



DEM
RHODE ISLAND



Ring-necked Pheasant

The ring-necked pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) is native to Asia and was first brought to the United States in 1881 and released to the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Since that time, pheasants have been released throughout the United States and have become established where suitable habitat exists. In Rhode Island, pheasants became well established from releases in the early 1900s when expanses of open grasslands and open farmland were common throughout the state. At that time, pheasants were found statewide and were abundant primarily in Washington, Bristol and Newport counties. Loss of suitable habitat is the primary reason for the decline of pheasant populations in Rhode Island, fueled by a decline in farmland, increase in development, and the maturation of forest. The stocking of pheasants has been practiced by the state since the early 1950s to supplement naturalized populations of the gamebird for hunters using state management areas. Today hunted pheasants in Rhode Island are stocked birds.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Although stocked throughout the northeast and beyond, the stronghold for wild pheasants in the United States is mainly in the prairies and great plains of North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, Iowa, and Kansas, among other states. Quality pheasant habitat is usually comprised of agricultural fields, tall overgrown fields and meadows of native grasses and wildflowers, hedgerows, wetlands, and shrubby old fields, which provide an abundance of cover to conceal them from predators.

IDENTIFICATION

Pheasants are large, plump gamebirds weighing 2.5 to 3 pounds. Males, or roosters, have bright coppery feathers with black and white spots, a blue-green head, red face, and white neck ring. Male pheasants are known for their long, pointed, barred tails. Females, or hens, have tan and drab brown feathers, and are smaller than males. They also have a pointed, barred tail, but not as long as males.

Food Habits: Pheasants eat a variety of plant foods consisting of seeds, waste grain, berries, green plant matter, and insects, which varies seasonally and with age. Pheasant chicks almost solely rely on insects to provide protein for the first few months of their lives.

Behavior: Pheasants are non-migratory, ground-loving birds with strong legs, which they use to evade predators by running. Pheasants have short, rounded wings that enable them to fly in short powerful bursts. They do not fly long distances. A pheasant will erupt in flight and then glide to a protected cover of grasses or shrubs. Predation is the most common cause of natural mortality of pheasants. Common predators of pheasants, young or eggs include birds of prey, skunks, raccoons, squirrels, snakes, foxes, and coyotes. The call of males is a loud cackle that can be heard over great distances.

Reproduction: Pheasants are ground nesting birds that establish a simple nest at the edge of a field. Females lay a clutch of 8-12 eggs that will hatch in 22-23 days. Block Island is the only remaining location in Rhode Island that has a sustained nesting population of pheasants.

REGULATORY STATUS

Pheasants are a game species in Rhode Island and are hunted the third Saturday in October through the end of February. Stocking generally occurs through December. The law requires that each hunter acquires a hunting license and gamebird permit, which can be obtained through the web based online licensing system www.ri.gov/dem/huntfish.

Pheasants provide food and sport for hunters, and hunting permit sales generate funds for state wildlife conservation and management. In addition, revenue from hunting license fees and federal excise taxes on firearms and ammunition is distributed back to Rhode Island in the form of grants from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program. These grants are used for land acquisition, facility maintenance, wildlife research and monitoring, and all the programs established for hunting in the state.

If pheasants used to live in Rhode Island, why not just reintroduce them?

Over the past 25 years, several states have attempted pheasant reintroduction programs without success. Pheasants rely on agricultural fields and grasslands for their life cycle needs, which have declined in Rhode Island in conjunction with increasing development. When populations can no longer sustain themselves in an area, it's because their needs are not met on a broader scale. Even if pheasants are reintroduced to an area that previously inhabited it does not mean they can sustain themselves without much larger changes also occurring on the surrounding landscape.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL PHEASANT HUNTING IN RHODE ISLAND

- Best hunting success will result if hunting with a bird dog, typically either with a pointing or flushing breed.
- Be patient, thorough, and walk slowly in cover with dogs or on foot, as birds will hide and run to escape rather than fly.
- Be considerate when hunting near others. Do not crowd or encroach into the cover of another bird that is being hunted.
- Be aware of other hunters in the area when swinging to shoot at a bird. It is far better to avoid taking the shot than to accidentally fire in line with another hunter.

New to pheasant hunting?

RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife's Hunter Education Program offers free Small Game Hunting Workshops!

Visit www.dem.ri.gov/huntereducation to learn more.

