



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

A rooster pheasant. The gray cloth on the bird's snout is a "blinder," a temporary device that discourages the birds from pecking each other.

PHEASANTS

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Motorists on Highway 7, just across the Powder River, get an unobstructed, if brief, view of the net-covered pens inside which more than 5,000 of the game birds have strutted at times this year.

Dexter said that almost every day he'll watch at least a few drivers pull off the highway and stand on the gravel shoulder, looking and, often as not, taking pictures.

"This place has been quite the buzz," he said.

On this afternoon, though, he's too busy gathering birds to watch passers-by gawking across the river.

Dexter and his parents, Cheryl and Gary Krantz, need to corral about 280 roosters today. They'll haul the birds, which are tucked into wooden crates, to a state wildlife area near Monmouth.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) is one of the Dexters' two main clients.

The couple also sell birds to several private hunting reserves. The biggest difference between the two buyers, Jason Dexter said, is that ODFW buys only roosters. That's because hunters on public and some private land can only legally shoot male birds. Many of the roosters Dexter sells to ODFW are released for special hunts open only to youths.

The state pays from \$17.50 to \$18.10 per bird, the price depending on delivery location, said Kelly Walton, assistant game bird biologist for ODFW.

Private game reserves, by contrast, can buy both hens and roosters and allow hunting of both on their own land.

Rounding up roosters

The process starts not unlike a cattle drive, only with the soft clucking of birds the predominant sound rather than the thunder of hooves.

The Krantzes start at one end of a pen and then walk slowly forward, in effect herding the birds to a catch pen.

The pheasants generally cooperate.

For a few minutes.

But then one flies, its wings flapping wildly as it bounces off the gently yielding nylon netting.

In a few seconds most of the flock is airborne. You can barely make out the Krantzes among the flurry of multi-colored feathers. They stand

"Once you get one or two flying, they all do."

— Jason Dexter

patiently, occasionally ducking when a pheasant buzzes by their heads, waiting for the birds to settle down.

"Once you get one or two flying, they all do," Dexter said.

He said he has had a few experiences in the pens that reminded him of nothing so much as "the movie" — meaning, of course, the 1963 Alfred Hitchcock film adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's classic horror tale, "The Birds."

Once the pheasants have calmed — the lines of feed that Gary Krantz poured onto the ground helping to divert the birds' attention — he and Cheryl start selecting roosters.

Gary, 63, uses a handheld net to capture each bird.

Cheryl, 66, carries it to the edge of the pen, where the crates are stacked. She removes the "blinder" — a gray fabric patch that fits over the bird's snout and discourages the pheasants from pecking each other — and places the rooster into the crate.

"Imagine putting blinders on 5,000 birds," Dexter says with a rueful smile.)

Each crate can hold nine birds, Dexter said.

With autumn's cooler temperature he can put that many pheasants in each crate. But during summer he had to limit each container to five or six, to prevent the birds, which have a normal body temperature of 105 degrees, from succumbing to the heat.

24-hour operation

Pheasants don't spend a lot of time confined in their cages, Dexter said.

Buyers, both ODFW and private game reserves, want birds delivered as soon as possible after they've been captured.

Summer deliveries were especially hectic, Dexter said.

Because the birds are sensitive to heat, Dexter said he and his wife, along with his parents and the other employees they hired at times, often worked until well past midnight to ensure the birds were caged, and ready for transport, during the cool of the night.

"There were six or seven days when we worked on this all night," Dexter said. "This was definitely the hardest thing I've ever done. It's an incredible amount of work."

By comparison, he said with a chuckle, his college studies and training as a registered nurse were only modestly taxing.

Dexter said his employers, Ashley Manor and Step Forward Activities in Baker City, have been "extremely flexible" in accommodating his new venture.

"It's been pretty hard to juggle both," he said.

Jeanie Dexter is the finance director for the city of Baker City.

Jason Dexter said he wouldn't have been able to start the pheasant farm without the help from his parents.

The odometer on his diesel pickup truck has been spinning most of the summer.

Dexter estimates he has put on 9,000 miles this year delivering birds to multiple places



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Gary Krantz pours feed at his son's Powder River Pheasant farm on Thursday, Oct. 22.

in Oregon and in Idaho.

"You're definitely on the road a lot," he said.

An unexpected beginning

Dexter said he and his wife had been talking about starting a pheasant farm.

They did not, however, plan for 2020 to be their inaugural crop.

But in early March, Jason Dexter got a call from a friend who raises pheasants near Middleton, Idaho.

The friend, who had previously sold birds to ODFW for youth hunts, was getting out of the business.

Dexter, who grew up in Baker City and fondly recalls hunting pheasants as a boy, said he wanted to make sure pheasants would be available for this year's hunts, including one at Ladd Marsh near La Grande.

Indeed, he said his role in giving kids a chance to hunt is the most gratifying part of raising pheasants.

