



Game farm workers and volunteers sort chicks by sex in this photo from the 1960s.

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Hatching a plan

A NEW PHEASANT HATCHERY KEEPS ALIVE AN OLD TRADITION.

John Motoviloff

Here's an old saw as dependable as your grandfather's Winchester Model 12 shotgun: You have to study the past to understand the present. So, to fathom the importance of the State Game Farm's new \$1.5 million pheasant hatchery slated for completion in 2016, we need to know something about the history of this property, something about the Department of Natural Resources' longstanding pheasant-stocking program — as well as a bit of this colorful bird's history. And if all this leaves the reader craving flushing roosters, take heart. You can follow the president of the Friends of the Poynette Game Farm and this author — along with their hunting dogs — into the field.

State Game Farm Manager Kelly Maguire, shares this enthusiasm.

"Wisconsin has a strong pheasant hunting tradition," Maguire says. "We're so excited about the new facility, which will help bring us into the future."

The bird of princes

The ring-necked pheasant, or *Phasianus colchicum*, has been called the King of Game Birds for good reason. Native to the windswept plains of Asia, the ring-necked pheasant has long been admired by society's upper echelons. In ancient China, pheasant images appeared as omens of good fortune on tapestries, wedding scrolls and royal robes. They also signified high rank on soldiers' uniforms.

To the west of China, on the steppes of Eurasia, pheasant hunting has long

been the sport of princes. Fifth century legend holds that the capital of what is now Georgia owes its existence to pheasants. One day, a prince and his falcon were out hunting. The falcon swooped down and seized a wild pheasant. After a struggle, the pheasant fell into a hot spring and was cooked to tender perfection. The prince named the city Tblisi, after the Georgian word *T'pili*, or "warm place," to honor the hot springs and his pheasant dinner.

Pheasants soon caught the fancy of Europeans and were naturalized throughout Europe well before the Middle Ages. But it was not until 1881, after releases in Oregon's Willamette Valley, that ring-necked pheasants began to

thrive and reproduce on American soil. Introduction to Midwest states, such as Iowa and South Dakota, followed in the early 1900s.

Southeastern Wisconsin's mix of grain fields, grasslands and fencerows also proved fertile ground for ring-necked pheasants. In 1911, entrepreneur and sportsman Gustav Pabst released pheasants on his Waukesha County farm, and between 1914 and 1920, Pabst oversaw the release of some 15,000 additional birds in surrounding counties. A population of wild pheasants was taking hold.

