

Aging Juvenile Pheasants by Plumage Characteristics

The approximate age of juvenile pheasants can be ascertained by examining their plumage. Attached is a table, describing these plumage differences. Since cocks younger than twelve weeks of age are not likely to be taken by hunters, the table starts with twelve week old birds.

This method is not completely fool proof. Variation in individuals may amount to errors of as much as two weeks in aging. In some cases development of wing feathers may not appear consistent with development of other plumage.

You can guard against the most obvious "booby traps", however, by checking the following:

(1) Remember to first determine whether or not the bird is a juvenile. Trying to run an adult bird through this key could give you some weird answers. Appearance and length of spurs is a good criterion for separating old from young, but check it with the lower mandible test. Even though the carcass is stiff, the lower mandible of an old bird will not break when your thumb is carefully forced into the birds mouth. If you are familiar with the technique, examine the bursa for a positive check.

(2) A few birds never develop the white ring.

(3) Carefully examine the tail to make certain that the bird has not accidentally lost some tail feathers. This could result in an inaccurate tail measurement.

Primary feathers are molted from the inside out - number 10 first, then 9, 8, 7, etc. Numbers 2 and 1 are the last ones. An "incomplete primary" is one which is short, or is full length but is still bluish on the base, or "sheath". When examining the first and second primary especially, be certain whether or not they are new feathers, for the old juvenile feathers may not yet be shed!

If you happen to locate a banded pheasant, please try to age it, and send us the age with the band number. The age/banded birds is known, and it will give us a chance to check this aging technique.

R. A. MacMullan

Plumage Characteristics of Variously Aged Cock Pheasants

- 12-weeks Tail length approximately 6 inches. Fairly uniform coppery colored breast; pale grayish blue apparent over lower back and rump.
- 13-weeks Red conspicuous around eyes; iridescent green feathers visible on crown and nape of neck; bluish-green increasingly clear on lower back and rump: colored "adult" plumage generally more conspicuous over body than remaining juvenile plumage: tail length approximately 8 inches: first alert calls heard.
- 14-weeks White ring around neck faintly outlined by the appearance of several white feathers. (Some birds do not develop the white ring). Primaries # 2, 3, 4 usually incomplete.
- 15-weeks White ring conspicuous around neck: colored "adult" plumage generally over all parts of the body: one long, narrow light gray patch along right and left sides of neck: cocks at this age appear smaller or somewhat scrawny when compared with adult cocks.
- 16-weeks Primaries 1, 2, 3 usually incomplete.
- 17-weeks Gray patches on neck obliterated by typical bronze plumage: tail approximately 12 inches long.
- 18-weeks Tail approximately 14 inches long.
- 19-weeks Second and possibly third primary still incomplete.
- 21-weeks Tail approximately 16 inches long. All primaries complete except 1 which is still incomplete.
- 24 weeks General appearance of young cocks comparable to that of adult birds in fullness of body and finished appearance of plumage: tail length approximately 20 inches.
- 26 weeks Tail length approximately 21 inches. Plumage is now about complete.