

1911 not 1915!
Early History of the Ring-necked Pheasant in Nebraska
Compiled by Lonnie Shafer (Summer, 2015)

News excerpts from 1907 to 1927 reveal some of the early history of the introduction of the ring-necked pheasant into Nebraska as a game bird. The first mention from these excerpts to cite involvement of the Nebraska Game and Fish Commission was in the years of 1906 and 1907. Note the first two excerpts mention that pheasants were donated to the Commission and not purchased with state funds. The third excerpt reveals that in 1911 money was spent by Nebraska to purchase pheasants.

1906

“The first pheasants brought into the state, half a hundred or so, were imported about 1906, under the supervision of Game Warden George Carter. They were bought with the funds donated by individual sportsmen. Though there was inadequate protection for wild game at that time, many of the birds survived and raised broods of young.” *The Lincoln Star*, September 10, 1922, page 28

1907

“Three English pheasants donated by a Chicago sportsman have been received by Chief Game Warden George L. Carter and taken to the state hatcheries at South Bend, where they will be kept through the winter in the hope of raising several broods next season. One is cock and the other two hens. The birds are somewhat larger than a prairie chicken and have long tails. Their plumage is rather brilliant but it is said they can arrange it so as to become almost invisible when running wild. It is hoped to stock Nebraska with the fowls in time, so that sportsmen may be able to hunt them. There are none in the state now except some that were privately raised at Columbus.” *The Norfolk Weekly News-Journal*, November 1, 1907, page 8

The next excerpt discloses that Jon Farrar discovered in 2009 that Nebraska spent money on the purchase of ring-necked pheasants in 1911. Recently, I have been doing research on pheasant history and uncovered evidence backing Farrar’s finding. The following clips covering 1911 to 1915 give support that Nebraska was indeed actively involved in raising and releasing pheasants during this time span.

1911

“The year most often given when the Nebraska Commission initiated pheasant releases is 1915, but it was 1911 when the legislature appropriated a modest sum to pay for the purchase, propagation and distribution of pheasants in the state, and birds were raised that spring.

‘Suitable buildings, cages, coops, hatching nests and netting enclosures were erected and purchased,’ wrote Henry N. Miller, Chief Deputy Commissioner of the Nebraska Game and Fish Commission in his *Biennial Report of the Game and Fish Commission* for the two years ending December 31, 1912. ‘Five hundred birds consisting of several varieties of pheasants were purchased from various game preserves at Oak Park, Illinois; Yardley, Pennsylvania; and Jefferson City, Missouri, but we had the same experience as other states have had in the beginning – losing a great many of the birds in transportation and in change of quarters, and also on account of inexperience and knowledge of the habits and requirements of these birds; therefore, the results are not all that we have hoped for.

‘We find from last year’s experience in game propagation that in order to raise the young birds, conditions must be made as nearly as possible as they would have them in the wild state, with plenty of room to roam, otherwise they cannot be kept in a healthy condition,’ Miller continued. ‘The appropriation made by the 1911 legislature was too small to purchase land, secure experienced help, and properly conduct the propagation of game. If the state expects to continue this work I would recommend a large enough appropriation so that a tract of land can be purchased, not less than 160 acres.’

Miller reported that ‘in the neighborhood’ of 200 pheasants were liberated across the state and that 432 breeding birds were held in temporary quarters at Antelope Park in Lincoln. The stocking program was rather hastily deemed a failure and the legislature declined to appropriate additional funds. In 1914 Miller wrote that the breeding stock was ‘sent out over the state to the most suitable places, mostly wooded districts and river farms.’ He reported pheasants could be seen ‘in great numbers along the Niobrara River

and also along the Platte.' Pheasants released on an island in the Platte near Columbus were reported to be 'doing fine.' " *NEBRASKAland*, "Arrival of the Ringneck" by Jon Farrar, March, 2009, page 37

"State Game Warden Henry N. Miller has received 100 hen pheasants of the Chinese ringneck variety. They will be placed with other game birds in the city park of Lincoln. This makes a total of three hundred birds in the city park of Lincoln. The birds were recently imported from England and were bought by the game warden at Jefferson City, Mo," *Valentine Democrat*, November 23, 1911, page 3

1912

"When the Nebraska state poultry association ends its exhibit here (York) next Saturday evening, fifty pheasants, which are now on exhibit, will be given their liberty.

