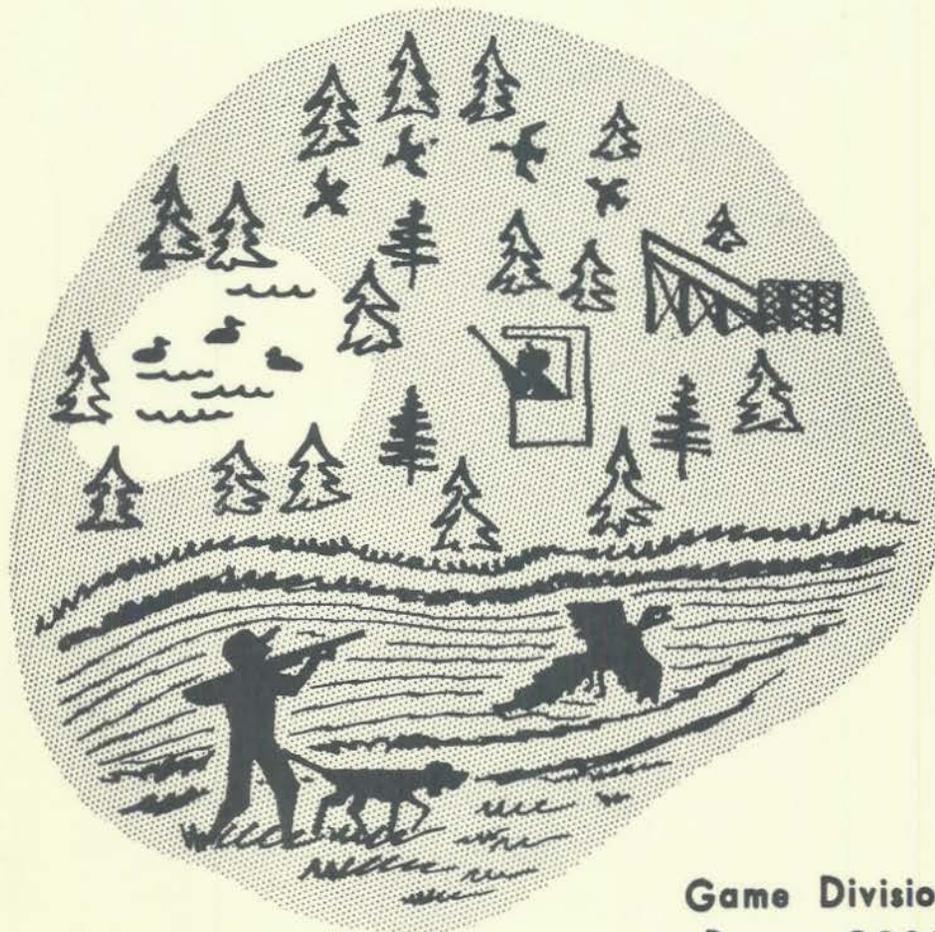


THE MICHIGAN SHOOTING PRESERVE PROGRAM

A TWO-YEAR REPORT

F. W. Stuewer



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By F. W. Stuewer

Every law on the books has certain objectives which its proponents feel are worthwhile. Let's take a look at the objectives of the shooting preserve law which was enacted in 1957. Before going further it might be well to say here that the preserve idea was not new for Michigan in 1957. Preserves were first provided for by a law of 1929. However, misunderstanding, misinformation, and emotion so ruled the day that the preserves were out again within six years.

Probably the most important objective of the preserve idea is to provide guaranteed game shooting for a price. This means put-and-take hunting of pen-reared birds, largely pheasants and mallards. A second objective is to have this made-to-order hunting over a much longer season than is possible for regular hunting of wild game of the same species, giving sportsmen several months rather than several weeks during which time it is legal to be afield shooting over one's favorite hunting dog. It is an objective of the law and regulations that this extra hunting be controlled so as not to interfere with regular hunting of wild pheasants.

In a way, preserve shooting is like allowing the licensed game breeder to go one step further. In addition to raising or buying and selling pheasants or ducks live or dressed, he may also turn them out and sell the privilege of shooting them. Wild pheasants get into the picture only incidentally and not too often. Wild mallards practically never get into the picture.

