

Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative

A Guide for Pheasant Cooperatives



www.michigan.gov/pheasant



Goals of the Initiative

1. Restore or enhance 200,000 acres of high-quality grassland habitat for pheasants.
2. Increase access to high-quality pheasant hunting on both public and private lands.
3. Recruit and retain small game pheasant hunters.
4. Inform and educate the public and staff on the status and priority objectives of the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative.
5. Develop partnerships to restore wild pheasant populations in suitable habitats.
6. Conduct monitoring and research to ensure the best management of pheasant populations.
7. Secure sustainable funding and necessary resources to implement the Initiative.



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Restoring Habitat Together

The Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative (MPRI) is an opportunity for you, your neighbors and partners to work toward a common goal – RESTORING HABITAT TOGETHER. This is a new initiative, and a new way of doing business. It is about evaluating the local landscape, improving existing habitat and restoring altered habitat on both public and private lands. This is not about removing high-quality agricultural land from production, but rather producing more from the land, including pheasants.

The MPRI is supported by a “collective us.” Most importantly, the “collective us” includes and depends on you and your neighbors! Agencies and organizations will provide support in terms of technical assistance from resource professionals and financial support through cost-share programs.

We can make this initiative successful by working together and thinking big. Positive changes to an individual’s five-acre or 40-acre field will improve habitat. The most significant impact will occur when we manage habitat on a landscape level. The larger goal of the initiative is to restore or enhance 1,200 acres of pheasant habitat within a 10,000-acre area. We will bring the pieces together through Pheasant Cooperatives, groups of people working together to restore pheasant habitat on their lands.

This guide provides suggestions on how you, your neighbors and partners can form a Pheasant Cooperative to improve habitat, increase pheasant numbers and ultimately increase recreation opportunities in your local area. The actions we take together will help to restore the ring-necked pheasant and an array of other wildlife to our rural landscape - if you build it, they will come!

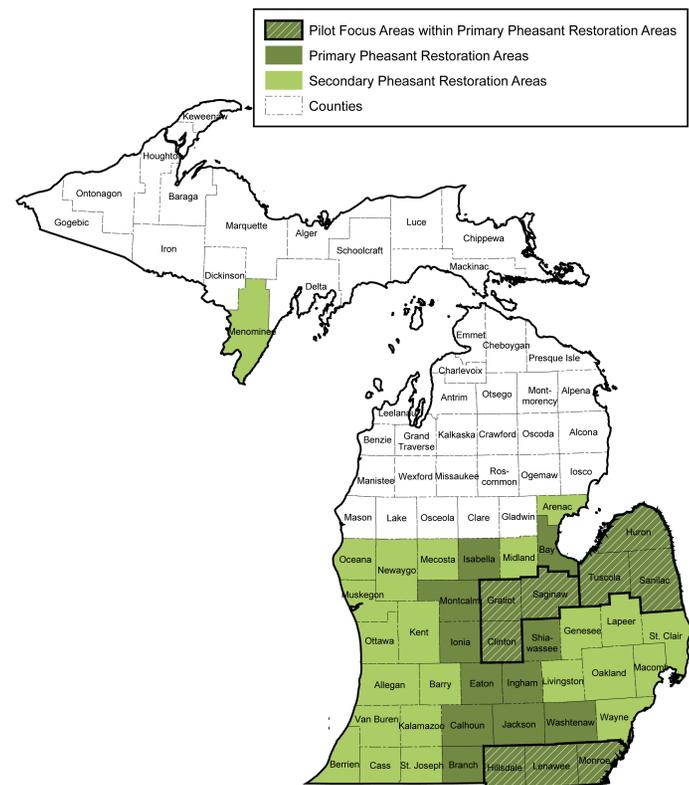
The “collective us”

- Pheasants Forever, Michigan Chapters
- Michigan United Conservation Clubs
- Ducks Unlimited
- Conservation Districts
- Michigan Department of Natural Resources
- Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
 - Michigan State University Extension
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- USDA Farm Services Agency
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- YOU

Getting Started – Focus Areas and Assistance

Partners of the Initiative have identified three pilot priority areas to get started. These areas were chosen based on a combination of current pheasant numbers, relative openness of the landscape (i.e., less forest) and existing habitat. To jump-start the effort, we have placed professional staff in the Lenawee, Gratiot and Bay Conservation Districts to help develop and assist Pheasant Cooperatives. Each MPRI resource professional can help you identify possible hurdles within the Cooperative boundary, set goals and develop the best operating guidelines based on your goals and local conditions. They will help you schedule meetings to discuss how to start a Pheasant Cooperative. They can also provide a link to other local resource professionals in agencies and organizations who may be of assistance. This service is provided free of charge through the partners of this Initiative.

