

# BY BOB D'ANGELO





**P**ENNSYLVANIA HUNTERS have had a long love affair with ring-necked pheasants that continues today with a core group of dedicated bird hunters. And along those lines, the Pennsylvania Game Commission has a storied and continuing history of raising pheasants on agency-operated game farms.

Not only ring-necked pheasants have been raised on game farms. Turkeys, bobwhite quail, mallard ducks, even Reeves pheasants, Mongolian pheasants, ruffed grouse and chukar and Hungarian partridges all were produced at game farms for at least a short time.

Pheasants, of course, have been the mainstay.

In 1915, the Game Commission first purchased 1,000 ring-necked pheasants and released them in central and southern counties that spring. It was reported hunters harvested upward of 600 birds that fall.

From 1916 to the mid-1920s, the Game Commission invested in efforts to hatch eggs and acquire pheasants for release. Hen pheasants were protected in 1923, and in 1925, more than 79,000 pheasants were harvested by hunters.

The Game Commission's 1927-28 biennial report outlined the agency's first efforts to propagate pheasants. Agency refuge keepers were supplied with pens, eggs, and food with the goal of raising pheasants to 10 weeks of age.

A report by the Game Commission's Division of Propagation chief C.A. Hiller stated, "The year 1928 may go down in the history of game conservation in Pennsylvania as the beginning of a new and very important step forward, namely the propagation of ring-necked pheasants. The Commission's first efforts along this line in 1928 were carried forward by the refuge keepers, who succeeded in raising and releasing 4,977 ringnecks at an average cost of \$1.47. This first attempt at propagation was certainly encouraging, and leads us to believe Pennsylvania will take a leading part in this work as it has in other game matters."

Hiller went on to say, "The increased interest in the outdoors, the high prices asked for game by breeders, the many disappointments of the past in the failure to obtain the game contracted for and the scarcity of such game are some of the reasons responsible for this move by the Commission. Propagation of game for the sportsmen of Pennsylvania is not a one-man job but it demands and deserves the cooperation of

# GAME FARMS

A CONTINUING HISTORY

both the personnel of the Game Commission and the sportsmen. It is the thought of the Commission, and a very proper thought, that if other states can successfully propagate game, Pennsylvania can do it, too, and do it just as well.”

## EXPANDING EFFORTS

Supply couldn't keep up with demand, however, and in 1929, in addition to pheasants being raised by refuge keepers, the Game Commission committed to the construction of two game farms for pheasant propagation: the C.G. Jordan State Game Farm near New Castle in Lawrence County, and the John S. Fisher State Game Farm near Schwenksville in Montgomery County. Propagation and egg production at the farms began the same year.

While the birds sometimes struggled

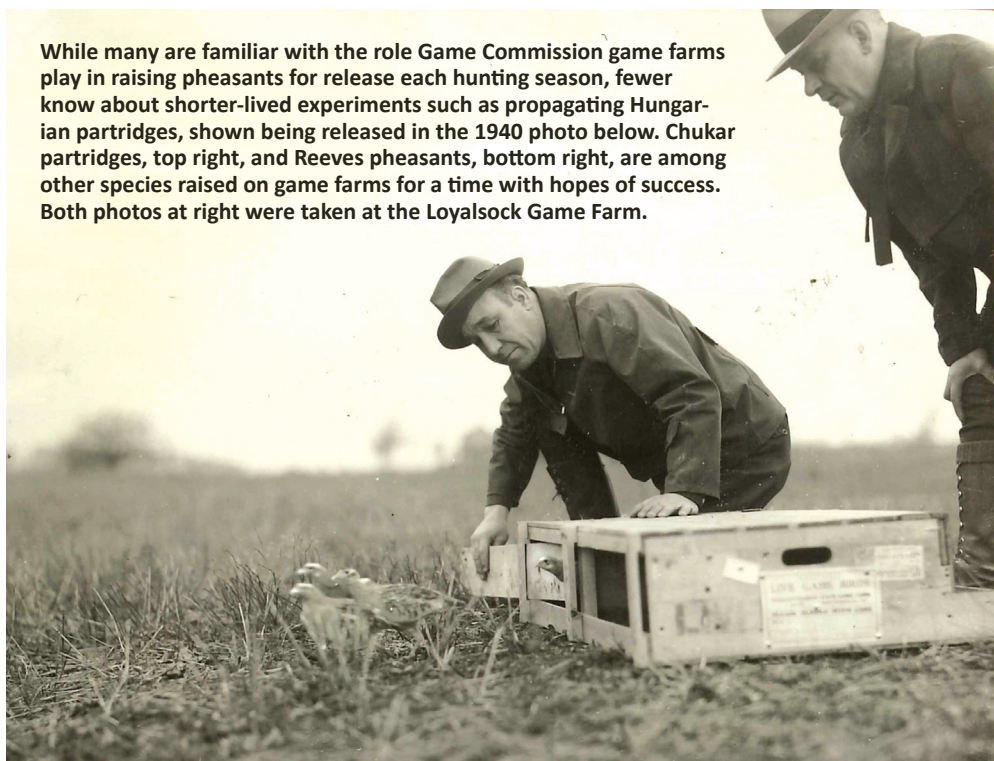
to survive in the wild, the farms enabled the Game Commission to raise pheasants for release, as well as raise eggs that were hatched out by sportsmen and farmers, and ultimately released.

In 1931 and '32, the agency distributed more than 91,000 pheasant eggs to partners.

The Game Commission continued selling day-old chicks and surplus eggs for the same purpose until the agency began purchasing its pheasants from private breeders in 2017.

In 1934, Game Commissioner Dr. William H. Moore wrote in *Game News* that, “Native birds cannot furnish enough game for the great army of hunters – this brings in the game farms, just as the fish hatcheries must stock the streams. The Fisher and Jordan game farms have shown beyond all question the successful

While many are familiar with the role Game Commission game farms play in raising pheasants for release each hunting season, fewer know about shorter-lived experiments such as propagating Hungarian partridges, shown being released in the 1940 photo below. Chukar partridges, top right, and Reeves pheasants, bottom right, are among other species raised on game farms for a time with hopes of success. Both photos at right were taken at the Loyalsock Game Farm.



propagation of ring-necked pheasants and quail, not by hobby or experimental methods, but by close application and study of these great birds.”

Moore’s article lists egg production at the two game farms as follows: ring-necked pheasant, 135,520; quail, 15,147; wild turkey, 6,916; Reeves pheasant, 879; and Hungarian partridge, 97. Also, shipped for release in the spring were 21,839 ring-necked pheasants and 1,501 quail. In addition, 16,270 day-old pheasant chicks were shipped, more than half to the newly established Loyalsock Game Farm, which opened near Montoursville in 1933. The rest went to sportsmen’s organizations.

The number of ring-necked pheasants and bobwhite quail produced at the Fisher, Jordan and Loyalsock game farms in 1935 reached the highest mark, accord-

ing to a report by Charles W. Wessell. And more turkeys than ever before were raised and shipped from a fourth game farm, the State Wild Turkey Farm, which opened in 1930 in Juniata County.

By 1937 the Game Commission had become proficient at operating its game farms. A report stated that, under the experienced and scientific management of its game propagators, working with the most modern equipment, the Commission’s game-propagating activities had rapidly reached the point where ring-necked pheasants and bobwhite quail were being produced in large numbers at minimum loss and cost.

By 1941, Keystone State hunters were harvesting nearly half a million pheasants annually.

## **PHEASANTS TAKE FLIGHT**

In the early 1940s, the agency’s game farms had a goal of producing 30,000 or more ring-necked pheasants annually, a target that regularly was exceeded.

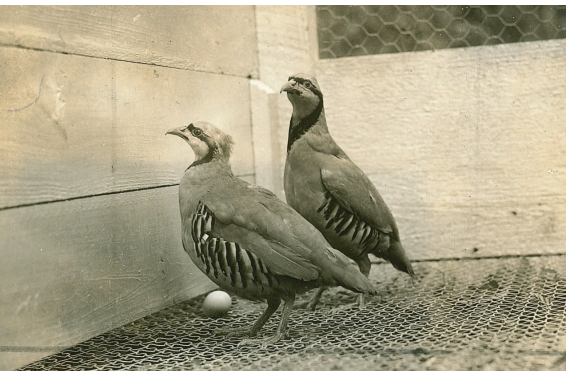
But by this time, the state’s small-game habitat was improving. Pheasants were taking hold and beginning to thrive in many places, and wild pheasants were adding increasingly to the annual harvests.