The pheasants were brought to the poultry show by State Game Warden Miller yesterday. It is proposed to stock this and adjoining counties with pheasants. The present game laws will protect the bird from hunting." *Lincoln Daily News*, January 17, 1912, page 6

"Mr. Miller is well pleased with the prospects for the distribution of pheasants in the state this fall. The pheasants in the state collection of game birds in the city park of Lincoln are producing from three to four dozen eggs each day. Four hundred pheasant eggs are now being hatched by common hens. The young birds so hatched will be liberated this fall in various parts of the state wherever sportsmen or others will agree to assist in protecting them from slaughter. There is no open season for pheasants and the game warden will not recommend one until the birds become numerous enough to justify killing." *Lincoln Daily News*, May 8, 1912, page 10

"Chief Game Warden Miller is pleased with the prospect for the rearing of at least 1,000 pheasants in the state game preserve in the city park of Lincoln. Several hundred have been hatched and the number of eggs gathered daily averages fifty. The little birds are not given food or water for twenty-four hours. After that they are given a special diet, which has been found suitable. One of the chief articles on the bill of fare is maggots. These little worms, which the young pheasants gobble up eagerly, are produced by hanging liver or other meat in a wire screen over the coops of the chicks. The worms drop down and are devoured." *Lincoln Daily News*, June 5, 1912, page 10

"A brood of three hundred newly hatched pheasants may now be seen at Antelope park. The birds are the property of the state, and are under the care of the game warden. The eggs are hatched under common hens. Fourteen hens, each with about thirteen little pheasants to care for, were recently taken off their nests. The birds are being raised to send out over the state in order to get them started as native game birds. In the pens at the park there are about 700 birds at the present time. The fowls are given careful attention and require better care than ordinary chickens." *Lincoln Daily News*, June 10, 1912, Page 11

1913

"Many of the Chinese ring-necked pheasants which were distributed by Chief Game Warden Rutenbeck last spring to sportsmen in different parts of the state, in the belief that they would multiply and furnish a new kind of game, have failed to do well. He has received reports from a number of men who received the birds, and the majority of these say the pheasants are not thriving." *The North Platte Semi-Weekly Tribune*, August 8, 1913

"Lewis Phillips of Columbus, who received five ring necked pheasants from the state game warden last spring, placed them on an island in the Platte river and he now reports that the birds raised a number of young ones during the summer season. There were three hens and two cocks in the group sent him. He says he saw broods of young pheasants out in the woods several times, but does not know whether they were all the same brood or not. He believes the birds will multiply in that location. The game warden has not heard lately in regard to any of the other fowls distributed last spring." *The Lincoln Star*, October 25, 1913, page 2

1914

“He (Warden Rutenbeck) distributed over the state 116 pheasants formerly held at the bird hatchery in Lincoln. The pheasants were sent to persons who agreed to turn them loose and see that they were protected.” *The Lincoln Star*, January 10, 1914, page 5

“Pheasants turned loose in northwestern Nebraska in the spring of 1913 have increased in numbers to such an extent that people living there now report that there are no fewer than 1,000 birds within the space of ten miles along the Niobrara river near Chadron. This report came to Chief Game Warden Rutenbeck from one of his deputies, Rasmus Anderson of Valentine, who recently made a trip to Chadron for the purpose of finding out about the pheasants.

