



# Ring-Necked Pheasant

by Chuck Fergus

When man imports creatures to lands where they don't naturally exist, he often brews trouble. Consider the impact and spread of the rabbit in Australia, the red deer in New Zealand, and the English sparrow and starling in the United States. The ring-necked pheasant is an import, too, but unlike the species mentioned above, it hasn't become a pest. In fact, this Asian native has proven to be a fine member of North America's wildlife community. The ringneck is the hunter's bird — imported, stocked and transferred to suitable habitat throughout the nation by wildlife departments. Today, the ringneck benefits us all, providing enjoyment to hunters, birdwatchers and nature lovers of all types.

The species is found throughout the United States, except in the southeast, parts of the southwest, and the far north. Good populations exist in farming regions of the Midwest. The ringneck's scientific name is *Phasianus colchicus*, and it is a member of the Phasianidae, or pheasant, family. Closely related to quails and grouse, the ringneck belongs to the order Galliformes, which also includes turkeys, ptarmigan and prairie chickens.

## Biology

An adult male weighs 2½- to 3½ pounds, an adult female, two pounds. Males are called roosters, cocks or cockbirds; females are hens. The standing height of a rooster is about one foot, and its length, from beak to tail tip, averages 36 inches. Hens are slightly smaller. A pheasant is long-legged and rangy through the body, with a long, pointed tail (20 to 23 inches) and short, rounded wings.

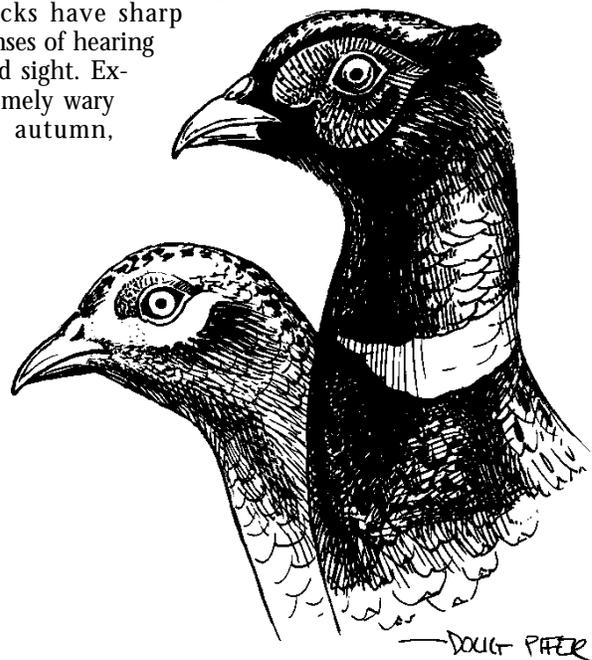
A hen's plumage is a subtle, camouflaging mixture of brown, black and gray. In contrast, a rooster's feathers are a beautiful mix of reds, browns, golds and black. A rooster has scarlet cheek patches, a white neck ring usually interrupted in the front, an iridescent greenish-black head, golden-brown breast, and a greenish-gray or blu-

ish rump and lower back. Tail feathers of both sexes are brown with black bars.

The crowing of a rooster is distinctive: A loud double squawk followed by rapid muffled wingbeats which may or may not be audible, depending on distance. Males crow most often during mating season, especially at sunrise and sunset; they may also emit a loud cackle when flushed into flight. Hens are normally silent.

Pheasants eat weed seeds (ragweed, smartweed, fox-tails, etc.), grains (corn, wheat, barley, oats, beans and buckwheat), fruits and berries (raspberries, dewberries, strawberries, thornapples and barberry), shoots, leaves, grasses, rose hips and insects. They find a lot of their food by scratching through ground litter.

Like most birds, ring-necks have sharp senses of hearing and sight. Extremely wary in autumn,



they stick to dense cover when hunted heavily. During spring and summer they can be seen strutting across freshly mowed fields and along roadsides. When pursued, pheasants would rather run than fly, dodging nimbly into heavy cover — brambles, honeysuckle or multiflora rose. When cornered or surprised, they take to the air. Strong fliers over short distances, they attain a maximum speed of 45 miles per hour in the open. Outside of breeding season (when roosters stake out individual territories) and brood-raising periods, pheasants are relatively gregarious, roosting in groups. In Pennsylvania, pheasants often roost in trees. The average pheasant ranges within one square mile.

