program outlays would surpass those for commodity support programs. However, Todd pointed out that the IRA funding is the only increase conservation programs have seen since the 2018 Farm Bill (and only $15B of the IRA's $34.7B is conservation-related), whereas commodity and crop insurance have seen healthy hikes. His summary is below.

Cost estimates in $ Billions

	2018 Bill	2023 Bill	Diff
Crop Ins	78	101	23
Commodities	61	69	8
Ag Production Totals	139	170	31
Conservation	60	60	0
IRA	NA	15	15
Conservation Totals	60	75	15

Finally, the application period is now open for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Notes from Around the Pheasant Range

I attended the MAFWA Private Lands Working Group meeting in Wisconsin Dells last month. The meeting was a departure from those previous in that the lion's share of the time was spent working on landscape-level issues in joint session with MAFWA's Public Lands and Wildlife Diversity working groups. In essence, this was the first large interagency opportunity for in-person discussions with staff at the Midwest Landscape Initiative (MLI), which is a partnership among the MAFWA states and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The MLI's (and thus MAFWA's) stated goals are lofty; specifically, by 2030 to achieve:

- A 10% increase in the health and connectedness of Midwest lands and waters, to include conservation of intact landscapes as well as restoration and enhancement of degraded landscapes.
- Sustainable populations of wildlife, fish, and plant species.
- An increase in the relevance of nature and the practice of pro-conservation and outdoor recreation behaviors of those who live, work, and recreate in the Midwest.

Piece of cake, right? These goals are obviously aspirational rather than operational, so this meeting was a step toward "operationalizing" the partnership in the direction of doing some actual interstate habitat work, or at least starting to think through how to approach the problem. We went through some large- and small-group exercises to generate ideas for potential interstate conservation projects; these will be used to jump-start project proposals for grant funds as opportunities arise. It is hoped that starting these interagency conversations early will smooth the way for quickly developing proposals that compete well nationally.

All this generally fits well with the motivation behind our National Pheasant Plan partnership, specifically that both interstate planning and cooperation are needed just to quantify, let alone meet, our regional or national aspirations. I count myself lucky to only have one primary species to worry about; I can hardly imagine being on the hook for "a 10% increase in the health and connectedness" of an entire regional landscape by 2030 (as a cynic, I'll take the under on that). Regardless, I have been and will continue to participate in MLI's Habitat Working Group and will help both partnerships work toward common goals as much as I can.

The MAFWA Private Lands Working Group also held a couple of solo sessions during the meeting, at which I presented an update on our draft pheasant habitat planning tool. More newsworthy was the discussion we had on the strain everyone is feeling in attracting, hiring, training, and retaining an ever-growing fleet of private lands biologists. John Kaiser of the Ohio DNR is heading up an AFWA Private Lands Working Group effort to better define training curricula for private lands workers; their initial report is expected in September. Relatedly, the MAFWA group drafted a letter to the state agency directors to propose development of a MAFWA-specific training program that all the member states could contribute to and use.

Based on conversations after the meeting, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever would be interested in discussing the concept of shared positions for dedicated private lands training staff who could work across organizational and political borders. If your agency has training needs that a shared position could potentially help address, please contact me or Rich Wissink (rwissink@pheasantsforever.org).

Finally, here's a recently published quote to ponder: "Artificial propagation of ring-necked pheasant through semen preservation is of significance, as this species is facing enormous threats in its natural habitat." I don't know – if we're ever down to trying to restore pheasants with pen-raised birds originating from preserved semen, it may be time to throw in the towel. You can read the latest on pheasant semen here.

Pheasant-relevant Media

Thune-Klobuchar bill would expand Sodsaver initiative
Bipartisan proposal would refocus Conservation Reserve Program
Agri-Pulse webinar: the Farm Bill – where are we now?
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation hosts Farm Bill fly-in to engage congressional policy makers
Sportfishing leaders highlight Farm Bill programs that support healthy fisheries
How the Farm Bill can conserve wildlife and working landscapes
Farm Bill must address western priorities, Colorado growers, ranchers tell Congress members
Taxpayer, farm, and environmental advocates urge Congress to reject farm subsidy increases
Farmers set to abandon US wheat crops at highest rate since 1917
Cost to rent Iowa farmland sets record high this year, a new ISU survey says
Last legs: Down to just 21 birds, Iowa's prairie chicken population fading away
Resolution would end lesser prairie-chicken ESA protection
Bike wrecked at Isle of Man TT after collision with a pheasant

Recent Literature

Tammiranta, N., et al. 2023. Highly pathogenic avian influenza A (H5N1) virus infections in wild carnivores connected to mass mortalities of pheasants in Finland. Infection, Genetics and Evolution 111:105423.

Green, R. E., et al. 2023. Comparison of concentrations of lead (Pb) in meat from wild-shot common pheasants killed using shotgun pellets principally composed of lead, iron (Fe), bismuth (Bi) and zinc (Zn). (bioRxiv preprint).

Madden, J. R., R. Buckley, and S. Ratcliffe. 2023. Large-scale correlations between gamebird release and management and animal biodiversity metrics in lowland Great Britain. Ecology and Evolution 13:e10059.

Dixon, A. P., M. E. Baker, and E. C. Ellis. 2023. Passive monitoring of avian habitat on working lands. Ecological Applications (early online version).

LeBeau, C., K. Smith, and K. Kosciuch. 2023. Lesser prairie-chicken habitat selection and survival relative to a wind energy facility located in a fragmented landscape. Wildlife Biology (early online version).

Shyvers, J. E., B. L. Walker, S. J. Oyler-McCance, J. A. Fike, and B. R. Noon. 2023. Genetic mark–recapture analysis reveals large annual variation in pre-breeding sex ratio of greater sage-grouse. Wildlife Biology (early online version).

Baici, J. E., and J. Bowman. 2023. Combining community science and MaxEnt modeling to estimate Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) winter abundance and distribution. Avian Conservation & Ecology 18:8.

Kellner, K. F., et al. 2023. The 'unmarked' R package: Twelve years of advances in occurrence and abundance modelling in ecology. Methods in Ecology and Evolution (early online version).

Trivia Answer

William B. Tegetmeier, in 1873's "*Pheasants for Coverts and Aviaries*." His insights were summarized in the May 15, 1873, issue of *Nature*, in an article entitled "Suppression of Scent in Pheasants." That piece was itself recently recapped by *Nature* on the 150th anniversary of the original article, hopefully with tongue planted firmly in cheek. No apparent word from Mr. Tegetmeier as to why hens only shunt the "odoriferous particles" into their intestinal tracts during incubation – I think if I could control the fate of my odoriferous particles, I'd do it all the time.

Tegetmeier (1816-1912), an English authority on fowl- and pigeon-raising, was a friend and pen-pal of Charles Darwin for 26 years. Darwin's son Francis wrote, "…in reading through the pile of letters it is made clear that Mr. Tegetmeier's knowledge and judgment were completely trusted and highly valued by (my father)." If that is true, Charles must not have gotten wind, so to speak, of William's musings on smelly bird particles. Then again, both were working at a time when bloodletting (by barbers, no less) was still a widely accepted medical practice, so I suppose we should cut them some slack. It is also possible that some brilliant pheasant semen researcher will turn their attention to odoriferous particles and prove Tegetmeier right – it wouldn't be any weirder than quantum physics.

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 https://nationalpheasantplan.org.