"For a lot of these kids it's their only hunting opportunity of the year," he said.

And so he and Jeanie decided to try raising birds even though they weren't truly ready.

"We ordered chicks before we even had brood houses to put them in," Jason Dexter said.

Nor did they have purchase contracts with ODFW.

Because he started relatively late, Dexter said it was challenging to find a sufficient number of birds to start his farm.

"We were looking all across the country," he said.

He bought eggs and laying hens as well as chicks.

The hens, until they stopped laying in the mid-summer heat, were at peak production laying two or three eggs each per day.

"They lay a ton of eggs," Dexter said. "We hatched out a lot."

He sent some of the chicks to a pheasant farm in Idaho.

Dexter said his operation now has an incubator, so next year should be considerably less hectic since they will be able to start the production season with thousands of eggs rather than having to scramble to find birds.

That will be a welcome change from 2020, he said.

Besides the rush to secure pheasants last spring, Dexter said he had to construct pens, buy feeders and feed, and do all the other things necessarily to raise several thousand birds in a few months.

"We were building pens all the time, just trying to stay ahead of them," he said. "When you've got 5,000 or 6,000 birds getting bigger and bigger ... and they get big fast."

Dexter said the current pens, in deference to the speed with which they were assembled, are only temporary.

He plans to improve the pens in time for the 2021 crop.

Pheasants 101

Although Dexter loved to hunt pheasants when he was a boy, he acknowledges that he didn't know much about the birds.

But following a summer in which he watched something like 6,000 pheasants grow to maturity — and deal with the occasional blow to the solar plexus — he is intimately familiar with the species.

And with their appetites.

When the pens were at the most crowded, with around 5,000 hungry gullets to satisfy, Dexter said he was going through 3 tons of feed per week. The mixture, with a protein content of 28%, is considerably richer than the mash fed to chickens, he said.

But even that wasn't enough to satiate the pheasants.

They also cropped the calf-high grass in the Dexters' river-side meadow down to stubble.

"They mow it right down," he said. "It's amazing how much these things eat. And it's expensive."

Dexter said he's also been surprised by how territorial pheasants are.

"One male will try to keep all the other birds away from a feeder," he said.

Occasionally a pheasant will manage to wriggle through a gap in the netting.

But Dexter said the birds, even as they're fluttering against the roof of the pens, aren't actually trying to escape. Those that gain their freedom invariably try to get back into the pens, he said.

The pheasants have mainly been healthy.

"We've had a few deaths here and there," Dexter said.

But none of those resulted



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Cheryl Krantz removes the blinder from a rooster pheasant just before placing the bird in a wooden crate.

from predator attacks.

Dexter grins when asked whether coyotes and other animals have ever made a meal of fresh pheasant.

The question strikes him as amusing because of the security system he installed.

The pens are equipped with an array of motion and heat sensors. When a sensor is triggered it sets off lights and blaring sirens.

That's happened many times, Dexter said, which suggests that predators certainly have been attracted by the presence of so much meat.

Typically the alarm goes off around dusk, the time when night hunters usually begin their search for sustenance.

"Jeanie calls it the witching hour," Dexter said.

He's seen no evidence, though, that any predator has ignored the cacophony and actually penetrated the pens.

Ready for a rest

The shipment of 280 roosters on Oct. 22 wasn't the last of the season — but there won't be many more.

"We're winding down," Dexter said. "Thank God."

As with any farmer, winter isn't a vacation, exactly.

But neither will he be working around the clock.

Dexter plans to keep about 800 laying hens through the winter. With the hens supplying eggs and the incubator operating, he doesn't expect to buy any chicks or eggs next spring.

Although he doesn't rule out the possibility of supplement-

ing his own flock.

"I hate to put all my eggs in one basket in case something happens to the incubator," he said.

Fortunately, Dexter said he knows he can rely on his fellow pheasant farmers, across the country, to help him in a crisis.

He said the business, perhaps because it's a relatively small niche, fosters cooperation rather than competition.

"All the raisers help each other, and every pheasant person knows all the others," Dexter said. "It's a pretty close-knit community."

He said a friend in Idaho who has been raising pheasants for almost three decades is his "go-to guy" for advice.

Dexter said patience is a key attribute for a fledgling pheasant farmer.

He doesn't expect to turn a profit for three years.

But Dexter said two of his primary goals are personal rather than financial.

He wants to help bolster pheasant populations in Baker County by donating birds for release in suitable habitat.

Pheasants generally prefer fields and other open areas with brushy edges.

"I'd like to get the birds going back in Baker County again," he said. "When I was a kid, the birds were all over. Now a lot of people don't even know what a pheasant looks like. Every time we go out (to deliver birds) we get asked, 'what kind of chicken is that?'"

Dexter also plans to donate pheasants for a youth hunt in Baker County in 2021.

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