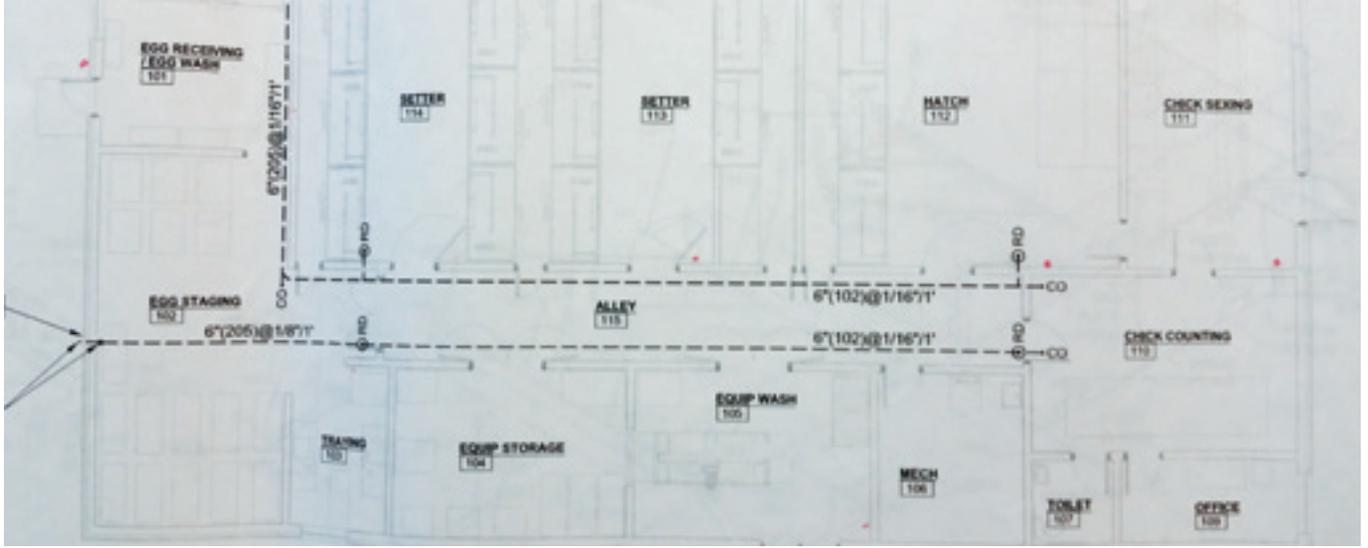
A flurry of conservation

By the 1920s, Wisconsin hunter interest in pheasants was strong. In 1928, the department began its own pheasant stocking program. Working out of the Wisconsin Experimental Game and Fur Farm in Fish Creek, it raised some 14,000 birds for release on hunting grounds throughout the state. While no one called it "customer service" in the 1920s, it was, nonetheless, an example of the responsiveness the Department of Natural



Workers remove the concrete floor in the old hatchery building. Installing wipe-clean surfaces and floor drains in the new facility will make cleaning much easier.

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MSA PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

In this architectural drawing of the new pheasant hatchery at the State Game Farm, it's easy to see how layout is designed to match the steps in the hatching process.

Resources continues to strive for.

In the next few years, the department's capacity to produce pheasants increased exponentially. Operations — which were dispersed among a number of facilities in eastern Wisconsin — were consolidated and moved to Poynette in 1934. The department worked hand in hand with the Works Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps; a major new facility capable of incubating 150,000 game bird eggs was completed in 1938. Infrastructure was now in place for large-scale pheasant production.

While pheasant production has always been a priority of the State Game Farm, early decades there were marked by a flurry of conservation activity that was enthusiastic if not always sharply focused. Hatchery workers reared a menagerie of grouse, quail, wild turkeys and prairie chickens — not to mention 27 different species of pheasants and a variety of furbearers!

Field staff were busy stocking pheasants of both sexes, in all counties of the state, at various times of the year, on both public and private lands. Other State Game Farm operations included animal health and propagation research. Educators led group tours of conservation and land management exhibits. Some 60,000 visitors flocked to the facility in 1940.

Land acquisition was another priority. Between the 1940s and 1960s, many properties were acquired with pheasant hunting (and stocking to supplement wild bird numbers) as a primary objective. Today, 91 Wisconsin wildlife areas are stocked with pheasants.

Since the State Game Farm's beginnings in 1928, the Day Old Chick (DOC) program has been providing chicks to participating conservation clubs. These birds are reared and then released as adults on public and private land.

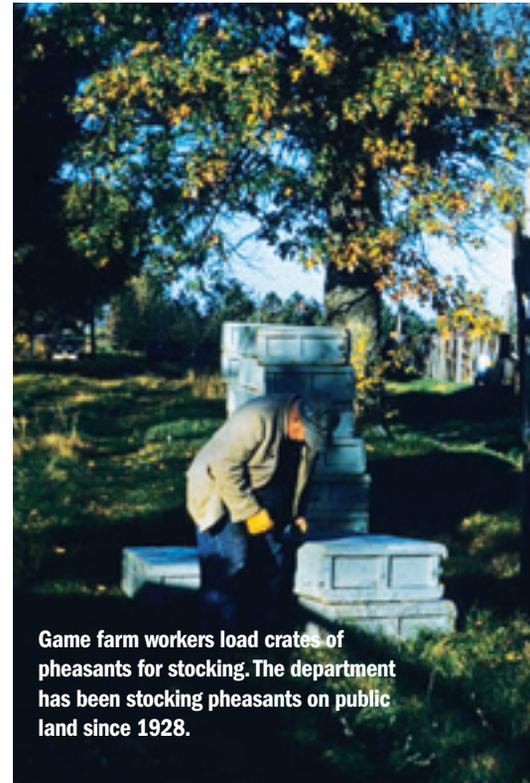
Raising game birds, however, is a costly proposition. And by the late 1950s, it became clear that greater focus and streamlining were necessary. The fur section was discontinued. Staff numbers were reduced. Stocking efforts shifted from a variety of game birds to pheasants — only during fall, on public lands with suitable habitat, in the southern half of the state where grassland habitat dominated the landscape, and with a focus on roosters rather than both sexes. The year of 1957 saw the hatchery's peak production, with 270,000 pheasant chicks.

New hatchery, new era

In the decades that followed, a number of factors contributed to declining production. A significant and sustained increase in the price of feed was a primary factor. Man hours spent operating and maintaining aging facilities decreased efficiency. And the discovery of Chronic Wasting Disease in 2002 required diversion of non-earmarked resources from this program for several years. The year of 2004 marked a low point of chick production, with only 58,000 birds produced. However, this number would rebound dramatically.

