

Hatching success at State Game Farm

Pheasant chicks newly hatched at the State Game Farm need about 8 to 12 hours to dry before they are counted, sorted by sex and moved to rearing facilities.

KELLY MAGUIRE

UPGRADES MODERNIZE THE DNR'S PHEASANT-REARING FACILITY.

Nolan Stracke

Pheasants have been hatching at the State Game Farm for more than 80 years, but it will only be in the coming production season that the process won't be a completely arduous and time-consuming affair. That's thanks to a new hatchery building and equipment finally ready at the facility in Poynette — bringing the Department of Natural Resources' pheasant-rearing operation into the 21st century.



A new hatchery building houses upgraded equipment at the State Game Farm in Poynette.



A pipped egg indicates the start of the hatching process by a pheasant chick, which takes about 24 hours to rotate and chip its shell in order to break out completely.

KELLY MAGUIRE PHOTOS

The new 5,000-square-foot hatchery and modern equipment, including automated egg washers and upgraded incubators, are part of a \$1.7 million project to improve the State Game Farm's efficiency, streamlining the pheasant production process while also ensuring better biosecurity. It brings the facility, first opened in Poynette in 1934, in line with current poultry industry standards for energy use, pheasant disease risk mitigation and accessibility requirements.

It also will make daily operations a little bit easier at the busy site, which hatches about 250,000 pheasant chicks each year to stock public and private lands for hunting and birding.

The labor-intensive task of egg washing, for example, which used to take a staff member eight hours or more per day for 5,300 eggs, will now be done in half the time. And placing the eggs in incubators will go from a two-person all-day job to about a three-hour process, said Kelly Maguire, supervisor of the State Game Farm.

"With the equipment in the new hatchery, the egg washer should cut disinfecting time in half while the number of eggs trayed in an incubator over a two-day period will now only take three hours," Maguire said. "Equipment is up to industry standards. Cleaning is a breeze now."

Perhaps even more importantly, Maguire said, there will be far fewer breakdowns with the new equipment — something that had plagued the outdated and difficult-to-repair old incubators, which had been in use since the 1950s.

"No more late-night checks on machines because the part needed to fix it correctly isn't made anymore," Maguire said.



KELLY MAGUIRE PHOTOS



During a test run of new equipment last year, workers at the State Game Farm move newly hatched pheasant chicks from hatching baskets to transfer crates to recover and await the move to rearing facilities.

These pheasant eggs have been removed from incubators and are awaiting transfer to hatching baskets.

While improved production was not a primary goal of the new hatchery, it will nonetheless be an outgrowth of the new and improved equipment. Already, hunters have seen a benefit in the form of a bonus brood of pheasants produced during a test run of the new hatchery last year. That resulted in the stocking of about 1,500 pheasants before the holidays in December.

“At the time of the initial test, we began to realize the full potential of the hatchery,” Maguire said. “The incubation and successful hatching of eggs is both an art and a science.”

When it became known that extra pheasants would be available in the winter, the DNR saw an opportunity to get hunters out of the house and into the field before the deep freezes of January — Christmas pheasants for hunters. For many on holiday vacation, it was an opportunity that wasn’t to be missed.

“I received many positive comments from hunters who were thankful for the extra stocking before the holidays,” DNR upland game ecologist Mark Witecha said. “Initial reports indicate hunters were out in full force and made the most of this one-time hunting opportunity.”

Improved opportunities

Each year, the DNR stocks about 75,000 pheasants, while partner groups add another 23,000 of these birds to the landscape. Initially, pheasants were stocked to increase the wild pheasant population for the purposes of hunting. But modern research has proven that, over time, stocked pheasants do not have the means to contribute to boosting a wild pheasant population, so current stocking efforts aim at providing quality hunting and

birding opportunities on public lands rather than increasing populations.

Pheasants are stocked on wildlife areas weekly throughout the fall. Some properties also are stocked in the month of December.

The State Game Farm is a key player in the stocking process. About 280,000 eggs are incubated each year, and weekly hatches go for three months, from early April through the beginning of July. At the end of the hatching season, about 250,000 chicks will be hatched.

Many of the pheasant chicks stay at the Game Farm. About 72,000 chicks are raised in two early-1980s brood-rearing barns until they are 6 weeks old. At that time, they are transferred from the indoor rearing facilities to the outdoor range fields until they are stocked onto public lands in the fall.

Other chicks from the State Game Farm go to conservation clubs as part of the Day-Old Chick program, dating to 1936, which partners with clubs throughout the state to rear day-old rooster pheasant chicks for release in the fall. A number of hen chicks also are made available for purchase by the general public.

