



The year 2011 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first appropriation by the Nebraska Legislature to purchase, propagate, and distribute pheasants in the state.

## **Nebraska's Pheasantennial - 1911-2011 - 100 Years of History**

### **Pre 1911 Dates**

1890s: Nebraska sportsmen and pheasant enthusiasts were rearing pheasants and releasing them into the wild. These private efforts continued into the 1900s.

1900: Newspapers recorded accounts of ring-necks appearing in Nebraska when privately released birds in northern Kansas drifted, or proliferated and spread, into southeastern Nebraska.

About 1906: Chief Game Warden George Carter accepted about 50 pheasants that had been bought with donations from individual sportsmen. In 1907 a Chicago sportsman donated three English pheasants to the Nebraska Game and Fish Commission. The hope was to use these donated birds to raise several broods and begin stocking the state. The long range motive was to create a population large enough to hunt.

### **The First Quarter of Century**

Nebraskans were searching for a game bird to replace the declining prairie chicken numbers. Farming practices had reduced grassland habitat needed for the native prairie chickens. After considerable investigation, it was decided to give the ring-necked pheasant, native to Asia, a try. The Game and Fish Commission began in earnest to stock the state in 1911 and by 1925 a thriving population existed in central Nebraska.

1911-1914: In 1911 the Nebraska legislature appropriated funds to pay for the purchase, propagation, and distribution of pheasants, and birds were raised that spring. During this four-year stretch the Game and Fish Commission raised and released pheasants. In 1914 the breeding stock was also released.

1911: State Game Warden Henry Miller received 100 Chinese pheasants hens and placed them with 200 other pheasants at Antelope Park in Lincoln. These hens had been imported from England and bought at Jefferson City, Missouri.

1912: With 300 newly hatched pheasants, the pheasant population at Antelope Park in Lincoln was 700. During the year pheasants were stocked in various counties.

1913: Lewis Phillips of Columbus reported that the pheasants the state gave him to stock the year before were raising young ones.

1914: Pheasant stockings in northwestern Nebraska resulted in a report of no fewer than 1,000 birds along the Niobrara River near Chadron.

1915-1924: In 1915 a shift was made to mainly purchase pheasants from out of state suppliers rather than raising them. For the next 10 years, additional birds were purchased and stocked in all 93 counties. These purchased birds were distributed without cost to farmers who had made application for pheasants.

1915: Pheasants that had been on display at the State Fair were distributed to men in different parts of the state.

1915-1917: The price of buying pheasants continued to rise because importers had trouble buying pheasants in Europe due to war (World War I).

1917: Nebraska law stated: There shall be no open season on Chinese pheasants imported for the purpose of propagation.

1918-1919 Pheasants were reported around the Grand Island and Wood River area.

1920: Pheasants were stocked along the Republican River in Furnas County.

1921: Pheasants were multiplying rapidly along the Loup River.

1922: State Game Warden George Koster purchased 1,200 pheasants to be released in various parts of the state.

1923: Fees for hunting licenses and fines collected from game violations paid for the distributing of pheasants by the Bureau of Game and Fish. The penalty for killing one pheasant was a \$100.00 fine. Another 1,700 pheasants were bought by State Game Warden Koster and distributed throughout the state.

1924: The Chinese pheasants planted by the Bureau of Game and Fish had been distributed to every county in the state.

1925: The results of the early planting efforts created a thriving population of pheasants in central Nebraska.

1926: Another change was made in how to stock the state with pheasants. In Howard County 15,000 pheasants were trapped and redistributed to 49 other counties.

1927: The first state pheasant hunting season was held in two Nebraska counties. In Howard, Sherman, and Valley Counties 30,000 birds were trapped and sent to 76 different counties.

1928: Pheasants had started to populate eastern areas of the state.  
 1929: The hunting season resulted in a harvest of 50,000 rooster pheasants.  
 1930: The state pheasant population was estimated to be over 1,000,000.  
 1931: Seventy-six counties were open for the hunting season.  
 1932: A Hunter Script Program allowed hunters to pay 50 cents per pheasant harvested to participating farmers.  
 1933: Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act creating year round idle acres. These acres provided habitat for pheasants and increased the population.  
 1934: The pheasant season was shortened and the bag limit was reduced on account of the severe drought.  
 1935: First split season established as a result of high populations in the North Platte River Valley and the northeast counties.