We think the present law is a good one and accomplishes its objectives. It spells out certain requirements but gives the Conservation Department the responsibility and authority for setting up the detailed regulations necessary to implement the law and carry out its intent.

The regulations have established a rather conservative pattern for preserve activity. Safeguarding of the regular non-preserve hunter's interests should be, and is, provided for. A look at the rules and regulations should convince one that adequate safeguards are a built-in feature.

The law limits the size of a preserve -- from 80 to 640 acres. No more than one per cent of the land area of a county may be licensed. So far, only Lapeer County is near one half of this limit.

An important check is the Department's field inspection of each premises made before a license is issued. We check on the possibility of the tract being a natural winter concentration area for wild pheasants. If mallards are to be flighted, we look for the possibility of wild ducks becoming involved. Two applications for pheasants and one for ducks have been turned down on these points.

Smaller operations are held to a lower percentage because their total releases and total number of unrecovered birds are much smaller. For example, we might have two preserves possibly of the same acreage, one of which releases only 300 pheasants while the other releases 5,000. Even though the bigger operator is allowed to kill 80% of the birds he releases, his remaining 20% numbers 1,000. The smaller operator, while he may take only 60%, has a 40% remainder totalling only 120.

Actually, we have less difficulty with large than with small preserve operations in this matter of wild pheasant kill. The heavy and consistent hunting pressure on the commercial preserve tends to drive out any wild pheasants present. In addition, to be sure of satisfactorily servicing his customers and to gain a profitable rate of recovery, the commercial operator must stock his pen-reared birds daily and they naturally become the main target of the gunners.

Before pheasants or mallards are released, they must be leg-banded and those that are shot must have a colored seal applied to the leg. Thus, all the pen-reared birds released on preserves are identifiable when alive or after being shot.

One of the basic principles of commercial preserve operation is the need for a longer shooting season. No one argues against the extended season during which these pen-reared birds may be turned out and hunted. In fact, the only reason we need either any closed season or any kill limitation is because some wild pheasants may become involved. Therefore, we might question the need for these restrictions for pheasants on preserves located in non-pheasant country. Included in this category are most preserves in Zone 1 and 2 and some in Zone 3. A Kalkaska County preserve is not going to shoot wild pheasants. Should it be limited to a 60% or 80% quota? What if it were permitted to shoot whenever weather permitted, the year around? As it is, because of snow, our one Upper Peninsula preserve has an effective season of two months at most -- September 15 to November 15.

Perhaps this is the place to say it -- there are no commercial preserve operators in Michigan so far who are getting rich and few are out of the red. This is true despite the liberalized regulations put in effect this year: The longer shooting season opening September 15, and the raised quotas of pheasants that may be shot -- from 50, 60, and 70% to 60, 70, and 80% of those released. Most operators realized from the start that it would take a few years to get off the ground, but Michigan operators have an extra strike against them in winter weather. Probably southern Michigan is about as far north as one can hope to operate a public preserve profitably. Weather can be a rugged competitor. As one can well realize, the heavy snow cover of the 1958-1959 winter cut into preserve activity severely. Neither did the month of March this year enhance the operator's chance of closing the recent season successfully.

Human population centers are an important key to success of the commercial shooting preserve; thus we can expect southern Michigan with its larger cities to continue to have most of them.

So far, the ordinary daily fee shooter has not showed up in any respectable number. I believe the commercial operators are coming to the conclusion that they must sign up members or leaseholders on an annual basis or recruit customers on a group basis from within industry or the professions.

In 1958-1959 there were 36 licensed preserves, 35 of which released and shot pheasants. During the past season, 43 were licensed with only 37 getting under way, releasing, and shooting.

	<u>1958-1959</u>		<u>1959-1960</u>	
	<u>Licensed</u>	<u>Operating</u>	<u>Licensed</u>	<u>Operating</u>
Preserves open to public	16	15	20	16
Preserves not open to public	<u>20</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>21</u>
	36	35	43	37

We have both the type of preserve which is open to the public and those not open to the public; as do other states. Properly so, we believe, neither the law nor commission regulations dictate or regulate management procedures or policies other than requiring certain records to be kept and furnished the Conservation Department. Cover management, quality of hunting, release techniques, fees, guide services, dogs; all these are the business of the operators. Of the 37 operating this past season, 16 preserves were classed as public and 21 as non-public. Among the public type are membership clubs, some of which are open to other hunters when not in use by members, and the daily fee-shooting type of preserve.

