

2024 State of Pheasants in South Dakota



Wise hunters cannot wait till a dab of snow arrives.

by Dennis Foster

I can resoundingly report that the state of our state is great!

It sounds political, but we are talking all natural, real deal plumage here. After all, the Chinese ringneck pheasant is our state bird and unquestionably the most beautiful fowl

to hunt. Pheasants have been toughing it out over all these years and enduring every way the prairie or political winds (farm programs) have been blowing.

Pheasants do not have time for all the nonsense. They have been far too busy surviving and, thankfully, thriving over the last century-plus. There's been a decided

upswing the last several years as the stars have aligned for the third successful hatch in a row.

Mild winters mean thriving birds

Weather is continuously the first topic to enter the conversation as it relates to our roosters, with winter always being the major factor that determines what we begin each spring with for breeding stock. And ultimately, what our hunting prospects will be.

For 2023/24, we basically experienced no winter whatsoever. One small cold snap in early January was all that we, and the birds, had to contend with. With zero stress endured, they easily shook it off, as the fall was incredibly mild with no snow and continually near or record-breaking temperatures.

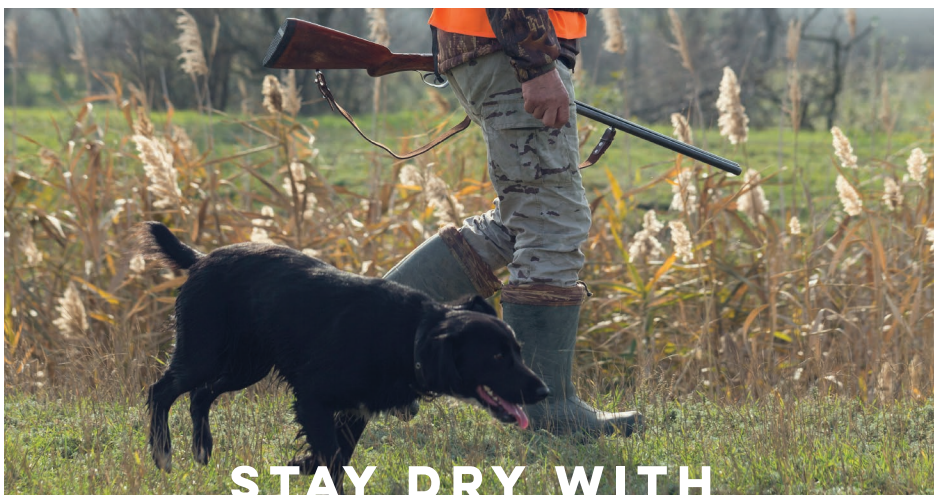
Once this Arctic front blew through, it was smooth sailing the rest of the way. With a brown winter and even more welcome balmy weather, the buffet table was fully set with limitless feeding opportunities. It also allowed the birds to be more spread out as they did not need to be confined to just heavy winter cover. Thus, they were less concentrated for the predators to pick on.

An equally bountiful buffet line full of

furry little mammals was laid out for the carnivores that typically survive on a winter diet rich in pheasant dinners. Rabbits and mice found the weather conducive to being active and therefore easily accessible to all predators, rather than hibernating under feet of snow and frozen ground. This greatly reduced the stress load that our birds normally endure.

So, we entered the breeding season with the complete survival of our already strong bird numbers. Spring proved to be equally mild with plenty of love in the air. In my over 50 years of observing the ups and downs, good and not as good with our birds, I have never seen hens in such great condition. As there was no snow to melt, they were up and active on the roads well ahead of schedule. All of them seemed fluffy, puffy and pretty, rivaling the size of a nearly colored out young rooster. And the roosters quickly found them to be as attractive as I did, resulting in early breeding and subsequent nesting.

I am not describing just one or two lucky locations. The reports are consistent from landowners in all areas of the state—even in perpetually arid western regions where we have extensive leases for not only pheasants, but sharpies, chickens and huns. Reports



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Hard-charging bird dogs love late season!

of excellent hatches of all species of upland birds are the norm there as well. It is a bit rare for conditions to be so conducive over such a widespread area. Believe me, this is a rare blessing that we are darn sure going to capitalize on, sharing the South Dakota Bounty with as many enthusiastic guests as possible.

