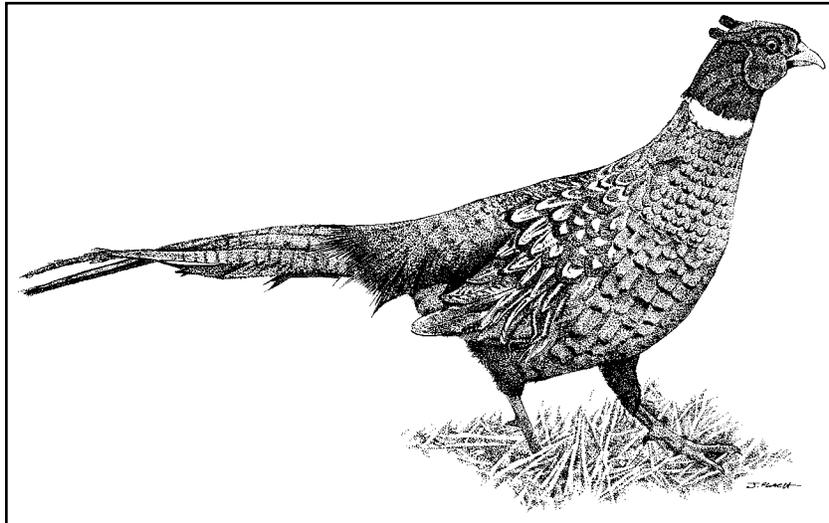


# Ring-necked Pheasant

Scientific Name: *Phasianus colchicus*



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## Introduction

Pheasants are Asian natives that were first successfully introduced into the U.S. in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Initial attempts to establish a wild population in and around Mercer County, Ohio, in the 1890s were unsuccessful. However, repeated releases resulted in a state-wide distribution of ring-necked pheasants by 1914. Agricultural land-use practices at the turn of the century were ideal for pheasants. For example, farm fields were small with plenty of fencerows and field dividers, pastures and hay fields were interspersed among abundant small grain crops, and chemical control of weed and insect pests was not yet widespread. As a result, pheasant numbers increased quickly and peaked in Ohio at approximately five million birds in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Highest densities were found in the Lake Plain counties of northwest Ohio. High populations persisted through the 1940s and 1950s with annual hunter harvests averaging around 750,000 cock pheasants.

Agricultural production intensified and became more industrialized after World War II. Mechanical equipment became more common and increased in size. Field sizes increased to accommodate the new equipment, while fencerows, wetlands and odd-area habitats were lost as a result. Row crops, especially corn and soybeans, replaced small grains, such as wheat and oats, in many farming rotations. Since horses were no longer needed to pull farm equipment, acreage in pasture and

hay declined and fields that remained were used more intensely (i.e., hay was cut more than once during the nesting season). Chemical control of weeds and insects increased in popularity reducing food and cover used by pheasants and their broods. Pheasants, and other grassland birds, declined as a direct result of habitat loss. By the late 1960s, Ohio's pheasant harvest declined to 100,000 to 300,000 cock birds annually. The population distribution also shifted with large declines in northwest and south central Ohio and increases in northeast Ohio. In 1985, the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was initiated to reduce the amount of highly erodible land that is used in agricultural production. Idle farmland created by CRP in the late 1980s through the 1990s provided much needed grassland habitat that stabilized pheasant population numbers in Ohio and allowed for local population increases.

## Description

The cock (male) pheasant is a large, chicken-like bird with a bluish green head, a red cheek patch, and usually a white neck ring. The adult male has reddish brown back feathers that fade to bluish green on the lower back, and copper or maroon feathers on the breast. Wing feathers are reddish brown at the base of the wing, and lighter brown toward the tip. The adult hen is smaller than the cock. Feathers on the female are generally tan with brown and cream markings.

## Habitat and Habits

The ringneck is a bird of agricultural edges, favoring soils rich in nutrients and organic matter. Pheasants thrive where farming is intensive if two major habitat requirements are met: adequate undisturbed cover for nesting, and sufficient food and cover for the critical winter period. During winter, pheasants usually concentrate near standing corn, brushy woodlots, dense field borders, and wetland edges. In spring, groups of birds disperse into more open, grassy and old field habitats adjacent to crop fields for breeding and summer brood rearing. Hens with broods move into fields with flowering plants, which attract protein-rich insects - an important food source for growing chicks. Adult pheasants also consume insects in late summer and fall to prepare for the winter ahead. Corn is the most important food item for pheasants in Ohio, but weed seeds and berries are also eaten. Pheasants are short-lived birds; up to 70 percent are killed before they are one year old, mainly by predation. Thick cover, such as brushy fencerows and cattails, provides escape from predators and is an essential component to pheasant habitat at all times of the year. Weather factors most harmful to pheasants are excessive rainfall or drought during the summer reproductive season and ice storms during the winter.

