



SOMETHING TO

Montana's pheasant forecast looks brighter than it's been in years.



LOOKING UP An upland hunter and his Lab ambush a mature rooster in north-central Montana. There and elsewhere in the state, pheasant numbers may be reaching levels not seen for a decade.

Earlier this year, Rick Northrup attended a meeting at a facility along the Rocky Mountain Front not far from Glacier National Park. The rugged, wind-swept mountain foothills are prime habitat for grizzly bears, mule deer, and elk. Oddly enough, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Upland Game Bird Program coordinator repeatedly heard rooster pheasants crowing.

“When you find pheasants in what’s ordinarily not pheasant habitat,” says Northrup, “that’s a sign things are looking good.”

Northrup explains that when ring-necked pheasant numbers are high—which appears to be the case in much of eastern and central Montana—the birds fill up prime habitat and spill into marginal habitat like that along the Front. Previously a wildlife biologist in Malta, Northrup says the main factors that drive pheasant numbers are the quality and amount of habitat and weather conditions during winter and the spring nesting season.

“If you’ve got good habitat, a mild winter with a good carryover of birds, and the right weather conditions when chicks first hatch, you’ll have lots of pheasants,” he says.

Barring some environmental calamity between now and the October 7 opener, this fall looks to be one of the best pheasant seasons in years.



CROW ABOUT

BY TOM DICKSON

Scott Thompson, FWP wildlife biologist in Culbertson, reports that spring rooster crowing counts in his district were up nearly 40 percent from last year and 18 percent over the long-term average.



Habitat is abundant and lush in most of Montana's pheasant range. Much of the nearly 3.5 million acres of federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) grasslands in Montana continues to provide excellent ring-neck nesting and hiding cover. Last winter was relatively mild, and abundant rain that soaked much of eastern Montana in May and June created ideal nesting conditions.

"This shows that, given abundant habitat, pheasants do a remarkable job of recovering on their own," Northrup says. "The drought has been hard on pheasants, but if you get a couple of years of good production in good habitat, the populations bounce right back."

Northrup points out that sweeping predictions and generalizations won't hold true everywhere. "The weather and habitat conditions even within a township can vary widely," he notes. "How pheasants are faring

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in one area may be completely different just a few miles away." Still, the biologist can draw some general conclusions about the status of pheasants in the state's major rooster regions:

AROUND THE STATE

Northrup says the area around Plentywood continues to be Montana's ringneck Shangri-la. The pheasant-filled farmland attracts Montanans as well as many Minnesotans and Wisconsinites who head west to Sheridan County's seemingly endless tracts of prime pheasant habitat.

"The northeast has a lot of CRP and grain fields mixed together, and has had mild winters over the past few years," Northrup says.

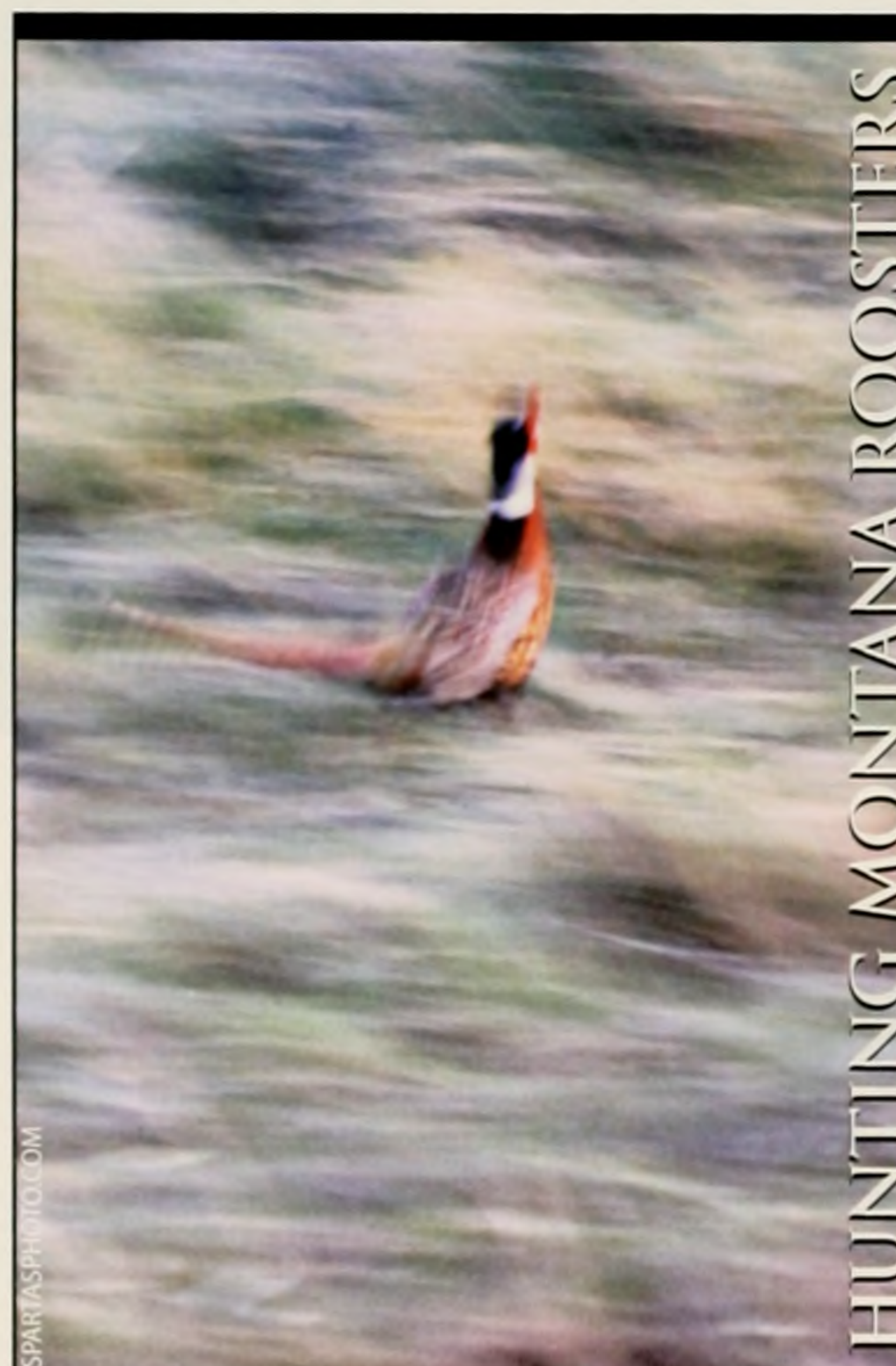
Scott Thompson, FWP wildlife biologist in Culbertson, reports that spring rooster crowing counts in his district were up nearly 40 percent from last year and 18 percent over the long-term average. "Our counts