Priority Pheasant Restoration Areas



Contacts for Pilot Areas:

Hillsdale, Lenawee, and Monroe Counties

Dennis Tison

517-263-7400 ext. 119

dennis.tison@mi.nacdnet.net

Huron, Sanilac and Tuscola Counties

Jeff Jones

989-673-8174 ext. 3

jeffrey.w.jones@mi.usda.gov

Clinton, Gratiot, and Saginaw Counties

Monique Ferris

989-875-3050 ext. 101

monique.ferris@mi.nacdnet.net

If you are not located within the pilot areas, you may contact:

Bill Vander Zouwen, Pheasants Forever

Regional Representative

616-450-2385

bvanderzouwen@pheasantsforever.org

Al Stewart, Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Upland Game Bird Specialist

517-284-6221

stewartal@michigan.gov

Mark Sargent, Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Private Lands Program Manager

517-284-6217

sargentm@michigan.gov

Where we want to go, together

By 2015, we would like to see at least 10 Pheasant Cooperatives formed, and have each one provide 1,200-2,000 acres of high-quality pheasant habitat within a larger area of approximately 10,000 acres. The goal for each cooperative area is to meet all pheasant needs, including nesting and brood-rearing habitat, winter cover, and available winter food sources.

In the three pilot areas, we envision using a State Game Area, mini-Game Area or other large block of habitat as an anchor point or hub, around which we can focus efforts on improving habitat on private land. Currently, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), in cooperation with partners, is working to improve grassland habitat on the Verona and Maple River State

Game Areas and the Lake Hudson State Recreation Area. You can help with these efforts by building a local Pheasant Cooperative around this hub on your private lands. Federal, state and partner funds or programs may be available to help with habitat improvement projects.

Building Pheasant Cooperatives

A Pheasant Cooperative is a group of like-minded people in a defined local area working together to restore pheasant habitat on their lands. You and your neighbors will set your own Cooperative goals, keeping these three points in mind: to improve the quality of pheasant habitat in a local area, increase the number of pheasants on the local landscape and increase your enjoyment of the outdoors through hunting or other activities.

Your Pheasant Cooperative may be composed of you and your neighbors, farmers and other rural landowners, members of conservation organizations and others who can help pool together resources to bring about changes on the land. Like any group effort, your Cooperative will need you or another individual, or committee, to step up and act as the spark plug to get things started and keep them moving. Cooperatives may be loosely organized or formalized through bylaws and other actions. The outcome for all is the same – to have a positive impact on local wildlife and wildlife conservation.

Below are the steps to create a Pheasant Cooperative. This is not meant to be the entire list of what a Cooperative can do, but rather a framework from which the members can build their activities over time.

Contact a MPRI resource professional in your pilot area

Three resource professionals have been hired specifically to help with this Initiative; one in each of the three-county pilot areas. They are there to directly help you with each step listed below, and also to provide a link to resource professionals in agencies and organizations. They can draw on the skills of many others to help successfully guide your new Pheasant Cooperative. They may know of other property owners in your area that also want to restore pheasant habitat. The resource professionals are ready to help landowners schedule meetings to discuss forming a Pheasant Cooperative. This service is provided free of charge through the partners of this Initiative. Each resource professional can help identify possible hurdles within the Cooperative boundary, help set goals, and develop the best operating guidelines based on your goals and local conditions.

Contact neighbors and partners to build your Cooperative

The information below may help you reach out to your neighbors and other interested partners.

1) Gather interested individuals to discuss the Initiative and create a Pheasant Cooperative. This may be a way to meet new neighbors and get together with longtime neighbors and friends. Or, walk door to door and speak to your neighbors or landowners to share ideas. Bring along some outreach materials and the letter of interest provided by the Initiative for them to fill out. You may wish to review a plat book or local tax records in your county to help determine the location, size and ownership of land parcels in your Cooperative area.