### **The Second Quarter of Century**

The national farm programs passed by the United States Congress in the 1930s and 1950s resulted in idle habitat acres and pheasant populations exploded. The early 1940s became known as the “Golden Age” of pheasant hunting in Nebraska because of yearly harvests of 2,000,000. By 1960 Nebraska claimed to be the “Pheasant Capital of the Nation” on account of the long hunting seasons and liberal bag and possession limits allowed.

1936: Congress passed the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, another plan that increased habitat. The spring pheasant population was estimated at 1,300,000 and the fall population was estimated at 3,300,000.

1937: Nebraska held its first statewide pheasant-hunting season.

1938: The highest pheasant populations were in the western counties along the Platte and Republican River Valleys.

1939: Pheasants were thriving in 78 counties.

1940: Another split season was held because of high populations in the North Platte River Valley.

1941: Nebraska had its first estimated harvest of 1,000,000.

1942: Pheasant populations were at an all time high, with 300 birds per section in good areas.

1943: A 70-day season resulted in a harvest of 2,000,000 roosters.

1944: The season length was increased to 80 days.

1945: This year was considered the greatest season harvest in Nebraska history. The average harvest was about 20 roosters per hunter.

1946: Only season to be shortened while in progress, due to complaints from hunters.

1947: The bag limit dropped to two roosters for the first time.

1948: The Blizzards during the winter of 1948-49 reduced the population by 80 percent in the northwest corner of the state.

1949: Only 68 counties were open to hunting; the northwestern section of the state was closed.

1950: The heaviest concentration of birds was located south of the Platte River.

1951: Nebraska had one of the finest pheasant populations in the United States.

1952: The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of pheasant hunting in Nebraska.

1953: The Saturday tradition for opening day started. Between 1927 and 1952 opening day had been on every day of the week except Wednesday.

1954: The Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission started a comprehensive 10-year study of pheasants in Clay and Fillmore counties.

1955: The Upland Bird Stamp program began to collect money for wildlife programs.

1956: Congress passed the Agricultural Act (Soil Bank Program) of 1956 resulting in a population boom for pheasants.

1957: Nebraska's pheasant harvest was estimated to be over half a million-rooster birds.

1958: The pheasant population was considered to be double of the year before.

1959: The estimated fall population was 9,000,000 pheasants.

1960: The bag limit was five roosters for the west-hunting zone.

### **The Third Quarter of Century**

Intense farming practices began to have a greater impact on pheasant habitat. Instead of having the diversity needed for pheasants, more and more agricultural land was converted to the row crops of corn and soybeans. The results were less and less acres for nesting, brooding, and roosting cover. The estimated harvest reflected the decline of necessary habitat. In 1961, hunters harvested 1,298,000 rooster pheasants and in 1985 the harvest was down to 467,189.

1961: It was estimated that hunters were only harvesting 25 to 30 percent of the roosters during the pheasant season.

1962: Nebraska offered the most generous season in the nation, 86 days long.

1963: The peak harvest of the Soil Bank era was reached, 1,461,000-bagged roosters.

1964: An experimental hen season was held in the Panhandle during the season.

1965: A special hen season was held during the season in the southwest and northeast sections of the state. Nebraska had the highest estimated pheasant harvest of any state.

1966: The Cropland Adjustment Program replaced the expiring Soil Bank.

1967: The last season to allow a hen in the daily bag limit during January.

1968: The season in the southeast corner was one week shorter than the rest of the state.

1969: Mel Steen, Director of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC), predicted John Q. Ringneck would still populate the state in the year 2019.

1970: Hunters harvested 1,025,900 pheasants.

1971: Hunters harvested 987,400; this was the highest harvest of the next decade.

1972: The ring-necked pheasant was Nebraska's most hunted species with an estimated population of between 4 and 5 million.

1973: *NEBRASKAland Magazine* published a 32-page document entitled "The Ring-necked Pheasant in Nebraska," focusing on habitat needs.

1974: Last of the 72-day seasons that started five years earlier.

1975: The panhandle was closed. This was the last time that any part of the state was closed during a pheasant season.

1976: The pheasant population was estimated at 3,000,000.

1977: The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of pheasant hunting in Nebraska. The Habitat Stamp replaced the Upland Bird Stamp. The money raised from stamp sales was used for wildlife habitat.

1978: The last pheasant season that had a bag limit of two.

1979: A tradition started that the entire state would be open to pheasant hunting with a three rooster bag limit.

1980: Thirteen million acres were considered able to support moderate-to-high pheasant populations.

1981: The last season harvest of over 1,000,000.

1982: The national Pheasants Forever (PF) organization was founded in Minnesota.

1983: Pheasant populations were set back by severe ice and snowstorms in November and December.

