



A Remarkable Comeback!

Look for great times afield this fall!

Hal Korber

By Robert C. Boyd

A BUMPER CROP of more than 200,000 pheasants were released for pheasant hunting in 2012, double the numbers that had been released annually since 2005, when production quotas were cut in half to meet agency-wide budget constraints. It was a great year for pheasant hunters, and an amazing turnaround for the Game Commission's storm-battered game farms.

In late August 2011, Tropical Storm Irene, followed less than two weeks later by Tropical Storm Lee, caused unprecedented flooding at two of the agency's four game farms along the Loyalsock Creek in Lycoming County. Only a month before pheasants would start to be released for the 2011 junior pheasant hunting season, 40,000 pheasants were on the loose or had died. Propagation staff managed to recapture 10,000 birds, but, the state's December releases had to be canceled in 2011.

New revenue from Marcellus shale leases under state game lands allowed

the Game Commission to return to a pheasant season release goal of 200,000 birds. Flood damage at the Northcentral and Loyalsock game farms, particularly to the large flight pens where pheasants are raised for their final three to four months before release, created a substantial challenge to repair to support doubling production. But the propagation staff met the task head-on and found plenty of support throughout the agency.

The Game Commission's pheasant propagation program is an old one. Pheasants were first released in 1915 and two state game farms had been built by 1929. The program peaked in the early 1980s, with the release of more than 400,000 pheasants annually from five game farms, as the Game Commission tried to satisfy hunter demands when wild pheasant populations started to decline rapidly in the early 1970s.

Although the program has been around for nearly a century, it still is one of the agency's most stable and ap-

pealing programs. The Game Commission's Strategic Plan directs the agency to provide enhanced pheasant hunting opportunities through a put-and-take operation and a reintroduction program to promote and perpetuate our hunting and trapping heritage. The plan also calls for an annual release of up to 250,000 pheasants on public lands and properties open to public hunting, with at least 15,000 being released for junior hunting opportunities, and to improve and modernize infrastructure on game farms. Similar goals and objectives are found in the *Ring-necked Pheasant Management Plan for Pennsylvania 2008-2017* on the agency's website.

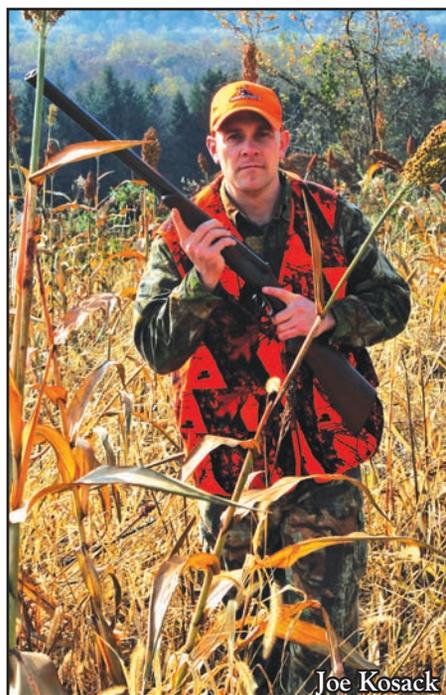
Equipment and building upgrades have modernized the agency's pheasant farms. Brooder houses have been built or restored at all farms. New incubators and hatchers have replaced 40- to 60-year-old equipment for which parts could no longer be found. Off-road equipment, such as tractors, mowers and utility vehicles, has been upgraded. Improvements in operational and energy efficiency also have been achieved.

Increases in hunting season releases from the current level of 200,000 birds to 225,000 (plus 25,000 reserved for breeders) will remain tied to future funding and infrastructure availability. But for now, the future looks better than it has for some time. Still, we've learned in recent decades that game farm pheasants contribute little to the establishment or maintenance of wild pheasant populations, and that the put-and-take program has cost more than \$3 million annually in recent years. But the pheasant program has some important values.

More than 100,000 hunters pursue

pheasants annually in Pennsylvania at a time when wild pheasant populations are virtually nonexistent. Pheasant hunting provides diversity to the Pennsylvania hunting experience and added hunting opportunities for junior hunters through the junior pheasant hunting season and hunts hosted by sportsmen's clubs. The Game Commission provides pheasants for these hosted hunts, where valuable safe gun handling and hunting experiences can be gained under close supervision. We all know that youth are the future for hunting.

Other changes were made in pheasant program procedures in 2012 to enhance hunting opportunities and maximize bird use. The fall pheasant season is five weeks, and when our fall stockings were up to 100,000 birds, we released birds in only the season's first two weeks, leaving three weeks of the





fall season with virtually no birds available to hunt. So in 2012, we released birds over the season's first four weeks and the parking lots were full.

We also increased the required size of pheasant hunting habitat needed from 15 to 50 acres before an area could be stocked with birds. This gave stocked birds a better chance of landing in targeted habitat upon release, making them less susceptible to being killed on roads, by predators and more likely to provide sporting opportunities to hunters.

We try to place a majority of birds on state game lands or other public lands under cooperative agreement with the Game Commission. They often have the state's best pheasant hunting habitat, and from a previous leg-banding study, we know birds stocked in these places have higher harvest rates than on hunter-access properties. We also stopped stocking hens in wildlife

management units with a male-only pheasant hunting regulation. They are better utilized in wildlife management units with either-sex pheasant hunting.

Our plans for pheasant stocking in the upcoming 2013 pheasant hunting season remain the same as in 2012. For the junior pheasant season, we will be stocking select game lands and other public lands, as indicated on pages 25-27 of the 2013-14 *Pennsylvania Hunting & Trapping Digest* and on our website. During the regular pheasant season, there will be one preseason and four in-season releases, followed by a December release of excess hens in wildlife management units with either-sex pheasant hunting.



Bob Boyd is chief of the Wildlife Services Division in the Bureau of Wildlife Management.