2) Build trust with your neighbors. Get to know the people who want to get involved. Find out their goals and ideas for the Initiative and your Cooperative. Communicate frequently with neighbors and host meetings or social gatherings to develop relationships and establish trust.

3) Choose members to act as leaders who can build the Cooperative and keep it going. Your MPRI resource professional can help you develop a non-binding landowner agreement. Landowners enter into the agreement with the expressed intent to comply in good faith with the Cooperative to manage habitat and pheasants. In addition, participating landowners agree to comply with recommendations from a management plan developed with the assistance of the MPRI resource professional. All parties should agree to participate in annual meetings, collect uniform data regarding habitat work and pheasants, and share observations with the Cooperative. Every property within a boundary does not have to be involved to be successful. There may be “holes” where some landowners do not wish to participate for one reason or another.

4) Establish a statement of purpose and by-laws (if desired) for the Cooperative. Work with a resource professional to help you establish goals and objectives for your cooperative.

5) Formalize your Cooperative with election of officers (if desired), establishment of member records (collection of dues, if desired) and agenda establishment.

6) Create a detailed Cooperative Management Plan with your local resource professional and keep him or her up-to-date on habitat enhancements. Changing landscape features takes time, so continue to have Cooperative meetings and be supportive of one another. Help with each other's properties. Maintain and enhance relationships among the members.

7) Schedule at least one meeting for the Cooperative each year to review the previous year's results, discuss issues and opportunities, and have fun. If you would like to invite non-Cooperative members, you can put information in your local newspaper or hand out flyers with the meeting information. Hosting a potluck or barbecue with neighbors can be very successful at drawing people together. For additional ideas, contact your pilot area resource professional.



(Information from this section used with permission and adapted from: Wood, Donnie. Seven Steps to a Successful Cooperative. www.qdma.com. 2010; Berger, Mike, et al., A Guide for Wildlife Management Associations and Co-ops, Texas Parks and Wildlife. 2004.)

Identify a boundary area

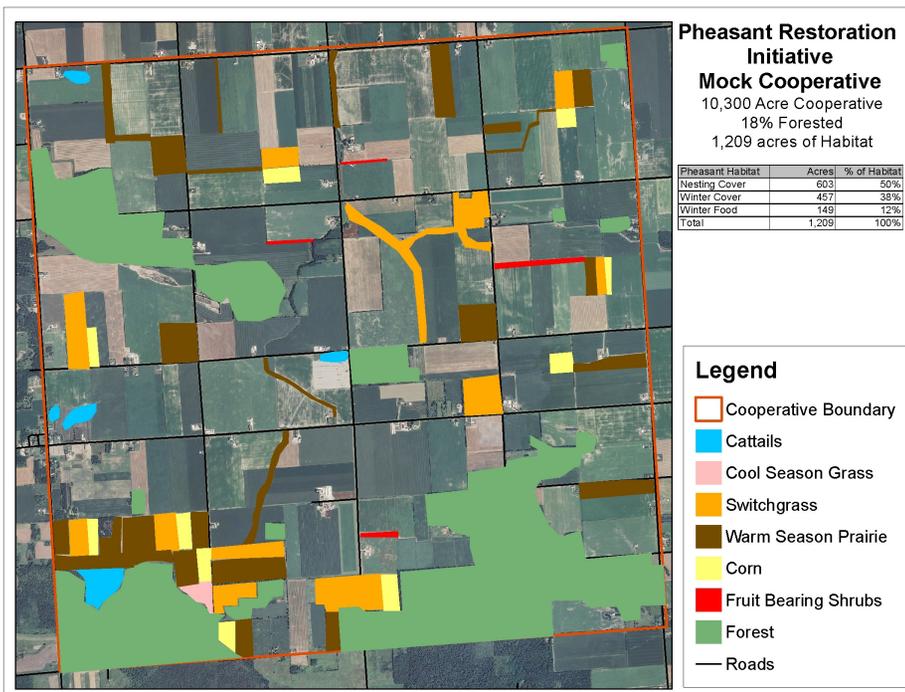
A Cooperative boundary area should be about 10,000 acres (16 square miles). To select your boundary area, look for grasslands, wetlands, filter strips, brushy areas and other areas that provide habitat for pheasants. By identifying the existing habitat, you can determine what the pheasants will still need, like food sources or shelter for example. Reviewing aerial photographs, through Google Map or similar programs, is one way to assess your potential Cooperative area. Driving roads through the area and making notes of potential habitat is another way. As you look for ways to configure a boundary, keep in mind that the Cooperative area should contain less than 20 percent forestland. Including a hub of suitable State land may be a way to reach acreage goals. Remember that resource professionals are available to help with all of these steps.