After more than a decade of discussion and budgeting, the department broke ground on a new facility in August 2015 with completion expected in 2016. The old hatchery will be "retired" from active use, and the buildings will be preserved as historic structures. Funding for the new hatchery will come from segregated bonding, and will be paid out of the Wildlife Operations Funding account.

"The staff has done an amazing job with what they have — coming in on nights and weekends and their own time. But most of the equipment dates back to the 1930s. Even the incubators are over 50 years old. It is clearly time for a new



Game farm workers load crates of pheasants for stocking. The department has been stocking pheasants on public land since 1928.



Vic Connors, president of Friends of Poynette Game Farm, and his Pudelpointer, Joey. With their dense coat and spirited disposition, Pudelpointers take to both upland game birds and waterfowl.



SCOTT LOOMANS

What it's all about — a late-season pair of roosters.



DNR FILE



JOHN MOTOWILOFF

hatchery,” Maguire adds. “Building the new hatchery will bring the program out of the 1950s. It will be easy to clean, much more efficient and reliable.”

The new hatchery interior will be all washable surfaces, floor to ceiling, and equipped with floor drains. In contrast, the walls and surfaces of the old hatchery are rough and cracked. The only way to keep them clean was to repaint them every year. Eliminating tasks like repainting will free up time that can, in turn, be used more productively.

The new hatchery will also have a better layout, with a separate room for each function: cleaning, holding eggs, incubation and hatching. Layout in the old hatchery was not conducive to an efficient work flow. Staff and eggs had to go from clean to dirty and vice versa.

“The flow-forward design of the new hatchery is a huge biosecurity benefit,” Maguire says.

While the 1950s-vintage incubators were at the end of their working lives — with duct tape seals, replacement parts no longer available, and staff regularly checking on them at night to make sure eggs weren’t lost — the new incubators will be automated. They will notify staff of problems via smartphone apps and give digital readouts.

The more things change ...

While equipment and facilities are changing, the State Game Farm’s core focus remains the same — raising pheasants and partnering with volunteer organizations to keep Wisconsin’s pheasant hunting tradition strong.

Incubation and rearing proceed now much as they have in the past, but with better technology. Through the State Game Farm’s use of artificial light to cue them into egg laying, hens are put into production in late February with the first eggs collected in late March. Hatches occur every week from early April until late June. Chicks are raised indoors in climate-controlled barns for six weeks and then transferred to the outdoor range fields. They remain in the range fields, which are protected from predators by fencing and overhead netting, until they are released in fall.

To meet a target yearly hatch of 215,000 to 230,000 chicks, some 300,000 eggs are incubated. Of these, 75,000 are slated for public pheasant hunting. The DOC program accounts for 45,000 chicks. Surplus chicks are sold to the public at a price of 15 cents per bird.

Of the 75,000 birds slated for public

pheasant hunting, several thousand are saved for Learn to Hunt programs. The Friends of the Poynette Game Farm and other conservation clubs throughout the state host these events. Members provide, on a volunteer basis, instruction in gun safety and pheasant hunting to aspiring hunters.

But what really distinguishes Learn to Hunt events is quality mentoring. After pheasants are stocked, aspiring hunters head to the field singly or in small groups and are guided by mentors. To help with locating birds and recovering downed birds, some volunteers bring their own hunting dogs. Hunting behind a well-trained pointer or flusher adds another level of excitement to the hunt.

Many hunters who participate in Learn to Hunt events are children of hunters. However, a growing number of adults have become interested in hunting because of an interest in local food. Molly Placke Silver, of Verona, is just such an aspiring hunter. Placke Silver, 38, has participated in Learn to Hunt deer, turkey and pheasant events.

“While I learned a lot in the deer and turkey programs and spent a couple of great days in the woods, I didn’t catch a glimpse of the animals I was hunting. With pheasants, we were almost guaranteed to see a few flushed. Which I did! And with the help of a capable and adorable hunting dog, we recovered the bird I shot. I felt a first flush of hunting success! As an added bonus, I was able to take home some pheasant to make a hearty, delicious stew,” says Placke Silver.

“The good old days are now”

Just as Placke Silver could count on birds being there for a pheasant Learn to Hunt, veteran hunters can expect pheasants to be stocked at their favorite public hunting grounds. In fact, it was in this spirit that Dr. Vic Connors, president of the Friends of the Poynette Game Farm, met me at Waterloo Public Hunting Ground in Jefferson County on a mild November Thursday.

An optometrist by trade, Connors has deep Wisconsin hunting roots. He grew up in the 1960s near Wonewoc, in rural Sauk County, hunting grouse and pheasants with his family’s springer spaniels.