“The modern role for the State Game Farm is a put-and-take system,” Maguire said. “The State Game Farm’s goal is to produce quality pheasants to be released for the enjoyment of both pheasant hunters and birders. Several projects are utilized to achieve this goal: Day-Old Chick clubs and pheasant stocking.”

Maguire said the Day-Old Chick program stocks approximately 25,000 pheasants each fall on public wildlife areas and some private lands opened to pheasant hunters. The primary stocking program has 83,000 pheasant chicks hatched and

reared at the State Game Farm each year. About 7,000 hens and 700 roosters are chosen for the next season’s breeding stock while the remaining pheasants are stocked on 92 state wildlife areas.

Favorite pastime for decades

The DNR’s pheasant-stocking program has evolved to support continuing demand for quality hunting experiences in the state. Pheasant hunting in Wisconsin has been a favorite among both experienced and novice hunters for almost 100 years, and for good reasons.

“Pheasant hunting is a favorite pastime for many Wisconsin hunters,” Witecha said. “It’s an exciting activity — you get to be up and moving, and nothing gets the adrenaline pumping like having a bird flush at your feet.

“Pheasant hunting is very easy to get into, as it requires minimal investment. All one really needs is a shotgun and shells. It can be done alone or as a group activity with friends and family. And for many hunters, myself included, it is an extremely fun and rewarding experience to pursue game with your hunting dog. The fact that pheasants are such great eating doesn’t hurt either.”

The ring-necked pheasant, originally from Asia, has been a staple of Wisconsin upland game hunting since the early 1900s. In Wisconsin, a series of introductions began in the late 1800s, with Gustave Pabst, son of Pabst Brewery founder Frederick Pabst, largely responsible for successfully establishing pheasants in Waukesha County around 1916.

The first pheasant hunts in Wisconsin took place in 1927 in Jefferson and Waukesha counties. A favorable habitat across the state’s landscape led to an

expansive wild pheasant population by the 1940s.

Over the ensuing decades, though, loss of habitat due to increased farming, urbanization and reforestation led to significant declines in the wild pheasant population. Today's pheasant population is most common in the west-central and southeastern regions of Wisconsin.

In response to habitat loss and population decline, the DNR's Pheasant Stamp program was created in 1991 to provide funds for habitat restoration and management. The successful management of ring-necked pheasants in Wisconsin is in large part thanks to revenues generated from stamp sales.

"The Pheasant Stamp provides about \$200,000 a year for creating and enhancing grassland habitat," Witecha said. "This funding not only benefits pheasants, but a whole host of other grassland wildlife species as well."

Habitat projects funded by Pheasant Stamp dollars along with contributions from partners such as Pheasants Forever, Wings Over Wisconsin and state conservation clubs have allowed for preservation, restoration and management of thousands of valuable acres of nesting and winter habitat for pheasants. Add that to what's happening at the State Game Farm, and it's a bright outlook for pheasant hunting and birding in the state.

Ring-necked pheasants are a favorite game of many hunters (and perhaps their canine companions), and the work of the State Game Farm helps to maintain healthy stocks.



KOREY O'DAY

Help from volunteers

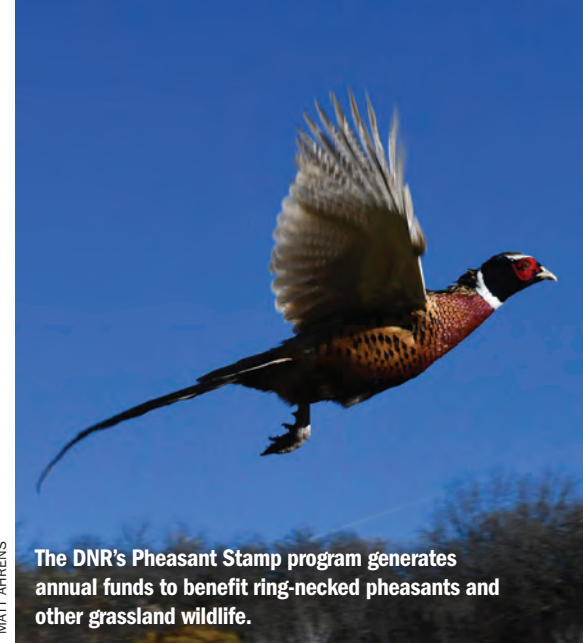
The State Game Farm's origins go back to 1928, when the first program for pheasant propagation was created at Peninsula State Park in Door County, marking the beginning of the DNR's stocking program. Back then, the farm was known as the Wisconsin Experimental Game and Fur Farm. