

Pheasant 4-H Project

Program Objectives

Wild populations of ring-necked pheasants have been on the decline for several years in north central Montana, which has been noted by both Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) and residents of Pondera County. While ring-necked pheasants are not a native species, they do contribute to the biodiversity of north central Montana. They also benefit the economy of Pondera County through bird hunting. With the decline of local ring-necked pheasant populations, Pondera County has seen a decline in game bird hunters visiting our county and contributing to our economy. Two ways to solve the problem of declining pheasant populations are to improve game bird habitat and release captive-reared birds to increase wild populations. I developed a pheasant 4-H project with the following objectives:

1. Give 4-H members a greater appreciation for and understanding of game birds in north central Montana.
2. Give 4-H members the skills to identify and improve wild game bird habitat.
3. Encourage 4-H members to work with MFWP.
4. Give 4-H members an opportunity to do a non-traditional animal-based project as a group to improve teamwork skills as well as animal care skills.
5. Raise ring-necked pheasants for release in north central Montana to bolster wild populations.

Program Impact

- All participating families (n=5) agreed that the pheasant 4-H project has helped them better understand and appreciate wild birds in north central Montana.
- 4-H members were able to identify land that would make acceptable wild pheasant habitat, and how to improve other areas.
- 4-H members improved their teamwork skills.
- Four 4-H families agreed that they were encouraged to work with MFWP because of the project. The remaining family neither agreed nor disagreed.
- 4-H members learned more about natural life cycles through predation on their captive-reared pheasants.
- A total of 389 ring-necked pheasants have been released into wild populations in Pondera County since 2019.
- Landowners reported seeing more pheasants on their property and harvest of 30 4-H raised pheasants in the fall following release.
- One landowner reported wild pheasant chicks present for the first time in years on their property in the spring following release.

Program Activities & Teaching Methods

The pheasant 4-H project embraced the experiential learning model of 4-H, as the 4-H members learned more about pheasants by working with them. The eight participating members raised the pheasants in two groups, based in two towns in the county. In 2019, the groups started with a total of 400 chicks, in 2020 there were 300 chicks, and 2021 will start with 350 chicks. Both groups of members were required to work together to raise the chicks. They coordinated amongst themselves to ensure all members did an equal amount of feeding, watering, and other care for the pheasants. During major events, like bringing the chicks home, putting anti-peck devices on the birds, and delivery to buyers, all members were present.

In each year of the project, the groups picked the chicks up in June from East Slope Kennels and Game Birds, located just outside of Conrad. While picking up the birds, members had the opportunity to help pull them out of hatching cabinets and see the chicks finish hatching. The day-old birds were brought home and the 4-H members provided the pheasants with feed and water, as well as medical care when necessary. When the birds were five weeks old, 4-H members outfitted them with anti-peck devices to prevent excessive feather pecking. They then transferred the birds into an outdoor pen so that they had more room to fly. When it came time to deliver the 10-week-old pheasants to their buyers, the anti-peck devices were removed, and the birds had a green 4-H identification band placed on their leg for future monitoring.

In both 2019 and 2020, the 4-H members experienced predation problems with their pheasants. In 2019, a weasel killed almost 100 of the five-week-old penned birds, while in 2020, an owl preyed on the pheasants through the netting on their outdoor pen. This gave the 4-H members a greater understanding of natural life cycles of wild pheasants and the predation risks they faced. This also reminded 4-H members of the importance of cover in pheasant habitat, so the birds have somewhere to hide from predators.

In 2019, we held project meetings with both groups of 4-H members to discuss pheasant habitat, feed requirements, and identification. Due to weather challenges making project meetings difficult to schedule, I created a project book for the members to work through learning activities on their own time in 2020. This book contains enough learning activities for several years in the pheasant project.

A total of twelve landowners have purchased 4-H raised birds over the course of the project. In the 2019 project year, three landowners participated in the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP), where the landowners were able to purchase a larger quantity of birds and be reimbursed by MFWP if they allowed public hunting on their land. In the 2020 project year, nine landowners purchased smaller groups of pheasants and chose not to participate in UGBEP, preferring to use the pheasants for private hunting and for dog training.

Evaluation

The pheasant 4-H project was evaluated through surveys and informal conversations. A survey was distributed to the participating 4-H families (n=5) to determine if the project was meeting the educational objectives and to discover their favorite and least favorite parts of the project. I also evaluated the project through informal conversations with the 4-H families and observations of the 4-H members actions. I had informal conversations with the landowners who purchased birds to determine the change in pheasant populations in their land.

All participating families agreed that the pheasant 4-H project helped them better understand wild birds in north central Montana and gave them more appreciation for wild bird populations. Four families agreed that the project encouraged them to work with MFWP. Discussions with the 4-H parents indicated that their children were gaining teamwork skills and animal care skills. When 4-H members were asked if release sites were acceptable pheasant habitat, they were able to answer correctly and explain why. We had fewer non-predator related deaths in the second year, indicating that the members were improving in their handling and care of the pheasants.

In post-release conversations held with landowners who purchased birds, all indicated an improvement in pheasant populations on their land. One landowner said that they had seen chicks on their property for the first time in several years in the spring following release. I created signs for landowners to place near the release sites requesting that hunters notify me or the landowner if they harvested birds with green leg bands. I was not notified by any of the hunters, but the landowners shared that hunters had harvested 4-H birds. Over the two project years, approximately 30 were harvested.

The responses to both formal and informal evaluations suggest that 4-H members are gaining knowledge in relation to the habitat, lifecycle, and care of pheasants. They also indicate that wild pheasant populations in Pondera County are beginning to improve. These suggest that the pheasant 4-H project is meeting its objectives.