While sportsmen in that part of the state are very much pleased to have the birds propagating so rapidly, farmers and truck gardeners in the Niobrara complain that their crops are damaged by the pheasants. Chief Warden Rutenbeck proposes to visit the locality in the near future and trap some of them, to be turned loose elsewhere in the state. He thinks if they are sufficiently scattered they will in a few years become more or less common over the state where there is sufficient wild country to enable them to get a living.

The pheasants do not migrate. The state law protects them from being killed at any time of year, and there has been no disposition to shoot them. ... As a consequence of this, they are very tame up around Chadron. Another bunch has its habitat on an island in the Platte river near Columbus.” *The Lincoln Star*, September 25, 1914, page 7

1915

“Chief Game Warden Rutenbeck has sent the pheasants recently on exhibition at the state fair to men in different parts of the state, who promised to see that they are protected and given a chance to propagate. Two pairs went to State Senator Buhrman at St. Libory; two pairs each to Grand Island, Benkelman and Orleans; one pair to Wauneta and a cock to Ashland.” *The Lincoln Star*, September 14, 1915, page 2

“In 1946, former Commission biologist Levi Mohler wrote that between 1915 and 1925 ‘the state brought in small shipments of pheasants and released them. None of these early releases were large and it appears, from what the early records show, that not more than 500 pairs of pheasants were brought into Nebraska from the outside.’ “ *NEBRASKAland*, “Arrival of the Ringneck” by Jon Farrar, March, 2009, page 37

Mohler’s estimate of 500 pairs may have been low considering the September 7, 1922, and the September 21, 1923, excerpts in the following section. These two excerpts mention 1,200 and 1,700 pheasants purchased for release, respectively. The point to note is that beginning in 1915 the Commission shifted its emphasis from raising pheasants to purchasing pheasants.

1917

“Despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of pheasants have been raised by the breeders, the report says, the prices have continued to rise because importers have been prevented from bringing these birds from foreign countries.” *The North Platte Semi-Weekly Tribune*, April 10, 1917, page 3

“There shall be no open season on pheasants ... imported into this state for, the purpose of propagation.” *The Alliance Herald*, September 13, 1917, page 16

1920

“Dr. C. C. Cone has recently stocked his farm on the Republican River in the north part of Furnas county with pheasants, which were received from the state game warden.” *The Red Cloud Chief*, March 24, 1921, page 6

1921

“Attention is now being turned to poachers, especially those gunners who are shooting up flocks of pheasants, multiplying rapidly along the Loup.” *Lincoln Evening Journal*, September 7, 1921, page 1

“Henry Hubenthal (Center, Nebraska) about a year ago received a number of these birds (pheasants) from the state and has agreed to feed and protect them for a term of ten years.” *The Nebraska State Journal*, Lincoln, November 16, 1921, page 3

1922

“John Finch of Arnold has placed a large number of Chinese pheasants on his ranch near that place. These birds are protected all the year round by the state law and it is expected they will greatly increase in numbers within a few years, provided the statute is not violated by unscrupulous hunters.” *The Lincoln Star*, April 19, 1922, page 7

“There are thousands of ringneck pheasants in this country between here (Wolbach) and Ansley. Charley Harris of Ansley has a covey with an old hen and six young birds that come into the yard and feed with the chickens. One farmer near Wolbach has an old hen pheasant with a covey of seventeen young birds.” *The Nebraska State Journal*, Lincoln, July 28, 1922, page 6

“George Koster, state fish and game warden, will ship 1,200 pheasants to various parts of the state this fall for breeding purposes.” *The Red Cloud Chief*, September 7, 1922, page 2

“Encouraged by the way in which Chinese pheasants heretofore turned loose in different parts of Nebraska have thriven and multiplied, Chief George Koster of the state game and fish division has bought a carload of 500 birds from a game farm in Illinois, and will distribute them this week in northern Nebraska along the line of the Northwestern railroad from Wisner to Harrison. These pheasant come from St. Charles, Ill, and cost about \$3 a piece or \$1,500 for the entire lot.

