

Destruction of habitats tapers bird population

By GREG WASSON
Of the Emerald

Field-burning does more than make the sun go away a few weeks each August, it also makes Willamette Valley pheasants go away, permanently.

A report issued by the Fish and Wildlife Department says "Destruction of insects by burning eliminates an extremely important source of protein for growing chicks."

Largely due to the grass seed industry, pheasant populations are steadily declining, the reverse of what happened when the birds were first introduced.

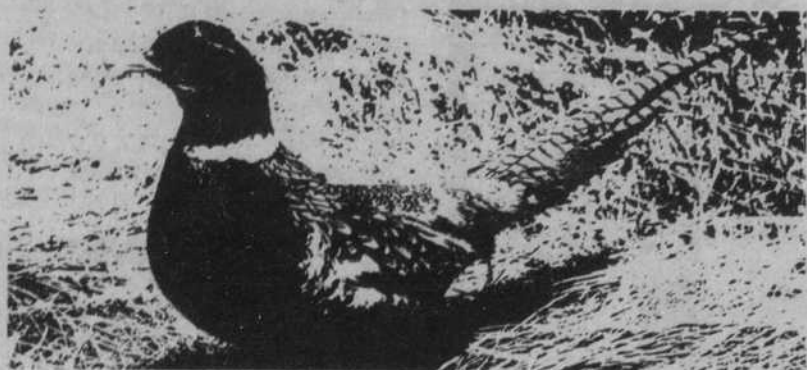
In 1881, Judge Owen Denny had 50 Ring-neck Pheasants shipped from China. The next year he brought 50 more over and released them with the others, in Linn County, north of Eugene.

"Eleven years later," says Bob Jubber of the wildlife division, "there's a record of 20,000 birds killed. They literally exploded in numbers."

In 1893, over 24,000 birds were shipped from Oregon to restaurants in San Francisco. Jubber speaks somewhat wistfully about those days.

"Those numbers are incomprehensible. Nobody can relate to shipping birds off to restaurants, shooting them by the wagonload and taking them down to the train station."

But that was a century ago. Today the habitat of pheasant and quail is being reduced and the grains they lived best on aren't being planted as often. Of the 340,000 acres of good pheasant area available in Linn County in 1940, the report says well over half was lost by 1970. The



emergence of the seed industry is blamed for most of that.

"Grass seed production," reads the report, "is a major reason for altering upland game habitat. Over half the total acreage of cropland harvested annually (as of 1970) in Linn County is devoted to growing grass seed."

When the grass fields are burned, continues the report, pheasants lost a valuable product "since stubble provides high quality food and cover."

Each 100 acres burned, contends the paper, destroys living quarters that would have supported 39 pheasants and 5 valley quail.

No exact population figures are available, but since 1961 standardized sample routes have been maintained and the number of pheasants sighted is related to the number of miles travelled. In 1861, researchers in Linn County sighted 2.7 birds per mile. Ten years later they sighted 0.4 birds per mile on the same roads.

"There's just been a shift of birds to the three federal refuges," explains Chester Kebbe of the wildlife division.

The refuges are the Finly refuge just south of Corvallis, the Baskett Slough refuge out of Dallas and

the Ankeny refuge near Salem.

The area of the state most heavily visited by ducks and geese is the Klamath Basin. Kebbe estimates that 80 percent of the birds on the Pacific Flyway funnel through the basin.

Shooting is allowed by permit at the three refuges, department land south of Portland and some in eastern Oregon. Hunters must use steel shot, though, rather than the lead pellets most sheels have. Kebbe explains that the ban is an effort to get lead out of the birds' diet.

"They take the lead into their gizzards where it's used to grind food," says Kebbe. "The lead disintegrates and is absorbed into the birds' bloodstreams and poisons them."

The steel loads aren't built for shotguns smaller than a 12 gauge, a box of steel shells costs about \$2.50 more than a box of lead ones and the steel pellets can scar barrels. Despite those drawbacks, Kebbe thinks the ban should stay in effect.

"When we first started the ban, 42.2 percent of the birds taken on our land had lead in their gizzards. Last year that percentage was down to about eight."

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Deer

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leys where there's agricultural development and they'll come out of the woods and just descend on these areas. Our department moves in with movable traps and takes problem animals to areas where they would be welcome."

Elk do not move around much and tend to stay in small herds. Eastmen says unless the poachers prevent it, the herds increase easily.

The department's had luck with its elk management but Eastmen complains existing law cramps the division.

"The statutes adopted by the Legislature declare that wildlife is secondary to other land uses. When there are conflicts with too many animals we can holler and scream but we have very little recourse."

The department also sponsors an antelope hunt in August. Eastmen says the chances of winning the draw are roughly two

to one — and about 4 years ago began monitoring bear hunts. Eastman estimates there were about 13,000 hunters last year and about a thousand bear were taken.

Bear are classified as game animals, making it illegal to waste the meat. The department is also responsible for animals not considered game.

"We do have some animals," says Eastmen, "that are considered trophies, like cougars. We

have selected areas where we offer tags for trophy hunts."

Besides cougar, the state allowed hunters to take 30 of Oregon's 1,500 big-horn sheep this year.

"These animals are surplus," says Eastmen. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime chance to take an animal that's not necessary for continuation of the herd. All we're saying is 'these animals are surplus and if anyone wants it, here's your chance.'"

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