



A bird in the hand

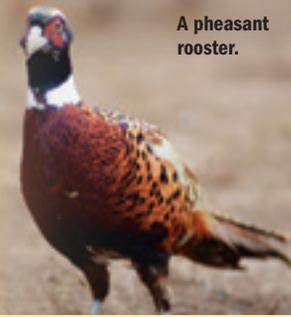
PHEASANTS
ABOUND ON
PUBLIC LANDS.

Gary Greene has hunted pheasant for more than 50 years. Here he is seen after a successful hunt with his hunting companions.

GARY GREENE

For Gary Greene, pheasant hunting has been a lifelong tradition with strong family ties.

“My dad introduced me to it when I was a small child,” says Greene. “He hunted with a Chesapeake Bay retriever. I remember being amazed by the beauty of the roosters.”



A pheasant rooster.

ROBERT MANWELL

Greene, a retired physical education instructor, has hunted pheasants every year since 1963 and hardly misses a day in the field with his dogs during pheasant season. He and wife Chris have bred Labrador retrievers into fine hunting dogs for many years, and being able to raise and work a dog from puppyhood adds a meaningful dimension to each hunt. Along with his own dogs (Hershey, Nyjer, Schmiddy, Elsie and Dookie), it's not unusual for Greene to hunt alongside multiple generations of his Labs.

“Several of my hunting buddies bought dogs from me, and at one time seven or eight of my dogs were in the field with us,” says Greene.

Such is his knowledge and engagement in the world of pheasant hunting that he also serves as a guide. He led 60 hunts last year alone, on both public and private lands, often ably assisted by his dogs.

While health concerns have compelled Greene to reduce his involvement in some of these activities, he eagerly anticipates getting into the field in the fall in pursuit of pheasants. He is well acquainted with the public lands in southern Wisconsin that offer quality pheasant hunting.

“I try to get to eight different public hunting grounds [during pheasant season],” says Greene. “Birds have a tendency to go to certain habitats, and if I'm not successful at one [hunting site] I'll try another.”

Adds Greene, “On public lands, you know the birds are probably going to be there.”

Private land pheasants spark public land hunts

Interestingly, pheasant hunting on public lands may owe its success in part to private landowners. Ring-necked pheasants, native to Asia, were originally introduced to Wisconsin by the early 1900s to provide another form of gamebird hunting. Multiple early releases on

private lands led to the establishment of Wisconsin's wild pheasant population. Agrarian habitats, combined with the native grasslands present across the southern two-thirds of Wisconsin, encouraged a thriving population and catalyzed the popularity of pheasant hunting across prime pheasant range.

However, the transition to modern agriculture and accompanying conversion of idle land to production caused a downturn in the pheasant population in the mid-1900s. Pheasants and other grassland wildlife faced reduced cover from predators, limited nesting habitat and increased exposure to pesticides. As a result, few wild birds were available on the landscape to view and hunt. The Wisconsin Conservation Department (now the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources), noting the importance of pheasants in Wisconsin's hunting heritage, soon attempted an experimental pheasant stocking initiative. These early efforts helped launch Wisconsin's successful pheasant stocking program.

Stocking on public lands

Pheasants respond well to captive breeding, and partnerships between the Wis-

consin Department of Natural Resources and local conservation clubs have helped bolster the wild population while sustaining pheasant hunting opportunities for thousands of hunters each year. Instrumental in this effort is the State Game Farm in Poynette, which has been rearing and releasing pheasants since 1934. About 330,000 pheasant eggs pass through the Game Farm's incubators annually, and chicks are reared onsite or delivered to conservation clubs to raise through the Day-old Chick Program. Ultimately, the majority of the adult roosters are released on both public and private lands.

Pheasant stocking increased from close to 54,000 birds in 2012 to roughly 75,000 birds in 2014, and this trend is expected to continue in 2015.

“If all goes according to plan, we will be stocking 75,000 pheasants on state wildlife areas in 31 Wisconsin counties,” says DNR Game Farm Supervisor Kelly Maguire.

DNR wildlife staff begins stocking birds the week before opening weekend in late October, and will stock through December in some areas. This strategy provides ample opportunity for hunters to see birds.

