

CAN GAME FARMS INCREASE OUR PHEASANTS!

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Michigan hunters enjoy some of the best pheasant shooting in the country, and we're proud of it. So we're ready and willing to do what is practical for the birds when they're down.

Within the past five years, we can remember when pheasants were down, and although the birds are coming back fast, they are still below their peak numbers of the early forties. Naturally we want to do everything practicable to help them recover.

There are a number of things that might be done to help pheasants. A frequent suggestion is an increased release program. After all, that's the way pheasants got their start here. Why shouldn't it be the answer now? Yet people who have studied the problem, in the rest of the nation as well as in Michigan, are firm in their stand that releases are not practical as a way to increase pheasants, once they are firmly established in good pheasant country.

This is rather surprising. For the moment, a release program seems soothing. It provides things to do. We can watch the birds released. At the end of a summer we can sit back with self-satisfaction and note with pride the hundreds of pheasants we have liberated in each county. It's fun to raise pheasants.

But when the auditor comes along, it's a different story. What we really want to know is, "How many more pheasants in hunters' bags does the release program provide?" For birds in the bag, no matter how we get them there, is the final goal.

The answer is not a happy one. In the 1949 season, for example, less than one-half of one per cent of the pheasants killed were released birds. In

other words the releases didn't mean much in terms of birds in the bag. Studies have also shown that few released hens survive until the following spring. These will make a pitifully small part of the breeding stock for next season's birds. Such a program adds little to the game bag. Increasing it ten fold would add little more.

The story in the rest of the country is the same. The two graphs illustrate experiences of other states with large release programs. Look at them closely. Whatever else they may do, widespread releases do not greatly affect the annual kill of pheasants once they are established. Fundamentally, each year's kill is dependent upon the nature of any state's pheasant range -- be it good or poor --, upon the variation of natural conditions such as weather from year to year, and upon peculiarities of the birds themselves. No amount of stocking can change these things.

The birds we release today are as good birds as those released to get pheasant started in Michigan. The difference now is that we have about $1\frac{1}{2}$ million producing hen pheasants in the wild in Michigan that we didn't have before. Millions of pheasants are produced by these hens each year which so far overshadows game farm releases that they become a drop in the bucket.

Look at it this way. A man lost in a desert might give all he owns for a glass of water. But he would balk at paying a dime in a downtown drug store for the same glass. It's a matter of relativity.

Among others, there might be three principal reasons for releasing pheasants: (1) to get them started in suitable country which has no pheasants, (2) to re-establish them in suitable places from which they have disappeared, and (3) to provide put and take birds ahead of the gun, to be shot shortly after release -- if you have the money to pay the shot.

Pheasants have been established in all suitable parts of Michigan. They have not been eradicated in any part of Michigan's range, and put and take pheasant shooting is a pretty poor substitute for the real thing. On a statewide basis it can be financed only by taking money from all the hunters to buy second rate shooting for a few.

So, at the present, in Michigan there is no practical reason for releasing large numbers of pheasants, that can stand up under the question -- "Is it worth the money?"

Like the farmer, the hunter must to a large degree depend on nature. There can be pheasant crop failures just as there can be wheat crop failures. If nature is responsible, there is little we can do except to do a better job cultivating. Addition of extra seed won't prevent crop failure either wheat or pheasants.

We often forget a basic principle discovered by the cave men. When we try to cultivate living things, plant or animal, all we can do is help nature by providing better places for them to live. Nature will take care of the reproduction, if we provide the housing.

Frankly, we enjoy raising pheasants. So long as attention is focused on birds released instead of birds in the bag, a game farm pleases many people. An official in a near-by state has put it rather neatly. "At least it gives the sportsmen something to do and keep them off our necks." If what we want is something to keep sportsmen occupied with a harmless plaything, then it's a good idea. Let's not fool ourselves that we are helping very much to bring back the birds.

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