Inventory existing land use and habitat value within your boundary

Once you have identified your Cooperative boundary area, work with your resource professional to list the vegetation cover types within it both in terms of quantity and quality. As you choose 1,200 to 2,000 acres within the 10,000 acre boundary to restore or enhance pheasant habitat, consider these needs:

- 35-70 percent of the acres should provide nesting cover;
- 25-50 percent of the acres should provide winter cover;
- 5-20 percent of the acres should provide winter food;
- Acres included should help minimize “habitat islands” or “habitat fragmentation.”

To accomplish this, it may be useful to use an aerial photograph of the Cooperative area in which key components are identified, including: wetlands with cattails, cool-season grass fields and filter strips, blocks of switchgrass,



The image above is a mock Cooperative and indicates where the key components are located. 1,209 acres of habitat occur on this 10,300 acre example.

warm-season grass fields and filter strips, corn and bean fields, fruit-bearing shrubland, forestland, and idle “weedy” or “old field” areas. This “base map” can be used as a tool to highlight habitat areas that can be maintained, enhanced or restored. It can also be used to help identify gaps in acres or quality of needed habitat and opportunities to fill those gaps.

As you evaluate the landscape with the resource professional, you should also consider land ownership. Public lands or lands enrolled in a USDA “reserve program” provide great opportunities to improve lands that are under short- or long-term protection.

Determine habitat management targets for the area and formulate a plan

After the land has been assessed, look for places and opportunities to fill in the gaps for nesting cover, winter cover and winter food. Try to connect blocks of habitat within your Cooperative boundary. Is there a block of State or other publicly owned land that can serve as a hub on which to build? Are there fields currently enrolled in conservation programs that can be restored or enhanced to provide better habitat? Are there opportunities to restore drained wetlands by plugging ditches or breaking tile lines? Are you or your neighbors willing and able to convert less productive farmland to permanent grassland? Can you plant a block of native fruit-bearing shrubs in an idle field corner? Can you alter a haying schedule to maintain grass cover throughout the nesting and brood-rearing period? These are ideas for how to evaluate the existing landscape and look for ways to improve pheasant habitat.

This is also a good time to list available equipment and resources to decide what may be done by Cooperative members and what may need to be done by contractors. Do you have a tractor and disk or sprayer to prepare fields? Can you rent a grass drill through your local Conservation District? Will the local Pheasants Forever chapter or other conservation group work with you to secure grass and wildflower seed?

Decide together how field work can be coordinated to meet your Cooperative’s habitat goals. Develop a work schedule to plan which tasks need to be done and in what order. The resource professional within your priority area can help you to develop a management plan, which should include specific goals or objectives, and a list of action items or tasks to be completed to help meet those goals.

Implement habitat improvements by using existing programs, if possible

There are a number of opportunities through government programs and conservation organizations to receive technical and cost-share assistance to complete habitat improvement projects. These range from planting native grasses and wildflowers to restoring drained or altered wetland basins to removing invasive species. The three pilot area resource professionals and staff at local Conservation Districts are familiar with these programs and can provide assistance and advice.

This is also a great opportunity to take advantage of the skills of members and equipment that may be available within your Cooperative. People often take greater ownership in a project if they “get their hands dirty” and do part of the work. Holding a field day among Cooperative members or a site preparation or planting day with several farmers provides opportunities to improve habitat and build a sense of team.

Maintain and manage habitat over time

Habitat management over time will be essential to successfully maintain higher pheasant numbers, and will require a long-term commitment of Cooperative members. When the excitement of restoring “new” habitat has passed, it is the management actions that will be the “nuts and bolts” of keeping high-quality pheasant habitat on the landscape. While this is a longer commitment, it is also a chance to continue or build long-term friendships and a sense of community, and keep pheasant around for your children and grandchildren to enjoy.