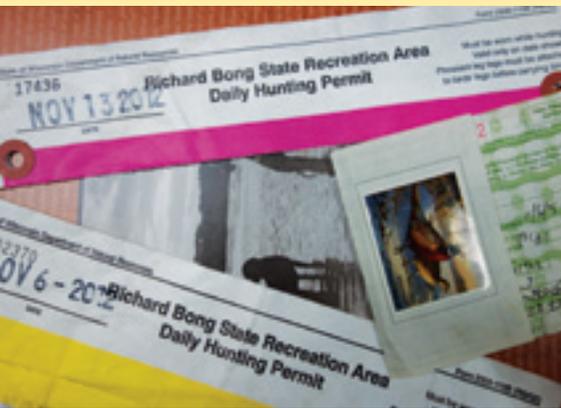
For Greene, the result of these efforts is a hunting experience approaching those of premier pheasant-hunting lands in South Dakota.

“I went to South Dakota with a buddy mid-December and we hunted from 10 until dark every day to get our six pheasants,” says Greene. “You can't shoot hens out there [which is allowed on certain lands in Wisconsin] and the birds are very smart. Here in Wisconsin, I've gotten birds on two days at the end of December. The birds are still there even three weeks after the end of stocking. It's



Prime pheasant hunting can be found at the Richard Bong State Recreation Area.

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Arm band and pheasant stamp.

much more fun if you know there are birds out there and there's an opportunity to harvest a bird."

The abundance of pheasants means plentiful opportunities to harvest a pheasant, even on public hunting grounds that might see over 200 hunters per day during peak season. Richard Bong State Recreation Area, featuring 3,500 acres open to hunting, is one of the most popular public hunting destinations in Wisconsin.

Accordingly, the Department of Natural Resources stocks thousands of birds there annually.

"Usually over 11,000 hunters use Bong during pheasant season," says DNR wildlife biologist Marty Johnson. "Last year we stocked over 12,000 birds and we are looking for something similar this year."

Initially slated to be an air force base in the 1950s, Bong was instead transformed into a recreation area under the authority of the Wisconsin Conservation Commission (now the Natural Resources Board) during the 1970s. Today, most

of its 4,515 acres are dedicated to conservation and the activities that support it.

According to Greene, the rules for hunting Bong have varied over the years. At first, hunters could only shoot roosters. Then, hens could also be taken, and during one season some pheasants were banded to help wildlife managers monitor numbers. Bong also experimented with hunting hours (opening before sunrise) and stocking patterns (such as stocking every other day). And starting in 2014, the mandatory arm bands were replaced with hunter information cards.

At one point, hunters could reserve days on which to hunt pheasants.

"If you didn't get there early, the cars would be parked all down the road," recalls Greene. "Normally my buddies and I would get our tags and go get a donut and a cup of coffee while waiting."

In 2014, the hunting permit fee on Bong during pheasant-stocking days increased from \$3 to \$12 to make the pheasant program more sustainable. Johnson notes that this likely contributed to a drop in the number of permits sold.

Other hunters recognize that the fee increase is just part of ensuring a positive and productive hunt.

"It doesn't bother me at all," states Greene. "The arm bands themselves cost more to make than \$3 each and the fee hasn't been raised since the 1970s."

Says Johnson, "Pheasant hunters in Wisconsin seem pleased with the opportunities they have on public land. The birds give them a good hunt and allow them to work their dogs during the winter."

Family traditions

Bong and other public lands are a gate-

way to pheasant hunting for young and novice hunters. The Department of Natural Resources and Friends of Poynette Game Farm team up to offer Learn to Hunt Pheasant events at Bong and elsewhere. According to Maguire, four Learn to Hunt events were offered on public lands this fall, with pheasants supplied from the game farm. Those interested in participating next year can learn more about the Learn to Hunt program at dnr.wi.gov, keywords "Learn to Hunt."

Pheasant hunting, especially on public lands, is also a bonding opportunity for many hunters with friends and family. Greene and his hunting partner had the pleasure of hunting public lands for 40 years, and Greene and his son Nate frequently take to the field after pheasants and ducks. Each day holds the promise of spotting the iridescent flash of a rooster's feathers amid the grasses or hearing it cackle as it takes to the air. Each hunt realizes the profound connection between hunters, dogs and nature that makes time in the field worthwhile even if the birds evade the shots.

It's moments like these that keep hunters coming back for more and passing the tradition down to the next generation of hunters. Pheasant hunting for Gary Greene and the many others who flock to public lands in the fall is far more than a hobby — it's a way of life.

Greene remembers receiving a call from Nate, at the time deployed in Afghanistan thousands of miles away.

His son told Greene that he woke one day and it smelled like the pheasant fields of Wisconsin. 

Meredith Penthorn is a DNR communications specialist for the wildlife program.



About 75,000 pheasants will be released in Wisconsin this year on public and private lands.

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