In 1945, the turkey farm was moved to Lycoming County, north of Montoursville between Barbour and Proctor, and named the Northcentral Game Farm.

By 1950, the game farms were producing half a million pheasant eggs, and in 1953, the Southwest Game Farm opened near Distant, Armstrong County, and began chipping in toward the total.

In 1957 the number of pheasant chicks distributed to cooperators reached 234,356, an all-time high.

In 1967, the statewide pheasant harvest exceeded 1 million birds for the first time.



Small game habitat was at its peak from the 1950s through the early 1970s.

It was the heyday of pheasant hunting in the Keystone State. In 1976, the game farms produced 1 million pheasant eggs for the first time.

But in the early 1970s the crash of the wild pheasant population began.

Changes to the farmland ecosystem adversely affected pheasants. The types of crops planted, timing of crop harvests, amount of unfarmed agricultural ground, and use of pesticides and herbicides all began to change. U.S. Department of Agriculture programs that prompted farm owners to set aside acreage for non-agricultural use, such as fallow fields, hedgerows and wetlands also ended in the early 1970s, negatively impacting pheasants. And increased development of former farmland also took its toll.

“I feel federal farm programs such as the Soil Bank started in 1955, and the Feed Grain and Wheat programs started in 1961, were the primary cause of the boom in pheasant populations starting in the mid-1950s, but also caused their demise when the programs were terminated in 1972,” said Bob Boyd, who began supervising the Game Commission’s propagation program in 2009 and retired from the agency in 2019.

## MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

Due to the decline in wild pheasants and to bolster hunting opportunity, the Game Commission began to increase pheasant production on game farms. And around this time, the Jordan Game Farm was moved to Crawford County and renamed the Western Game Farm.

In 1973, the agency released 210,270



pheasants, including 25,500 purchased from private breeders, and distributed 73,635 chicks to sportsmen's organizations to raise and release. The estimated pheasant harvest in 1973 was 1.2 million birds.


By the early 1970s, according to agency biologists Gerald Wunz and Arnold Hayden, Game Commission personnel in the central and western Pennsylvania began to realize that long-term success in restoring wild turkeys hinged on a trap-and-transfer program. The stock-

ing of game farm turkeys, which had been ceased in the northcentral counties since the 1960s, was phased out in the south-central and half of the western counties. Turkey stocking continued to supplement wild populations in the southeastern and northeastern parts of the state.

The bulk of the pen-raised turkey stock went to the forested Pocono Plateau, and agency personnel noted turkeys there seemed finally to be taking hold. But the release of 180 wild-trapped turkeys in three counties there contributed to

**Established in 1933 and still operating today, the Game Commission's Loyalsock Game Farm, below, has a long history of propagating game for Pennsylvania hunters. This game farm near Montoursville in Lycoming County is one of two with a continuing role in raising pheasants for release each fall. The Southwest Game Farm, left inset photo below, is the other. It opened near Distant, Armstrong County, in 1953. Four farms were in operation until 2017, when the Game Commission made changes to make its pheasant program more cost effective. The Western Game Farm in Crawford County, center inset, and Northcentral Game Farm in Lycoming County, right inset, operated up until the pheasants they kept as breeder stock were released for hunting.**





that success. Also, New York State had released wild stock along its border with Pennsylvania, and the color-tagged birds were being reported in Pennsylvania.

It was from these areas where wild birds had been released that populations appeared to develop and spread. It is also significant that these populations stopped or slowed their spread wherever habitat became fragmented or disconnected. Thus, the western counties of the northeastern region, such as Northumberland, remained without a turkey population despite years of game farm birds being stocked. Pen-reared turkeys simply lacked the genetic variation of wild birds and were not the solution to restore Pennsylvania's wild population.

Faced with evidence the existing turkey population would have reached its same level if no game farm turkeys ever had been stocked, the Game Commission in 1980 voted to cease stocking farm-reared turkeys, abandoning a game-management practice that, over the years, placed more than 200,000 turkeys into the Pennsylvania wild, most of them from the State Wild Turkey Farm.