1984: A tradition of shooting hours being 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset was set in place.

1985: Congress passed the Food Security Act authorizing the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). One of the results was increased pheasant population due to better habitat.

### **The Fourth Quarter of Century**

The NGPC and PF led the way to maintain a viable pheasant population in the state during this 25-year period. Their work, along with other conservation groups, successfully urged Congress to renew the Conservation Reserve Program, a program that provided habitat for wildlife. The NGPC and PF also initiated the Focus on Pheasants and Reload Nebraska programs aimed to increase habitat and boost pheasant populations. The end results were that Nebraska had more pheasants than it would have otherwise had without these efforts.

1986: The first Nebraska Pheasants Forever chapter, Elkhorn Valley in Norfolk, was established.

1987: Two years into the CRP resulted in a harvest of 661,836 pheasants.

1988: A tradition of closing the season on January 31<sup>st</sup> was established. The state pheasant population was estimated to be 1,500,000.

1989: *NEBRASKAland* published a second document on "The Ring-necked Pheasant in Nebraska," focusing on the life cycle.

1990: Five years into the CRP the harvest was 653,280. CRP was renewed with the 1990 Farm Bill.

1991: This was a typical pheasant season with a three rooster bag limit, the shooting hours of 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset, and a closing date of January 31<sup>st</sup>.

1992: The population count was down 48 percent due to cool and wet weather during the nesting and brooding periods.

1993: Pheasant populations increased dramatically in counties with high participation in CRP.

1994: The tradition of a possession limit of 12 was set.

1995: A harvest of 5,967,207 was recorded during the first 10-year span of the CRP.

1996: A third national Farm Bill was passed containing new CRP provisions.

1997: The Conservation Reserve Program-Management Access Program (CRP-MAP) was started by the NGPC and PF to allow walk-in hunting.

1998: A tradition of a two-day Youth Pheasant Season started.

1999: The season was 94 days long, the first season to exceed 93-days.

2000: An estimated 8,400 youths participated in the Youth Pheasant Season.

2001: The pheasant population declined by 50 percent due to the severe winter of 2000-2001.

2002: The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of pheasant hunting in Nebraska. Focus on Pheasants (FOP) was initiated by the NGPC and PF to increase pheasant populations.

2003: One-third of pheasants harvested came from CRP-MAP lands.

2004: The last time the season opened in November.

2005: Pheasants Forever hosted the National Pheasant Fest in Omaha.

2006: The NGPC passed a regulation that the opening day of pheasant season would be the last Saturday in October.

2007: The hunter access portion of CRP-MAP Atlas had approximately 180,000 acres open to walk-in hunting.

2008: Pheasants Forever launched Reload Nebraska, a plan to increase pheasant and quail numbers in the state. The pheasant hunting season was 99 days in length.

2009: The NGPC started the Open Fields and Water Plan to increase access to private lands/waters for hunters and fishermen in the state.

2010: Nebraska harvested 251,800 roosters ranking it 5<sup>th</sup> among the “Top Tier” pheasant hunting states.

2011: Nebraska’s Pheasantennial, a century of involvement for the state of Nebraska and the ring-necked pheasant. The Nebraska FOP plan was restructured into a new 10-year plan to improve the program.

#### **Post 2011 Dates**

2012: A severe drought hit the state resulting in CRP vegetation being hayed and grazed, reducing necessary habitat for pheasants.

2013: High prices for corn and soybeans caused more acres to be converted to cropland, especially in the eastern part of the state. The only parts of the state considered to have adequate habitat for pheasants were parts of southwest and south-central Nebraska, as well as parts of the Panhandle.

2014: The pheasant harvest increased over the previous year for the first time in eight years. The 2014 Farm Bill (Agricultural Act) extended the CRP in some form for the sixth time.

2015: The NGPC fall outlook for pheasants estimated the population to be 55 percent higher than the year before. The increase was attributed to mild weather patterns.

2016: The NGPC adopted the Nebraska Mega Plan for pheasants. This 5-year plan focused on pheasant habitat and hunter access efforts in eight defined regions that include 17 wildlife management areas.

2017: The 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of pheasant hunting in Nebraska.

#### **90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Fun Figures**

(1) Nebraska had a total of 5,640 pheasant hunting days over the past 90 seasons.

(2) The compiler gauged the pheasant harvested in Nebraska from 1927 through 2016 at **58,750,414**.

(3) The total pheasant population to inhabit Nebraska during the month of October from 1927 through 2016 was gauged to be **168,000,000**. This figure was calculated by the compiler on limited information and was not backed by scientific data.