In the first season, 18,760 pheasants were released and 9,191 or 49%, were shot. The second year releases picked up to total 25,816 with 16,256, or 63%, shot. Experience and improved techniques were largely responsible for the improved recovery rate from 49 to 63%. Most of this improvement was among the public preserves which strive for the best possible recovery rate, as one would expect, since they are in business to turn a profit. This year they recovered 70% as many pheasants as were released, as against 44% for the non-public preserves.

Pheasants Released and Shot -- All Preserves

	<u>Released</u>	<u>Shot (all birds)</u>	<u>Shot (wild)</u>	<u>Per cent shot</u>
1958-1959	18,760	9,191	512	49%
1959-1960	<u>25,816</u>	<u>16,256</u>	<u>419</u>	<u>63%</u>
Totals	44,576	25,447	931	57%

The records show that of the 44,576 pheasants released during the two shooting seasons 9,331 were cock pheasants turned out by November 10, the closing date of the regular pheasant season. Approximately 4,303 of these had not been shot on preserves by November 10. It is interesting to note how many of these turned up in the bags of outside hunters. In 1958 only 38 were reported killed by hunters -- in 1959 only 56. A few more each year were reported to have been found dead, killed by cars, or to have died for other reasons. Even though several times as many pheasants might be shot as are reported, the recoveries of such birds are low. This agrees with previous Conservation Department experiences -- pen-raised pheasants pass out of the picture for many unknown reasons. Hunters get relatively few of them.

The questions might be asked: Do preserves work? Are there drawbacks? Should sportsmen defend or oppose them? In our best judgment, based on the first two years of operation, we know of no good reason for you or other sportsmen to oppose preserves. The preserve idea is sound but how well they work out will depend upon the operators being hard-working and business men. The state will not be flooded with licensed areas -- it cannot be under the acreage limitations spelled out in the law. Some wild pheasants are shot, but these same owners could have killed as many or more wild pheasants if they had hunted under the regular season and bag limits. One thing is certain, hunters in poor pheasant country, for example in parts of Barry and Oakland counties, will be having at least some pheasant targets as a result of preserves established in their localities.

Letters to Lansing usually serve nowadays as an indicator of the hunting public's blood pressure. To date in the Game Division office, we have received only two letters critical of the current shooting preserve program. As far as we know most sportsmen now regard preserves as having a legitimate place on the Michigan shooting scene. As preserves caught on across the country, the idea of private enterprise furnishing tailor-made hunting for a price took on respectability and acceptability in Michigan as well, so with the coming of the new law, the battle of the minds was already won.

This year one preserve was shooting more wild pheasants than we considered permissible. Wet weather had prevented corn harvest last fall and the large corn acreage combined with good winter cover had resulted in a concentration of wild birds. The operator agreed to shoot only cocks the remainder of the season.

One other operator was discovered stretching the regulations a bit to his advantage. Proper action was taken to put him back on the straight and narrow path.

I have barely mentioned ducks. The flighting of mallards has worked out very well, though few operators have gone into this phase of operation so far. It is somewhat of a specialized business. Training these birds as they grow from duckling size to maturity requires daily attention of conscientious employees. If wild ducks have presented any problems it has been that of possibly enticing some of the better flying pen-reared ducks away from the shooting preserve premises. In the 1958-1959 season, 5 preserves flew ducks -- they shot 2,633. In 1959-1960, 6 preserves shot 8,740.

I have only one parting suggestion. Do not belittle the qualities of preserve duck shooting until you have tried it. It can be made much more difficult than decoy shooting. The average shooter bangs away about 6 or 8 times to bring down one duck. There is the story fast becoming a classic in shooting preserve circles. Allegedly there was the old mallard drake that earned retirement to a nice big pond with an unlimited supply of shelled corn -- he had successfully flown 25 missions, outsmarting the gunners every time!