They are over a year old and sufficiently sophisticated so that it is believed they will be able to look out for themselves when turned out to live wild in unfamiliar localities.

From three to a dozen of the birds will be left in a place depending upon the natural cover and available feed for them. Two hens will go with every cock, that being the size of family group, which seems to prosper best. The distribution will be made direct from the car, for the most part, but some pheasants will be taken out and shipped by express up the Bonesteel branch line as far as Butte.

Interested sportsmen in each city and town will receive the birds and stand sponsor to the state for their protection and care.

At different times in the past, the state has planted pheasants in territory, which was thought to be favorable for their propagation. Reports have come from many communities that the original colonies have multiplied and that the birds are now fairly plentiful, though not numerous enough as yet to permit shooting them.

Around Central City there are some of these beautiful, ring-necked fowls, which range along the Platte river and its adjacent lowlands, Loup City, Ravenna, Gordon and other localities have fairly good-sized flocks of them. At Dannebrog, W. H. Lemburg has been hatching them on a farm and turning them loose for several years with the result that they are frequently seen in pairs or groups.

The first pheasants brought into the state, half a hundred or so, were imported about 1906, under the supervision of Game Warden George Carter. They were bought with the funds donated by individual sportsmen. Though there was inadequate protection for wild game at that time, many of the birds survived and raised broods of young.

At one time, a state bird hatchery was maintained in Lincoln, and the pheasants were raised there. It was discontinued seven or eight years ago and the fowls were parceled out to communities, which promised to keep watch over them, Gust Rutenbeck was state game warden at that time.

Chief Koster put out seventy more pheasants two years ago, in family groups of three. He got word the next year that they had increased so that each group added from seven to thirty more.” *The Lincoln Star*, September 10, 1922, page 28

“The state game law protects these pheasants. Any one who kills one is subject to a fine of \$100.” *The Nebraska State Journal*, September 10, 1922, page 25

“Chinese pheasants are also to be found in Nebraska. These extend over Greeley, Valley, Howard and Sherman. The original flock was turned loose by local sportsmen and increased until there are now thousands of the birds. The pheasants extend up and down the Platte river some being found as far east as Columbus.

The game commission has planted pheasants in Knox, Holt, Rock, Brown and Cherry counties, also a few in Lincoln county. During the month of September the commission will turn loose eleven hundred pheasants in northwestern Nebraska.” *The Lincoln Star*, September 10, 1922, page 22

“Two carloads of Chinese pheasants have been shipped out in the state by George Koster, state game and fish warden.” *The North Platte Semi-Weekly Tribune*, October 24, 1922, page 6

1923

“... the entire expense of planting ... pheasants by the state fish and game commission in the last two years was covered by hunting and fishing license fees and fines paid by violators of the fish and game laws.” *The Nebraska State Journal*, Lincoln, February 26, 1923, page 4

“State Game Warden Koster has put in an order for some pheasant eggs to be delivered within a short time, and when received they will be set under hens or in incubators. The young birds hatched out will be cared for at state or private game reserves until they are old enough to look out for themselves, when they will be turned loose. A few may be kept in captivity, however, to provide eggs for future hatchings. Warden Koster does not expect to make any further distribution of grown pheasants or partridges until next fall. The legislature provided \$15,000 for propagating and distributing these birds and quail.” *The Lincoln Star*, May 8, 1923, page 2

“About 2,900 pheasant eggs from a large game farm and hatchery in Illinois are being distributed, under State Game Warden Koster’s supervision and at the expense of his department, to 150 persons in Nebraska who have agreed to set the eggs, care for the pheasant chicks until they are old enough to find their own living, and then turn them loose in suitable surroundings.

The cost of the eggs is \$300 per 1,000, or 30 cents apiece, which is one-tenth what the state has to pay for grown birds of the same species, Warden Koster thinks that if the settings of eggs are properly looked after and the chicks placed in the proper environment, it will be cheaper to stock the state with them in this manner than by purchasing the adult birds next fall.

