

Pheasants Forever Pursue Habitat Development

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YORK (York Co) - The crowing of ringnecked pheasants once echoed around the fields and meadows of southcentral Pennsylvania. But the numbers of these brilliantly-plumed birds have plunged over the past few decades, until they have become almost a rarity on many area farms.

A national group of pheasant enthusiasts has dedicated itself toward reestablishing the populations that were once commonplace in some parts of the country, but which have diminished in recent times.

Several active members of the Susquehanna Valley chapter of Pheasants Forever are working diligently in York County with farm and conservation segments toward helping to reestablish the once prominent game bird.

"We don't stock pheasants. We are about habitat and education," emphasized York countian Mike Thoman, habitat chairman for the local chapter. Much of that educational effort is directed toward helping landowners establish plots of habitat and nesting cover catering to the preferences of ringnecks.

Thoman compares the plight of the ringnecks to that of the Eastern bluebird, which, until recently, was also becoming a rarity. By building and siting bluebird houses across the countryside, an involved public has helped to restore the bluebirds to more plentiful numbers. Pheasants Forever members would like to replicate that effort with the ringneck species.

"If they don't have the proper conditions, they'll go by the wayside," Thoman said, of the pheasant's short lifespan of two to three years. "So, it doesn't take too long to wipe out a population."

Pheasants need suitable winter habitat to maintain populations through the periods of short feed and reduced cover.

While corn and small grain residue once provided such cover with abundance, those acres have steadily diminished over the years. And while farmers have found it economical to follow small grains with soybean plantings, soybean stubble leaves sparse cover for gamebirds.

Thus, a key focus of Pheasants Forever habitat restoration is planting of plots of suitable cover grasses, with special emphasis on switchgrass. Though notoriously slow to start and become established, this native perennial grass offers ideal habitat for pheasants.

One established, switchgrass holds up well in drought, maintains a stand for about 20 years once well established, and will generally yield at least one good cutting of hay that is well suited for both dry dairy cow and beef cow feed. And, though it gives less yield, switchgrass' drought-resistant tendencies keep it growing when other hay crops succumb to lack of moisture.

While snow cover will partially flatten the dried standing stalks of switchgrass, it does not collapse completely to the ground. A bunch grass, it helps form "tunnel" beneath a cover of snow, passages in which birds and small animals can seek food

in relative safety.

Switchgrass has become part of the vocabulary of one of Thoman's fellow Yorkers and enthusiasts is the pheasant project, Kevin Roland.

"In 1992, the word 'switchgrass' could have been French, for all I knew about it," said Roland, who works actively with public relations and promotion for the local chapter.

In York County, the Susquehanna Valley Pheasants Forever group is cooperating with the Army Corps of Engineers to establish plots of switchgrass habitat on State Game Lands which form part of the flood plain maintained for the Indian Rock Dam.

The dam on the Codorus Creek, an emergency one closed periodically when unusually heavy rains threaten downtown York, backs up water on acres of flood plain, then releases it slowly to prevent the flooding of the city.

The chapter is also beginning to work with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, Chesapeake Bay and various United States Department of Agriculture conservation-related programs aimed at helping farmers and landowners develop habitat favorable for pheasant habitat.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) is one of the most recent programs developed from the 1996 Farm Bill which may offer a further boost toward the goals of Pheasants Forever. Information on that program is available from local offices of USDA's Farm Service Agencies.

"We're still getting our feet wet in experimenting with plantings," Thoman said. Much of that effort starts with their annual auction, which is the prime source of the funds the chapter raises toward financing its pheasant restoration programs.

Because of limited funds and the increasing costs of habitat establishment, Pheasants Forever activists can only tackle a handful of their ambitious goals.

In working with landowners interested in establishing habitat, the chapter focuses on helping provide seed for the plantings. But switchgrass seed, for instance, nearly tripled in cost from only one year ago. In 1997, it was available for \$3.10 per pound, while this season's cost jumped to the \$11-per-pound range.

Recommended seeding rate is 10 pounds per acre; thus, seed cost increases further limit the chapter's ability to help develop additional habitat. So in addition to their funding efforts, sometimes these dedicated gamebird enthusiasts offer their own labor.

At the Steve Martin farm near Spring Grove, the chapter has jumped in to help with state and local agency conservation program efforts under way to restore meadow wetlands.

The site was once a pond which washed away during extremely heavy rainfall many years ago. As part of the restoration of the meadow, streambank fencing and cattle water troughs are being installed, as well as an emergency spillway to handle possible future flood threats to the low-lying area.



From the left, Mike Thoman, Kevin Rohland and Wendy Zwally look over a wildlife cover planting done through the effort of the Susquehanna Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever, an international organization devoted to the restoration and preservation of pheasant habitat. Thoman and Rohland are with Pheasants Forever, while Zwally is with the York County Soil Conservation District. The planting incorporates switchgrass.



Conservation staffers work with leveling equipment in the conversion effort to make a washed-out pond into a wetlands-wildlife area, on the Spring Grove area farm of Steve Martin.

Pheasants Forever members have helped with physical labor, primarily helping to clear multi-flora rose stands, and will further fund costs of seeding. Grasses such as redbud and tall fescue will be incorporated for the particular planting.

"Part of our motivation is to have demonstration sites at places visible to the public," Thoman said. The Martin farm roadside location, between Seven Valleys and Jefferson in southwestern York County, provides an ideal site where improvements being made are easily visible to the public.

In an effort to maximize their limited funds, the chapter earlier donated \$1,000 for State Game Lands plantings of switchgrass in Cumberland County. With seed harvested from that developing stand,

Pheasants Forever has been able to expand their involvement to Adams County.

"Pheasant habitat does not need to be in the 'back 40's,'" Thoman said, explaining how even small corners of land can be useful for wildlife. "It can enhance something that was wasteland. And it's something you may be able to do with just a few acres; it doesn't have to be a big area."

Participation in seeding programs with Pheasants Forever does not require a landowner to open the land to hunting or public access. And, while most government-related conservation programs have specific requirements to meet, Pheasants Forever does not ask landowners to sign contracts of any sort.

However, they supply seed on good faith, expecting partici-

pants to utilize the results toward wildlife enhancement.

For instance, Pheasants Forever is sometimes able to obtain outdated seed from commercial seed companies for use by landowners interested in planting cover crops for wildlife feed through the winter. However, landowners who receive and plant such donated seed must leave the crop stand for wildlife use; harvest from such donated plantings may not be used commercially.

The Susquehanna Chapter of Pheasants Forever is interested in working with landowners to establish more habitat and provide cover for ringnecks. Landowners seeking more information on their programs and activities may contact the group at P.O. Box 7253, York, PA 17404-7253, or call Kevin Rohland at 717-767-6548.

Through this group's untiring devotion and efforts, working hand-in-hand with cooperating landowners, perhaps one day the proud crow of the cockbird ringneck will once again be a commonplace sound across the fields and meadows of southcentral Pennsylvania.

