

Pheasant numbers up; quails down

By Kimberly Davis

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Bird hunters in northwest Kansas are in for a mixed season this year, as the number of pheasants is up about one-third over last year, while the number of quail is way down.

Randy Rogers, small game biologist with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks out of Hays, said there is some room for error in the figures, but according to the brood survey, there should more birds in most of the northwest area of the state.

The brood survey, which runs from the middle of July to the end of August, basically shows that there are more pheasants, he said. During the survey, he said, department's field staff keeps track of how many pheasants, quail and turkey they see while on duty. From that count, an index number is derived and the department can tell whether the populations are up or down. Although the brood survey provides data for a population trend, said Rogers, it doesn't provide an absolute number.

The study shows that pheasant numbers are up around 32 percent in the northwest, said Rogers. In Cheyenne and Sherman counties, he said, there are still some lingering effects from the big snowstorm two winters ago, so although the numbers might be up, there won't be as many birds as in other counties out here.

As far as quail go, he said, the birds were hurt during the blizzard two years ago and the population is still in pretty rough shape. The quail in the region are bouncing back, he said, but it's going to take some time.

Farther east in Norton and Phillips counties, where the storms weren't as bad, the quail numbers are pretty good, he said. In those counties, the numbers are average or a little above average compared to the past 10 years.

A lot of the increase in pheasant numbers has to do with the weather and the crops, said Rogers.

This year was the second in the row for a pretty good wheat crop, and both years the crop was harvested a bit later. What that means, said Rogers, is the pheasants have longer to nest in wheat fields. The birds have responded nicely to having a little more time before the grain is

harvested.

"I think we are in excellent shape in northwest Kansas for pheasants," he said.

Last year was the best for the bird season that a lot of people have seen in the past 20 years, he said.

After the season, he said, the department sends out a survey to find out how many pheasants were harvested. The survey showed an estimated 887,000 pheasants harvested last year statewide. That's the highest that number has been in a while, he said.

In 1982, a record year, there were 1.56 million birds harvested. Of course, he said, those numbers aren't exact, either.

People ask if taking that many birds each year will hurt the pheasant population in northwest Kansas. Pheasants, said Rogers, are polygamist species, meaning the male will mate with more than one hen in a season. At hatching in the spring and through the fall, the sex ration for the birds is about one to one.

More than enough roosters make it through that season to successfully reproduce for the next year, he said, no matter how hard people hunt.

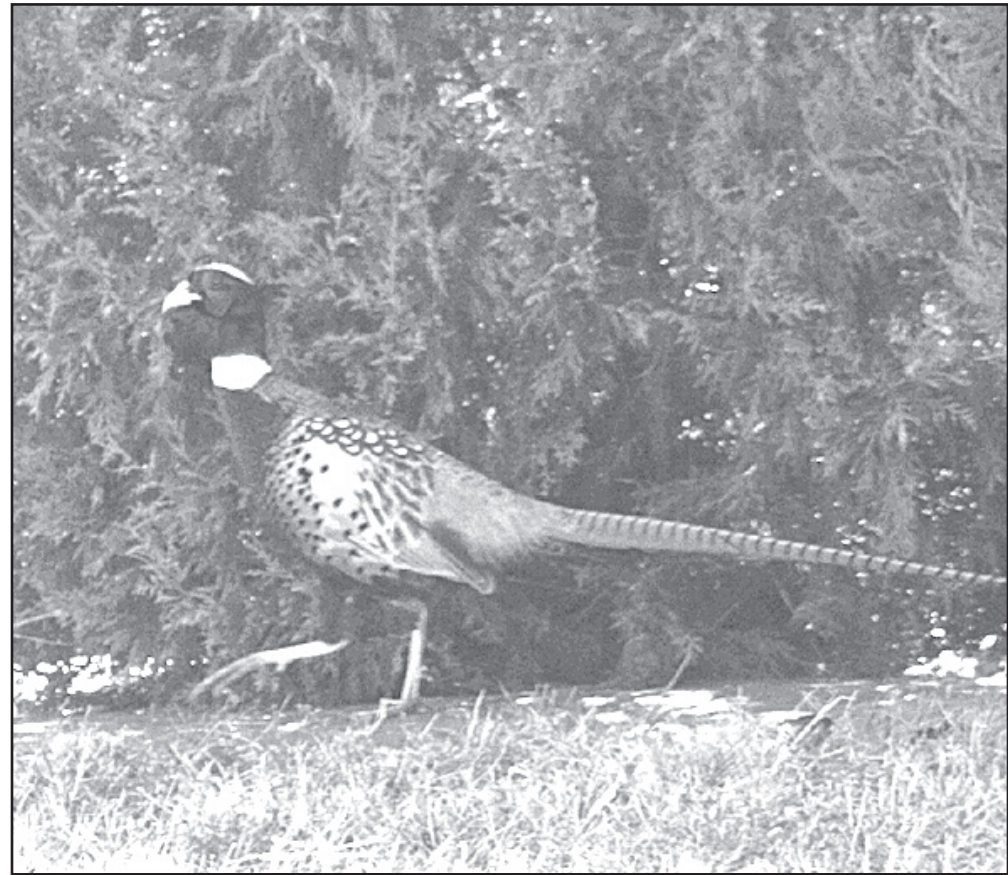
In the state, he said, he estimates hunters take 35 to 40 percent of the roosters each year. Since hunters can't take hens, he said, hunting has no effect on the population.

Looking back, he said, pheasant numbers are definitely up compared to five years ago. From 2001 to 2003, the numbers were low and northwest Kansas was in bad shape as far as pheasants go, he said. The drought and weather hurt the numbers.

"This year has been a blessing," said Rogers.

Quail are different, he said. Those birds are monogamous, meaning they mate with only one bird. Quail have a very high annual mortality or death rate, he said. Even if the birds weren't hunted in the fall, people could expect that 65 to 70 percent of the quail would be dead the following spring, but the birds do have a high reproductive rate.

On a larger scale, hunting really doesn't have much effect on the numbers, he said, but that's not to say that a local covey can't be hunted out.



Near a windbreak outside Rawlins County on a fall day, three male pheasants (above and below) peeked in and out of the trees. Experts say the pheasant population is up this year.

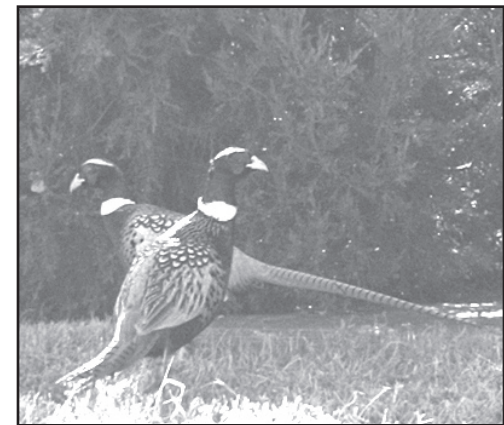
— Photos by Kimberly Davis/The Oberlin Herald

He said he can't predict what will happen next year with the bird numbers because it depends on the weather and the wheat crop.

Hunters need to keep in mind that the first day of the pheasant season for this year is the first Saturday in November. For the last two years and this year, pheasant season has started the first Saturday in November, but quail season doesn't open until the second Saturday in November.

Next year, he said, the date will change, going back to the way it used to be, more or less.

Pheasant season will go back to starting the second Saturday in November, he said. The biggest change with that is quail season will start at the same time.



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