this year were the highest we've had since 1995," he says. "The hayers I've talked to report seeing quite a few pheasant broods, and I have too."

From Culbertson, pheasant numbers appear to remain strong as a hunter heads south, where the birds thrive in grain and CRP fields from Fairview to Sidney and Glendive. The hunting here can be especially good in river bottoms, which contain dense winter cover and hold moisture that produces insects and lush brood habitat.

Southeastern Montana has a few pheasants here and there, says Northrup, but the rangeland lacks enough crops to support pheasants except in occasional irrigated valleys and nearby wooded draws.

South-central Montana contains pockets of pheasants along the Yellowstone River corridor and tributaries. "The pheasants there are mostly tied to the agricultural areas," says Northrup. Look for places where



One of the best ways to find pheasants is to watch for them at sunup as they head from CRP fields (where they roost overnight) to grain fields (where they feed in the morning). During midday, look for the birds loafing in grassy or weedy cover along fencelines, windbreaks, and creek bottoms. In late afternoon, the birds sneak back to grain fields for supper before finding another sleeping spot in CRP fields.

The best pheasant hunting is usually on opening weekend, when the older roosters haven't yet remembered their tricks from the previous year and the young-of-the-year birds are seeing dogs and hearing shotguns for the first time.

Many of the young birds are soon shot, however, and the remaining pheasants wise up quickly. Though hunters pursue a much wrier quarry for the remainder of the season, the good news is they don't face much competition.

"After the first two weeks, most pheasant hunters hang up their shotguns and concentrate more on deer and elk," says Northrup. "But there can be a lot of good pheasant hunting later in the year. The birds flock up more, and when you get some snow it can be a lot easier to key in on areas where they hang out."

If it doesn't snow, however, the going can be tough in November and December. The birds learn to avoid areas that hunters frequent, often moving to places far from the beaten path or off-limits to public hunting.

"But even though the hunting can be difficult if there's no snow, the lack of hunters can make a late-season pheasant hunt real enjoyable," Northrup says. ■

croplands mix with good cover such as river bottoms. A word of warning: Many prime river bottoms have been leased by individuals or hunting groups and are closed to traditional public hunting.

The middle part of the state contains scattered tracts of hardwood draws, CRP fields, creek bottoms, and irrigated fields that can be good bets for roosters. Northrup notes that crowing counts in the Lewistown area this past spring were higher than average.

The Bozeman area and Bitterroot Valley contain some productive pheasant habitat, primarily in lush bottomlands. However, private land access in both areas can be difficult to obtain.

The best place to find ringnecks around Missoula is Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and the surrounding valley. About an hour's drive north of Missoula, the 9,100-acre WMA can provide exceptional pheasant hunting opportunities. Ninepipe was established by FWP to conserve and enhance upland and wetland habitats for a range of game and nongame species. In addition to prime pheasant hunting, the wildlife area has great waterfowling.

Northwestern Montana may have a pheasant or two, especially in the Flathead Valley. But generally you're more likely to spot a

spruce grouse than a ringneck the farther you get west of the Continental Divide.