For the same reason, the Game Commission's Wild Waterfowl Farm, 2 miles northwest of Geneva, Crawford County, closed in 1981. Opened in 1955, it was responsible for the release of 200,000 mallards raised there over the years.

Meanwhile, the Northcentral Game Farm, which had been raising turkeys, converted to pheasant production in 1981.

In 1983, the five operating Game Commission farms raised and released a record 425,217 pheasants. The harvest that year, though, fell to 688,250 birds.

By 1990, the pheasant harvest had dropped to 274,950 after more than 200,000 birds had been stocked.

The number of hunters pursuing pheasants dropped, too.

Around this time, the Game Commission implemented youth hunting opportunities to spur along small-game hunting participation. A weeklong pheasant season for junior hunters was implemented ahead of the statewide season and sportsmen's organizations hosting youth hunting opportunities began receiving pheasants from the agency.


Greater emphasis was placed on improving the quality of the birds being raised and stocked. Under the management of Carl Riegner, game farms became more efficient, and the cost of producing pheasants remained relatively stable during the 1990s.

Boyd, who oversaw the propagation program at the time a pheasant management plan was written in 2008, recognized the inevitable. "Wild sustainable pheasant populations had largely flat-lined by the mid-1990s," he said.

During this time, it was expensive raising and stocking pheasants, with each bird ending up in a hunter's game bag costing about \$40. At the same time, funding shortfalls were causing service reductions in the Game Commission's operations.

The Eastern Game Farm, which was formerly called the Fisher State Game Farm, closed in 1995.

In 2017, the Game Commission closed two of its four game farms, the Western and Northcentral game farms, and breeder flocks there were released. The two remaining game farms, the Southwest



and Loyalsock farms, still were raising and releasing more than 200,000 pheasants annually.

## FARMS & THE FUTURE

As of 2018, after a trial purchase in 2017, day-old pheasant chicks, 21,000 at a time, are procured, then raised at the Southwest and Loyalsock farms from mid-April to mid-July. Pheasants no longer are kept year-round to produce their own chicks. The breeder flocks and hatchery operations were eliminated on the farms, which reduced costs and raised efficiency.

And it is an extremely efficient operation. In 2020, 221,231 pheasants were released during fall and winter, and hunted by 49,613 adult and 13,220 junior pheasant permit holders, as well as certain senior hunters who are exempted from needing a permit. Birds are released right before opening day of the youth, regular and late pheasant hunting seasons, as well as within the season, to provide hunting recreation.

The recreational benefits of the pheasant propagation program continue to be highly valued by hunters, as evidenced by 2020 sales of adult pheasant hunting permits being 13 percent higher than sales in 2017, when the permit was initiated. Under the current two-farm business model, the Game Commission is stocking the same number of pheasants as under the previous four-farm model, but at a per-bird cost of less than \$14 compared to about \$21 previously. Moreover, releases now consist of 75 percent males compared to 50 percent previously, further increasing hunter satisfaction.

The Game Commission has quite the history of game farm operations, and with the two farms presently in operation, the agency still can claim to have the largest pheasant propagation program of any state wildlife agency in the nation.

Today's program not only allows us to relive the wonderful memories of pheasant hunting during its heyday, but also create new memories. The junior pheasant hunting opportunities help recruit and retain hunters.

Although pen-reared pheasants do not build sustainable wild populations, they do provide a quality hunting experience that's the next best thing for those who remember the glory days of hunting wild pheasants, said Game Commission Wildlife Operations Division Chief Ian Gregg, who heads the agency's pheasant program.

"Without unforeseen landscape-level changes in agricultural practices, the high densities of wild pheasants many Pennsylvanians fondly remember from decades ago will remain only a memory," Gregg said. "But excellent pheasant hunting opportunities continue to be a reality throughout the Commonwealth thanks to stocked birds produced by the Game Commission's two pheasant farms.

"And with increasing trends in pheasant permit sales, it appears that from senior citizens who cut their pheasant hunting teeth on wild birds 50 years ago, to mentored youth carrying a shotgun afield for the first time, Pennsylvania hunters of all ages are recognizing the 2020s as a great time to make memories of exciting pheasant hunts enjoyed with family, friends, and good dogs," Gregg said. ❧