Each setting is shipped direct from the Illinois game farm to the person in Nebraska who is willing to be responsible for them. A setting consists of ten to sixteen eggs. With each batch go printed instructions on hatching, feeding, and handling the chicks and when to turn them out.

Light weight hens, such as Leghorns or bantams, are preferred to do the hatching. The pheasant eggs are somewhat smaller than those of tame chickens. The young birds can be raised in much the same manner as ordinary chicks and are ready to shift for themselves when seven or eight weeks old, Warden Koster says. They should be turned out where there is some timber adjacent to open country.” *The Lincoln Star*, May 9, 1923, page 1

“There are many pheasants to be seen in the Elkhorn valley, where birds of this variety were turned loose to propagate several years ago.” *The Lincoln Star*, June 1, 1923, page 1

“Some of the people who received settings of pheasant eggs furnished by the state during May and June have reported to Agriculture Secretary Shumway and Chief Game Warden Koster that most of the eggs hatched and that the young birds have been doing well. The average incubation Mr. Shumway says, was about 85 per cent. Those who agreed to set the eggs will take care of the chicks for six weeks or two months and then turn them out to hunt their own living under natural conditions.” *The Lincoln Star*, July 19, 1923, page 2

“About 1,700 more pheasants have been bought by State Game Warden Koster and will be distributed throughout the state during the next few weeks. They were purchased from a game farm in Illinois, costing about \$3 per bird, the whole bill coming to \$4,995. A contract has been awarded to the Lincoln Box Manufacturing Co. for 570 crates costing 43 cents each, in which the pheasants will be shipped out after they are received in carload consignments.

Two hens and one cock will be placed in each crate. Shipments will be made to sportsmen and other citizens in each community who agree to turn the birds out where they will be able to find food and shelter such as they are accustomed to, and where conditions will be favorable for propagation.

This is a continuance of the project undertaken several years ago to stock Nebraska with pheasants which are not indigenous to this state but seem to thrive here after being imported. A great many localities have already been supplied with them, and from most places a good increase in pheasant population is reported. Chief Warden Koster expects that in two or three years it will be possible to establish an open season and permit hunters to kill them, under strict limitations.

The distribution of pheasants was supplemented last spring by the purchase of several hundred settings of pheasant eggs, which the state game and fish department furnished to people who promised to set them under hens and look after the pheasant chicks until they were able to shift for themselves, Chief Warden Koster has reports showing that 80 per cent of the eggs hatched." *The Lincoln Star*, September 21, 1923, page 13

1924

"Mr. Koster has reports from over the state that pheasants are multiplying and thriving in localities where his department has placed them during the past six years. He does not believe the time has come yet, however, to establish an open season on these birds. In two or three years, they may be numerous enough to justify such action, Koster thinks." *The Lincoln Star*, May 30, 1924, page 10

"Chinese pheasants were 'planted' years ago near St. Paul and are reported to have multiplied rapidly. Chief Game Warden Koster proposes to investigate stories of damage to crops. If he finds them true he may try to trap them in large numbers, if that is possible, and transfer them to a region where there are no growing crops except hay and sage brush. As a last resort he could let it be known that the perpetual closed season is removed so far as he is concerned and look to hunters to take the hint and destroy the birds which the state has spent large sums in propagating and distributing. He has no present notion of permitting hunters to kill the birds.

Mr. Koster will go to the scene of action Wednesday." *Lincoln Evening Journal*, June 3, 1924, Page 2

"Chief Game Warden Koster spent two days in the vicinity of Ravenna and St. Paul trying, with the assistance of one or two of his field men, to trap pheasants which have been doing considerable injury to farmers' crops. Owing to the abundance of wild food at this time of year, it was found impossible to lure the birds into traps by any kind of bait. In the winter time they could probably be caught without much trouble, but nowadays the fields, woods and meadows afford them plenty of forage." *The Lincoln Star*, June 11, 1924, page 1

"Only a small per cent of the damage to growing corn in Howard county may actually be attributed to pheasants, and a large per cent is caused by the planting of seed corn of poor germination, says a report by I. P. Armstrong, deputy game warden, who with W. L. Korb, went over the field thoroughly with County Agent Davis and Representative Svoboda.