Pheasants require young, diverse grassland habitat to provide high-quality nesting and brood-rearing habitat. These fields should include a lot of broad-leaf plants to attract insects to feed the chicks and sufficient bare ground to allow chicks to easily move throughout the stand. Grassland habitats change relatively quickly, with the best quality reached in four to six years after planting. By 10 years old, most grasslands provide poor-quality habitat for pheasants and other ground-nesting birds. Old fields dominated by a few species, such as brome grass, goldenrod or wild carrot, are of little value to pheasants. Therefore, performing routine management activities is critical to maintaining a high-quality stand over time.

Grasslands may need to be mowed, sprayed, disked, inter-seeded or burned to maintain the quality for pheasants. The timing of the management activity, by year and season, is dependent upon the results you wish to achieve. Consideration must be given both to the long-term benefits to habitat that will result from management, as well as short-term impacts that may affect birds and other wildlife, particularly during the nesting and brood-rearing period. Your resource professionals can help you make these choices.

For some USDA programs, like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), mid-contract management is required as part of the CRP contract. There may be an opportunity to work with CRP landowners within the Cooperative area to help guide and assist with the management activity to maximize benefits to pheasants and other grassland birds.

Wetlands may need management as well to help provide cover in winter. Embankment of some restored wetlands need to be inspected and repaired to minimize impacts from burrowing animals and woody vegetation. Water levels in basins with water-control structures may adjusted to improve vegetation for waterfowl, pheasants and other wildlife.

Once the habitat goals of a Cooperative are met, the number of pheasants in the area should increase. If they do not, the DNR may release wild-trapped pheasants in the Cooperative area, to help “jump-start” a local population. DNR staff will work with you to help determine if the habitat goals, both quantity and quality, have been met in the Cooperative area.



Evaluation

We encourage you to work with us to map and record the types of vegetation and general features of your Cooperative area, and the steps you take to improve and manage habitat. Keep track of changes to the land with “before and after” photographs. Record “crowing” counts in the spring, brood counts in the summer, and hunting effort and success in the fall and early winter. Your MPRI resource professional will provide you with tracking sheets and help you record information in the same format that others are using, so we can analyze the information and measure the overall success of the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative. By recording changes to habitat and pheasant numbers and logging your success you can proudly share this information with other members of your Cooperative and encourage those who are still waiting for results.

Increase recreational opportunities

There are many recreational opportunities associated with increased habitat acres, increased wildlife numbers and working together as a Cooperative. “Growing habitat” may be as rewarding as growing a garden. Whether you are seeking out frogs or songbirds in the spring or pheasants and rabbits in the fall, hunting with a camera or a shotgun, more and better habitat will bring more opportunities to enjoy wildlife.

One of the goals of the overall Initiative is to increase pheasant hunter retention and recruitment. Members of a Cooperative may focus part of their effort on youth activities. In an age of electronic gadgetry, the chance to bring kids to the field to connect with nature is worth pursuing. You may decide to open some areas of your land to the public through the DNR’s Hunter Access Program and use the revenue generated to fund actions of your Cooperative. You also may just enjoy hunting pheasants on your property with friends. Asking an adult that has left the sport of pheasant hunting to get involved is another great way to build your local Cooperative and maintain Michigan’s hunting heritage.



Benefits of Participating in the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative

As much as this Initiative is about improving habitat and increasing numbers of pheasants and other grassland wildlife, ultimately for you and other Cooperative members it is about having fun and finding reward. Your reward may come through knowledge gained about wildlife and habitat. Fun may be preparing an overgrown site, planting seed, and watching as habitat grows. It may be hearing the crowing roosters on the family property or seeing more of the fuzz-ball chicks in the fields. Your reward may be in the teamwork, sharing ideas and working toward a common goal with neighbors and others. Your fun may come from participating in your Cooperative’s family picnic or watching your hunting dog at work. Your fun and reward may be in sharing a hunting tradition with a child or grandchild and knowing the actions you are taking now will make a positive difference in their future.

Whatever your motivation, we are pleased to have you join the “collective us” and work toward and benefit from the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative. We look forward to RESTORING HABITAT TOGETHER!



Good winter cover next to winter food supports more pheasants.