Roosters claim individual breeding territories each spring. A rooster's courtship display includes spreading his tail and wings and strutting; his red cheek patches are swollen, his head is held low, and his neck feathers are ruffled. With luck and persistence, he will collect a harem of hens. Breeding begins in late March or early April and may extend into August. The male does not help incubate eggs or raise young.

Nesting occurs from April to August. A hen selects a nest site on the ground in a hayfield, a weedy field, an overgrown pasture or a brushy fencerow. A natural hollow (or one scraped out by the hen) is lined with weeds, grasses and leaves. Surrounding vegetation helps conceal both the nest and the laying or brooding bird.

The female lays 6 to 15 eggs (average is 10 to 12) over a 2-week period. Eggs measure about 1¼ by 1¾ inches and are light tan to pale olive green in color. Incubation usually doesn't begin until the last egg is laid, so all eggs receive equal incubation time and hatch on the same day. If eggs are destroyed by farm operations, predators, fires or floods, hens may reneest, some even making up to three attempts.

The eggs hatch after 23 or 24 days of incubation. Most clutches hatch by early July. Like the young of other gallinaceous species, pheasant chicks are precocial — covered with down, their eyes open, able to run about and eat as soon as their down dries. Chicks depend on the hen to shelter them from cold and rain (she does this by brooding, or sitting on top of them). Hens brood at night

until young are able to roost in trees. Instinctively, chicks squat and remain motionless at a signal given by the hen; their coloration, tan with darker brown streaking, conceals them well. Foxes, raccoons, crows, weasels, house cats, dogs and hawks prey on the young.

The hen guides her chicks in finding food; insects, plentiful and high in protein, are a good early food. By two weeks of age, chicks can fly short distances; after six weeks, their adult plumage starts to come in; and by autumn, birds of the year look like adults. Young roosters can be told from older males by the length and hardness of their spurs — appendages growing out from the backs of their legs. In young birds, the spurs are relatively soft, blunt, and short (a quarter-inch or less). Older roosters have hard, sharp spurs up to an inch in length from spur tip to the front of the leg.

In winter, pheasants may form flocks. During inclement weather, they stick to the thick protective cover of conifers, brushy sloughs or forests overgrown with vegetation. While not commonly occurring, the following diseases afflict pheasants: coccidiosis, blackhead and pullorum. Flukes, tapeworms and roundworms parasitize some individuals. There is an annual removal rate, from all causes, of 90 to 95 percent for roosters and more than 60 percent for hens.

### Population

The first successful pheasant introduction to North America was a release of about 30 birds in Oregon's Willamette Valley in 1881. Many of America's ringnecks have descended from those 30, hybridizing with other imported strains. The Pennsylvania Game Commission began stocking pheasants in 1915.

Since Pennsylvania's ring-necked pheasant population peaked in the early 1970s, the annual pheasant harvest has declined from 1.3 million to about 250,000 birds. During its heyday, wild pheasants numbered in the millions and accounted for a majority of the harvest. As the '70s progressed, however, the pheasant population declined, and today pheasant hunting is largely sustained by stocked birds.

Wildlife managers have long contended that habitat loss and land-use changes have caused the ringneck's plunge. In recent years, thousands of farmland acres have been lost to industrial complexes, shopping malls, suburban developments and urban sprawl. On areas still being farmed, smaller fields have been consolidated into bigger ones to accommodate larger farm equipment, causing a loss of fencerows and other areas where pheasants once found food and shelter. Changing farming practices also include an increased use of pesticides and herbicides, which kill the insects and weedy cover vital to pheasants.

Nowadays hay is mowed earlier and more frequently, giving hens little or no time to raise a brood. Fencerows and wind-



breaks have vanished. Even harvested cornfields, always a popular hangout for pheasants, are chopped into silage, leaving little cover for wildlife.