The report shows that some of the seed corn planted in this county tested only 56 per cent. The men took up a row of poor stand corn for 100 yards and eighty-six kernels were dug from the hills that had shown no signs of germination. ...

The farmer recognize the birds as insect eaters, Secretary Shumway says. Two that were killed by mowers in alfalfa fields had their crops filled with cutworms and beetles.

It is probable, he points out, and that any damage the pheasants may have done is offset by destruction of these pests, one of which is particularly an enemy of growing corn.

A redistribution of the birds will be undertaken by the chief game warden's office as soon as the new broods are hatched and large enough to care for themselves, in order to relieve the concentration in Howard county." *The Lincoln Star*, June 12, 1924, page 14

"... while the Chinese pheasants, planted by the state commission, are to be found in every county in Nebraska." *The Lincoln Star*, August 24, 1924, page 58

1925

"Serious damage to growing corn and other crops in Sherman and Buffalo counties is being done by pheasants which enjoy all-year-round protection of the state game laws, according to numerous telegrams, long distance telephone calls and letters which have reached Chief Game Warden Jenkins at Lincoln. The Loup City Community club wants something done to stop the ravages of the birds in the farmers' fields. ...

The chief game warden has similar complaints from Boelus and Ravenna. In a good many other localities of Nebraska, people are asking to have some pheasants put out by the state to propagate. The legislature considered a bill last winter for the payment of a bounty of 50 cents to \$1 per pair for trapping the birds where they have become too thick and having them placed elsewhere, but it failed to pass." *The Lincoln Star*, June 6, 1925, page 1

From 1911 to 1914 Nebraska focused on raising pheasants for propagation purposes. In 1915 the shift was made to mainly purchasing pheasants for release rather than raising birds. In 1926 another change was made, to trap pheasants from within the state and transfer them to areas yet to be populated. By 1927, certain counties had enough pheasants to allow the first pheasant hunting season.

1926

“In the spring of 1926 it was decided that rather than import more foreign stock into the state, it would be cheaper and better to trap some of the birds in the central part of the state and redistribute them in the eastern sections. This was undertaken in the winter of the present year. ...

It was not until March that any results were had. The Bureau of Game and Fish first offered 50 cents for each bird trapped, but none were forthcoming. Then the offer was raised to \$1.00 per bird. ... It was only a matter of a few weeks until 88 persons were trapping and pheasants were coming to Lincoln by the thousands. ...

During the month of March over 15,000 birds were trapped and redistributed. ... It is believed that by careful stocking and good protection, the pheasant can be raised in sufficient numbers to give the people of eastern and southern Nebraska a good game bird.” *Outdoor Nebraska*, June, 1926, pages 3 and 14

1927

“Another law passed allows the Bureau to open the season on male pheasants in such counties where it is deemed they are over-stocked. This can be done only after the County Board of such county passes a resolution to that effect and the state game authorities decide the birds are over-stocked.”

Outdoor Nebraska, April, 1927, page 16

“For the first time in the history of Nebraska, sportsmen of the state will have an opportunity to try their luck in hunting the Chinese ring-necked pheasant. An open season of three days duration has been declared in Wheeler and certain parts of Sherman Counties.” *Outdoor Nebraska*, September, 1927, page 3

The news excerpts in this article has given insight into what Nebraska did to develop a population level of pheasants that would allow sportsmen a new game bird to hunt. The efforts began in earnest by the Nebraska Game and Fish Commission in 1911. The success of this endeavor has resulted in an annual pheasant hunting season since 1927. Today, efforts continue to be made by the Game and Parks Commission to develop habitat for pheasants to ensure future opportunities to hunt this popular game bird.