East of the divide, it's a different story. Much of the triangle formed by Cut Bank, Great Falls, and Havre contains the mix of CRP fields and croplands that grows pheasants. Roosters are even more abundant as you head east toward Chinook, Malta, and Glasgow, especially in areas that have grassy cover and croplands along the Milk River and its tributaries.

HUNTING ACCESS

Hunters have four main access options: Ask and gain permission to hunt private land, hunt private land enrolled in FWP programs, hunt public land, or pay to hunt private land. All have their pros and cons, depending on a hunter's personal values, available time, and financial situation.

Ideally, your favorite cousin owns a big farm along the Milk River so loaded with pheasants the crowing wakes him up each morning. Barring that, you'll often need to do some door knocking if you want to chase ringnecks on private land.

"It can be hard to get permission near towns and cities, where landowners are constantly being asked," says Northrup. "But once you get to the more remote parts of

Montana, many landowners are still real open to allowing people onto their land, provided hunters ask politely and treat their property with respect."

Many hunters pursue roosters on Block Management Areas (BMAs), which offer abundant opportunities to hunt private land, especially in the northeast from Havre to Plentywood. Block Management is an FWP program that pays landowners to allow public hunting access. In parts of eastern Montana, some BMAs contain more pheasant habitat than two hunters and their dogs could cover in a week. BMAs elsewhere in Montana can provide good pheasant hunting, though not like what a hunter will find in Sheridan and Roosevelt counties.

Hunters can also ask permission to hunt on Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program project sites. The program uses hunting license dollars to enhance upland bird habitat and release pheasants on private land. In return, landowners agree to allow some public upland bird hunting. Hunters can receive the updated catalog showing locations of project sites at any FWP office.

Because they usually don't contain grain, most public lands can be spotty for pheasants. The best areas are usually public grasslands next to private irrigated croplands.

FOOTHILL PHEASANTS Across central Montana, even in sight of mountainous elk habitat, hunters can find roosters in creek draws next to irrigated crop fields.



Freezout Lake WMA near Choteau can be good, though it receives heavy early season pressure from Great Falls and Helena hunters. Some federal lands, such as waterfowl production areas and national wildlife refuges, often hold roosters. Others, such as Bureau of Land Management sagebrush-grasslands, rarely contain pheasants. Don't waste your time hunting national forests, with the exception of grassland foothills near irrigated crops.

Under Montana's Stream Access Law, you may legally hunt waterfowl and upland birds (though not big game) along any river or stream as long as you gain legal access (such as with landowner permission, at a fishing access site, or at most bridge crossings). However, hunters who go above the high water mark are trespassing.

Relatively new in Montana, fee hunting continues to grow (though not nearly at the pace seen in the Dakotas). Fees generally range from \$50 to \$150 per hunter per day.

FUTURE PHEASANTS

Northrup says the biggest factor influencing Montana pheasant hunting down the road is CRP acreage. The federal land conservation program was established in 1986 to take highly erodible croplands out of production. This results in cleaner waterways and wildlife habitat in the grasslands that temporarily replace crops. Landowners receive a payment from the U.S. Department of Agriculture by enrolling their land in CRP for up to 15 years.

Nationwide, CRP has been a boon to pheasants and many other grassland wildlife species. Conservation groups have improved the program by pushing Congress to add measures that benefit upland birds, such as requiring landowners to plant forbs (broad-leafed plants) in the mix of grasses on CRP acres.

Montana is among the top three states with acres enrolled in the program. But that could change when CRP is reviewed as part of the 2007 Farm Bill. Dan Hare, Pheasants Forever, Inc., wildlife biologist for Montana and North Dakota, says his group is part of a nationwide effort to retain CRP and the nearly 40 million acres the program is authorized to enroll. But he notes that local hunters and other conserva-

DRINK UP Upland hunters disappointed in pheasant numbers during the past few years may find 2006 the year to quench their thirst for ringnecks.



tionists will need to act now to ensure the amount of CRP acreage in their state does not decline.

"I tell hunters in Miles City, Lewistown, Culbertson, and across Montana that even if CRP is fully reauthorized in 2007, that doesn't mean Montana will retain the acreage it now has," Hare says. "That's why Montana hunters need to call their congressional delegation and tell them that CRP is important to them personally."

Access is the other big issue affecting the future of pheasant hunting in Montana. The increase in leasing private land or closing it to public hunting is a nationwide trend that's bound to continue. As long as ranchers and farmers need to find new income

sources, and growing numbers of hunters are willing to pay, there's no stopping those financial transactions and their ramifications for traditional public access to private land.

Fortunately, some private land enrolled in Block Management helps offset part of that loss. "When the 2005 legislature made the Block Management Program permanent, that was really a huge boost for hunting access in Montana," says Northrup. 🐾

For more information on Montana pheasant hunting, including harvest records by county and region since 1996, go to the bottom of the Interactive Hunt Planner, found on the "Hunting" page of the FWP website: fwp.mt.gov.