We were wet last fall, with perfectly timed rains in early spring to kickstart all the vegetation. Ideal nesting conditions quickly ensued with hens hastily getting into action. As the broods began hatching, the little ones benefited from already present overhead cover from ever-menacing and always-overpopulated airborne avian predators. The quick cover was also perfect for darting and dodging ground-bound predators. We must also factor in that the bunnies and mice have also found the conditions ripe for reproduction—and we all know what bunnies are good at—therefore providing ample food sources helping to take the targets off the backs of our beautiful birds.

Early nests equal big broods

I can verify this is the case as we started to see them exploding up out of the ample vegetation in mid-June, with full-flight capabilities! I absolutely cannot recall broods this far along in development at this date. Their chance of surviving to maturity has now dramatically increased. Thus, we will have big numbers of first-year roosters that are full sized and completely colored out by opening day. These are backed by a very strong population of second-year roosters which will now be sporting some respectable spurs, followed by a vigorous population of cagey third-season, sharp-spurred, long-tailed survivalists. There is absolutely nothing better than watching a seasoned dog go paw to claw with one of these escape artists, and to literally be led around by the nose until the bird either dives deep in cover for a solid point, or runs out of cover options and flushes.

Bugs beyond belief or relief

To the point of making one of my favorite summer activities, country dog walks (just like hunting without the shots and retrieves) nearly unbearable. Kind of a grin and bear it scenario as the insects are a definite plus in the protein department for the quickly maturing chicks. The instant and always accessible protein will just quicken the pace of maturation and in turn, predator evasion. That is, until we show up with dogs that are

quite eager to match wits with them.

At this point, they have cleared all the major hurdles enroute to surviving to fall. Just in time for our guests to arrive and witness what we are so fortunate to have grown up in and around our entire lives. I can confidently predict some of the best bird numbers in my lifetime. Rivalling and perhaps even equaling or let's hope - surpassing the early 2000's and the height of CRP acres

Expanded CRP acres

These are the first things our repeat

guests will notice on our hunting grounds.

The government programs have become much more palatable and profitable for our farm producers. The additional CRP lands will nicely complement our ongoing and uncompromising efforts to continue to offer what we feel are the most traditional hunts possible.

The partnership between Pheasants Forever and South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks has been gaining traction for years. They have been extremely generous in providing advice via Private Lands biologists,

as well as hard resources, such as seed for food and pollinator plots and assistance navigating ever-changing farm programs. These have opened opportunities to enroll more CRP acres, as well as ever-important thermal cover in the form of new tree plantings. We and many other outfitters and producers are now becoming more educated as to the myriad conservation-minded programs available.

You will see a marked improvement in CRP acres and ever-valuable food plots in your fall trips throughout the area this season. I believe that with enough education and spreading the facts, the tide is turning for more balanced agricultural practices. Promoting activities that benefit our birds as well as the farmers' bottom line allows us to keep our traditions, and quite frankly, our small rural communities alive.

This is far more than a passion for us; it really is in our blood. Spink County is the birthplace of pheasant hunting in the United States, with our County Seat of Redfield holding the official distinction of Pheasant Capitol of the World. The very first successful release of this most-welcome invasive species took place here in 1908. They soon took hold and populated the area, with the first one-day season limited to Spink County held in 1919. As they say, the rest is history.

Our history and heritage continue to this day with our guests hunting not only the area of origin, but on the very land where it all began. If you would like to learn more and get a real feel for our good fortune, go to the *Focus Outdoors TV* YouTube channel and search the "Pheasantennial episode" that commemorated the 100th anniversary. **MWO**

Dennis Foster is an avid multimedia outdoor communicator, tournament fisherman and hunting guide. His work appears in publications such as MidWest Outdoors, on radio stations throughout the country, and on Focus Outdoors TV. He is the owner/operator of Dakota Pheasant Guide and welcomes feedback through dakotapheasantguide.com.

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