Wildlife Division

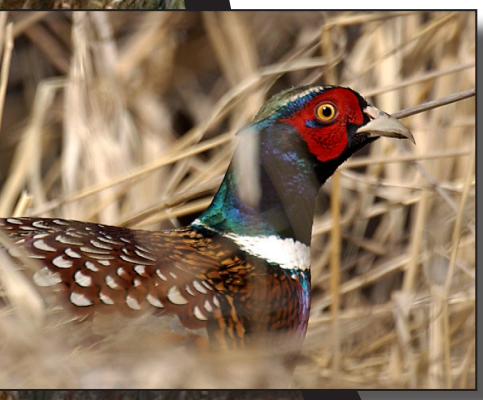
Bringing Back Quality Pheasant Hunting to Michigan

Expanding our ability to implement our Guiding Principles and Strategies (GPS)

Why

Pheasants were once plentiful across Michigan's southern Lower Peninsula. At one time schools closed on the pheasant season opener and long lunch lines were the norm at local diners as orange clad hunters converged following their morning hunt. Michigan small game hunters once shot over a million pheasants per year. For many Michiganders, their first experience bagging game came in their youth where they would chase pheasants out of idle fields and roadside ditches. Small game hunting such as bagging pheasants was the common door many went through on their way to becoming big game and lifelong hunters.

In recent years, however, Michigan pheasant hunters harvest less than 60,000 roosters annually. Many new hunters bypass small game hunting altogether as they go straight to bigger game such as deer, turkey, and bear. This loss of small game hunting heritage has resulted in dramatic declines in pheasant populations following large-scale land use changes throughout southern Michigan. This decline may also have a role in the overall decline in hunters in our state. Regardless of the causes, if something is not done soon part of Michigan's hunting heritage will be lost.



What

Pheasant numbers can be increased locally by planting nesting cover, restoring wetlands, establishing winter cover, and planting certain grains to provide winter food. Thorough these techniques, 1-3 pheasant broods per 40 acres of managed habitat yielding a harvest of 4-8 roosters can usually be achieved. Working at the scale of 40 acres of habitat, however, will not result in meaningful population growth across a region. To get sustainable numbers of wild pheasants necessary to once again bolster small game hunting participation, we need large-scale habitat restoration at regional or landscape levels.

Programs specifically designed to have affects across a region or landscape, such as the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), have learned that when pheasant habitat is restored to occupying as little as 10-15% of a region, declines in pheasant populations can be reversed. The Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative (MPRI), developed in 2011, is a cooperative partnership approach to increasing pheasant populations across regions and landscapes. This initiative has the potential to change small game hunting opportunities, increase wildlife populations, improve hunter satisfaction, and help Michigan's economy. By restoring high-quality pheasant hunting opportunities, there should be not only a return of hunters who have left the sport, but a new generation of hunters as well.

Where

Specific efforts will be conducted in 11 pheasant management cooperatives in southern Michigan focused around specific public land areas and surrounding private lands.

Specific sites include:

- Allegan State Game Area (Allegan County)
- Augusta Creek State Game Area (Kalamazoo County)
- Gagetown State Game Area (Huron County)
- Lake Hudson State Park (Lenawee County)
- Maple River State Game Area (Gratiot, Ionia, and Clinton Counties)
- Quanicassee State Wildlife Area (Tuscola County)
- Rose Lake State Wildlife Research Area (Clinton County)
- Sharonville State Game Area (Jackson County)
- Shiawassee State Game Area (Saginaw County)
- Tuscola County mini-game areas
- Verona State Game Area (Huron County)

How

Working on public lands and the surrounding private lands, the DNR will develop at least 11 large grassland complexes of 250 acres or more of high quality pheasant habitat. Habitat practices will include:

- restoration of poor quality grasslands
- planting quality nesting cover of native grasses and wildflowers
- wetland restorations along with management to provide native cattail cover for winter habitat
- planting switchgrass for winter cover
- planting food plots of corn, soybeans, sunflowers, and millet for winter food

For participating cooperatives, DNR staff will provide advice and assistance on habitat prescriptions; project partners will aid in securing seed for grass plantings; and federal resources may be leveraged to provide financial incentives for private landowners. For private lands that meet habitat restoration objectives, the DNR will provide seed and materials, the use of equipment, and in some cases, the release of wild pheasants to initiate population response. National Farm Bill programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and CREP will be leveraged to provide additional opportunities to promote pheasant habitat on agricultural lands. DNR will work with partners to expand present CREP opportunities in Saginaw Bay and the River Raisin Watershed as well as expand opportunities into new areas such as the St. Joseph river basin in southern Michigan.

Beneficial Impacts

Additonal benefits to wildlife include creation of habitat for:

- bobwhite quail
- cottontail rabbits
- deer
- grassland songbirds
- mallards
- wild turkey

Grasslands, along with CRP and CREP practices such as filter strips planted on agricultural lands, will reduce crop field run-off reducing sediment and nutrient loads in our ponds, lakes, streams and rivers. In places where haying or grazing can be used as a habitat management tool, these grasslands will provide an agricultural crop with economic benefits to landowners while benefiting pheasants.

By increasing recreational hunting opportunities, more hunters will travel to Michigan's rural agricultural areas where they will spend money on food, gas, and supplies that will benefit local businesses. These funds will provide desperately needed financial support to a state that has been seriously impacted by the U.S. economic downturn. In addition, funds provided through MPRI for habitat restoration and management will be used to purchase seed and planting materials while also being used to contract local farmers for land clearing and planting services. With the additional funds necessary to realize MPRI's potential, there will be a $2 in local economic activity for every $1 MPRI investment in local projects annually.