“There were a lot of grouse and pheasants in those days. Farming wasn’t as clean, so there were plenty of fencerows. And every village had a rod and gun club that raised day old chicks,” Connors told me the day of our hunt.

After rendezvousing in the parking lot, Connors and I followed our dogs down a

grassy road leading to the pheasant field we planned to hunt. Gypsy, my 3-year-old Labrador retriever, and Joey, Connors' 2-year-old Pudelpointer, scented the air with their muzzles. We agreed that I would work the brushy edge and Connors would work the grassy inside. I soon found myself in a thicket of red willow, where I heard the sound of whirring wings. I pivoted and managed, uncharacteristically, to drop the flushing rooster with one shot.

Connors and I hunted Waterloo for about three hours. Knowing birds had been planted during the preceding three weeks created a relaxed backdrop for our hunt, during which we talked at length. I learned about his recent pheasant trip to western Minnesota; the versatility of the Pudelpointer, a coarse-haired German breed that excels in both water and uplands; and Connors' work with NAVHDA (North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association).

But what really stood out was the working relationship between man and dog. Connors, a tall man with the sure stride of a seasoned hunter, walked at a comfortable amble and Joey, who has excelled at NAVHDA trials, hunted just out in front of us. It was obvious she had a fine nose and keen intelligence, and she provided us with two beautiful points at roosters which somehow managed to elude our shot patterns.

As the temperature climbed toward 70 and the dogs began to flag, Connors and I decided to wind up our hunt and hit a local diner for lunch. While Connors shared stories from a half century of hunting, it was clear that he was just as passionate about the future.

Over lunch, I learned that Connors had been international president of NAVHDA, and helped to form a Madison chapter of this association in the late 1990s. He also worked with State Game Farm staff to create the Friends of the Poynette Game Farm in 2011. The group's two main goals are expanding pheasant hunting in Wisconsin and mentoring developing hunters and dog handlers.

"Game is so plentiful in Wisconsin. Pheasants, turkeys, deer, ducks, grouse. The good old days are now," Connors says with a smile while putting down his coffee cup. "We are living them." 

John Motoviloff edits hunting regulations booklets for the Department of Natural Resources. He is an avid hunter and author of the cookbook, "Wild Rice Goose and Other Dishes of the Upper Midwest."

WISCONSIN STATE GAME FARM BY THE NUMBERS

- 1881** Pheasants introduced to Willamette Valley in the state of Oregon.
- 1911** Entrepreneur and sportsman, Gustav Pabst, stocks pheasants on his Waukesha County farm.
- 1928** Wisconsin Conservation Department program begins raising pheasants for stocking, with 14,000 birds released throughout the state.
- 1934** State Game Farm moves to Poynette; new hatchery begun with Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration assistance.
- 1938** New hatchery, with capacity to produce 150,000 game bird eggs, completed in Poynette.
- 1940** State Game Farm receives 60,000 visitors.
- 1940-1960** Many Department of Natural Resources properties with pheasant hunting as primary management objective are acquired.
- 1957** Peak hatch of 270,000 pheasant chicks.
- 1986 to 2005** Experimental release of wild-strain pheasants in large tracts of prime pheasant habitat.
- 2004** Smallest hatch of pheasant chicks, 58,000.
- 2015** Construction begins on new facility.

12,000,000

Number of pheasants released by Wisconsin DNR since 1928.

46,855

Number of pheasant hunters in Wisconsin.

300,000

Target number of pheasant eggs incubated annually at State Game Farm.

230,000

Target number of pheasant chicks hatched annually.

30,000 to 74,000

Number of pheasants stocked annually.

91

Number of public hunting grounds stocked with pheasants in 2015.

>>> OTHER GAME BIRDS RAISED AT STATE GAME FARM UNTIL LATE 1950s: Hungarian partridge, chukar partridge, bobwhite quail, prairie chicken, ruffed grouse, ducks, geese and turkeys.

>>> MAMMALS RAISED AT HATCHERY UNTIL LATE 1950s: mink, otter, raccoon, fox, pine marten and cottontail rabbit.

>>> MOST COMMON PHEASANT PREDATOR AT STATE GAME FARM: hawks.

>>> MOST COMMON DOGS USED BY WISCONSIN PHEASANT HUNTERS: Labrador retrievers.

>>> TOP WISCONSIN PHEASANT HARVEST COUNTIES: Fond du Lac, Jefferson and Kenosha.

>>> BEST PHEASANT LOADS: #4 to #6 lead, and #2 to #4 steel.