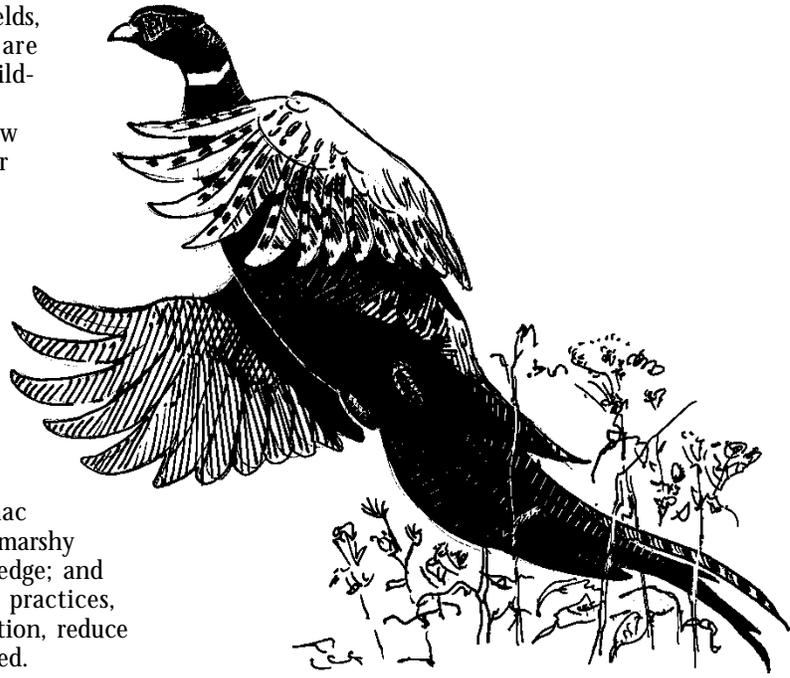
In the '70s, pheasant chicks, for the first few weeks of life, could find all the food and cover they required without leaving the hay field they were hatched in. Now, if a hen is able to even hatch her brood before the hay is cut, she and her young must range farther to obtain adequate food and cover, greatly increasing their exposure to predators, cars and other dangers.

### Habitat

Prime pheasant habitat is farmland that has occasional weed fields; blackberry, sumac and honeysuckle patches; swamp edges and marshy depressions grown up in cattails, grass and sedge; and overgrown drainage ditches. Clean-farming practices, where every bit of ground is put into production, reduce the diversity of food and cover pheasants need.

Winter food and cover are important to pheasant populations. Good foods are thornapples, apples, rose hips, skunk cabbage, ragweed, burdock, grapes, grasses, green vegetation and Japanese barberry; these, along with grain (especially waste corn left by mechanical harvesters) help birds overwinter. Pheasants locate food in areas melted or blown free of snow, or by scratching. Pines provide excellent cover for roosting and daytime resting. Pheasants also seek out densely vegetated marsh or creek-side areas during bitter weather.

Farmers can manage their land to produce more pheasants. Strips of corn may be left unharvested (5 to 10 rows next to cover are adequate); unpicked soybeans make



good summer, fall and winter cover, and the beans are eaten from fall to spring. Forest edges can be cut to increase low, brushy growth, which makes good cover. Autumn olive, honeysuckle and pine plantings also improve cover. However, these things alone will not increase the pheasant population. Safe nesting cover will. This is the most important factor when bird numbers fluctuate widely from year to year. To reduce nesting losses, farmers should delay their first alfalfa cutting until the end of June.

Given adequate food and protective cover, ringnecks can pull through rough winters. They are hardy birds and, like all wildlife, have keen survival instincts.

Wildlife Notes are available from the  
Pennsylvania Game Commission  
Bureau of Information and Education  
Dept. MS, 2001 Elmerton Avenue  
Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797  
[www.pgc.state.pa.us](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us)

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# Wildlife Notes

Allegheny Woodrat	Northern Cardinal, Grosbeaks, Indigo Bunting and Dickcissel
Bats	Opossum
Beaver	Otter
Black Bear	Owls
Blackbirds, Orioles, Cowbird and Starling	Porcupine
Blue Jay	Puddle Ducks
Bobcat	Raccoon
Bobwhite Quail	Rails, Moorhen and Coot
Canada Goose	Raptors
Chickadees, Nuthatches, Titmouse and Brown Creepers	Ring-necked Pheasant
Chimney Swift, Purple Martin and Swallows	Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Chipmunk	Ruffed Grouse
Common Nighthawk and Whip-Poor-Will	Shrews
Cottontail Rabbit	Snowshoe Hare
Coyote	Sparrows and Towhee
Crows and Ravens	Squirrels
Diving Ducks	Striped Skunk
Doves	Tanagers
Eagles and Ospreys	Thrushes
Elk	Vireos
Finches and House Sparrow	Vultures
Fisher	Weasels
Flycatchers	White-tailed Deer
Foxes (Red & Gray)	Wild Turkey
Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher	Woodchuck
Hérons	Woodcock
Kingfisher	Wood Duck
Mallard	Woodpecker
Mice and Voles	Wood Warblers
Minks & Muskrats	Wrens