



Pheasants still popular among Illinois hunters

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With all the exciting hunting opportunities that now exist within the Illinois, few provide the heart-stopping thrill that comes when a colorful cock pheasant flushes within only a few feet of an unsuspecting hunter.

Without a doubt, the ringneck pheasant is the Illinois' upland hunter's version of big game. Each fall, this highly prized bird brings thousands of hopeful hunters to central and northern Illinois.

Unfortunately, Illinois' pheasant populations have declined in recent years. As with similar declines facing most upland game populations, loss of habitat is the basic problem facing the ringneck pheasants.

What little CRP land (a haven for pheasants and other upland game) that once existed in Illinois has been reduced. And, the trend of clean farming has also played a significant role in reducing the pheasant's habitat.

Still, Illinois' upland hunters continue to find good hunting in certain parts of the state. And, according to Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) upland wildlife specialists, this year will be no exception.

Recent information from the 2017 spring call count surveys indicated a slight, but still significant, decrease in adult birds.

There are established routes across the state and biologists run the routes two times annually during the breeding season. The first run is completed during the peak breeding window for ring-necked pheasant (May 10 – June 10). Each route has 20 stops for three minutes each to record individuals heard or seen.

The number of routes surveyed annually depends on staff availability, but as many of the surveys are completed as possible.

During 2017, observers recorded an average of 0.26 pheasants per stop on the 71 survey routes (30 percent decrease). Ring-necked pheasants were recorded at 14 percent of the stops (percent occurrence) on the routes (33 percent decrease). The number of pheasants counted and the number of stops where pheasants were seen or heard were lower than the numbers from the 2016 surveys.

The winter of 2016-17 was relatively mild and winter mortality due to weather was likely low for pheasant. Spring brought above-average rainfall and may have been problematic for nesting hens and broods in May and early June.

From late June through most of August, weather conditions improved across much of the state (with parts of northern Illinois being the exception due to record flooding). Overall, 2017 weather conditions were a little wet for pheasant during their peak nesting season, but good for hens that attempted a second nest.

Despite some heavy rains early, a recent pheasant study conducted in east-central Illinois highlights the importance of having high-quality habitat to encourage recruitment into the pheasant population. Despite some inclement weather, nesting effort, nest success and brood survival on some of the state-owned Pheasant Habitat Areas and other, high-quality private grasslands has been good in years with similar weather.

The research on these sites found the areas hen pheasants seek for nesting and raising their broods are often the same areas used to take cover during heavy snow events. The presence of thick-stemmed and hardy forbs keeps grasses upright during the winter when winds, rains and snow can often lay solid stands of native grasses flat.

According to IDNR Upland Program Biologist Stan McTaggart, the key to a successful 2017-18 pheasant season is finding high-quality habitat.

“Focus on areas with relatively new CRP plantings, or recently managed grasslands, with hay and/or small grains nearby,” he explained. “Within these areas, look for abundant forbs (broad-leafed, flowering plants) mixed in with scattered clumps of grasses.”

“Hunters may find fewer roosters across Illinois this fall based on lower survey numbers this summer,” he added.

Certainly, Illinois has fewer pheasant hunters. Many hunters who once pursued pheasants have opted to spend their time hunting white-tailed deer, geese or wild turkeys. But, fewer pheasants also typically result in fewer hunters. And, this has been a disturbing trend for several years.

In 2016, Illinois hunters bagged approximately 14,831 ringnecks. According to the figures, only 10,204 hunters pursued pheasants. This indicates a 26 percent decrease in hunters and a 40 percent decrease in harvest from the previous year.

While this news may be somewhat disheartening to pheasant enthusiasts, there is also some bright spots in the forecast. In fact, certain areas of the state continue to shine as top-notch pheasant hunting sites. And, while pheasant numbers are far from those found four decades ago, Illinois ringneck hunters should still find fair action throughout much of the remainder of the pheasant range.

With the timely corn harvest and good weather during the early weeks of the hunting season, the experts feel we should see a pheasant harvest slightly less than last year's. Weather during the nesting season, though not ideal, was probably good enough to bring off fair to good reproduction in areas with suitable habitat.