



Pheasants Still Popular Among Illinois Hunters

by Lee Keck

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With all the exciting hunting opportunities currently existing 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 pheasants nesting habitat.

Still, Illinois' upland hunters continue to find quality 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 2018 spring call count surveys indicate slightly more adult birds in the population.

The IDNR wildlife staff began using a new survey technique in 2010 to better estimate bird density and response to habitat changes.

"Last year's drought and relatively mild winter (except for the wet weather in March) contrasted with a wet and cool spring in 2019," said IDNR upland wildlife biologist Wade Lewis. "Below average temperatures continued throughout the summer until August."

Lewis says cooler than average temperatures and above average precipitation were prevalent in most of the state during the peak pheasant nesting season. This, he says, likely had a negative impact on nest success for many birds during this timeframe. Dry conditions followed from late July through the end of September. This may have allowed some late-nesting and/or re-nesting birds to successfully fledge broods later in the summer.

Still, he feels, hunters with access to good habitat could enjoy a successful season. Corn harvest was mostly on schedule this year.

"The key to a successful 2019-20 pheasant season is finding high-quality habitat. Focus areas should include relatively new CRP plantings, larger blocks of grass or hay with small grains nearby," 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.

IDNR biologists feels that one of the pitfalls for pheasant habitat is grass that is too thick and rank. Even native warm-season grasses, planted for habitat, must be frequently managed with prescribed fire, strip disking or herbicide treatments to maintain some bare dirt so broods can maneuver underneath the canopy.

If pheasant numbers on traditional hunting areas have been declining, some management or habitat enhancements are likely needed to meet three key elements for good pheasant habitat. These include nesting areas, brood-rearing areas and winter cover. Large blocks of grass with a diverse mix of species are best for nesting cover.

Still, with the timely corn harvest (unlikely this year) and good weather during the early weeks of the hunting season, experts hope to see a pheasant harvest similar to recent years. The most productive areas for pheasant hunting continue to be in east central and northern Illinois.