## Reproduction and Care of Young

Male pheasants are polygynous, that is, they mate with more than one female. In the spring, cocks attract hens and warn other cocks to stay out of their territory by crowing a hoarse, two syllable "Erk-erk". In his courtship display the cock pheasant will strut, spread his tail, and fluff out his feathers. The size of a cock's harem (group of females) varies with the number of hens in the vicinity.

The hen builds her nest on the ground in grass, alfalfa, and other low vegetation. Hay fields and pastures are favorite nesting areas. The hen lays her clutch of about 12 eggs in a period of two weeks. After an incubation period of about 23 days chicks hatch and are ready to leave the nest as soon as their feathers dry off. They stay near the hen for the next several weeks. Young pheasants grow quickly, resembling adults by 15 weeks of age.

## Management Plans

Pheasants will prosper living side by side with man if they have the proper habitat. Pheasant habitat can be improved with a few simple management steps. Delayed mowing of hay and large grassy areas, sowing odd areas to brome and timothy grass, or alfalfa, or both, will

increase nesting cover and ensure that eggs safely hatch. Crop fields with scattered clumps of weeds are important foraging areas for pheasant broods. Encouraging thick escape cover along cropland fencerows and planting a mixture of prairie grasses, such as switchgrass, big bluestem, and Indiangrass, will enhance winter habitat.

The Division of Wildlife manages for grassland habitats on certain wildlife areas in the agricultural portions of the state. We also work cooperatively with private landowners and conservation organizations, such as Pheasants Forever, to establish quality nesting habitat within Ohio's pheasant range.

## Viewing Opportunities

Ring-necked pheasants are present throughout the northwestern two-thirds of the state. The best places to try to see a ring-necked pheasant are along edges of crop fields near other cover in central and the far northwestern corner of Ohio. Pheasants are most visible early in the morning when they come out in the open to dry their feathers from heavy dew. Try Wildlife Viewing Sites such as: Deer Creek Wildlife Area, Delaware Wildlife Area, Big Island Wildlife Area, Lake La Su An Wildlife Area, Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area, and Funk Bottoms Wildlife Area.

## Do Something Wild!

The Division of Wildlife manages for wildlife diversity in the state. We attempt to create and/or conserve the habitat that will support as wide a diversity of wildlife as possible. Many species like the ring-necked pheasant are hunted in the state, but many more are not. The Division has a special program to manage and study non-game species that is supported by the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money either donated through the state income tax checkoff, by the purchase of wildlife license plates, or direct contributions to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat that is essential to sustaining many species of wildlife and to implement special efforts like the reintroduction of the osprey and the trumpeter swan to the state.

Contributions to our Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to:  
Endangered Species Special Account  
ODNR Division of Wildlife  
2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio,  
43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

## At a Glance

Mating: Polygynous

Peak Breeding Activity: May through June

Incubation Period: 23 days

Clutch Size: 6-18 eggs; 12 average

Young are Hatched: May through September; peak of hatch is late June

Young: Precocial; leave nest when down is dry. First flight at 10 days; resemble adults at 15 weeks

Number of Broods per Year: 1; if first nest is disrupted, may reneest and lay 8-10 eggs

Adult Weight: Male—30-56 ounces; Female—25-35 ounces

Adult Length: Male—33-36 inches, including the tail; Female—20-22 inches including the tail

Life Expectancy: Less than 1 year

Movement: Male home range radius for food and cover 1/2 mile, breeding range radius 1 mile; female home range radius 1/2 mile

Feeding Periods: Mostly dawn and dusk

Typical Foods: Seeds of corn, wheat, oats, soybeans, foxtail, smartweed, ragweed, buckwheat, grape, poison ivy, bittersweet, sumac, dogwood, wild plum, raspberry, and blackberry; also insects

Native to Ohio: No

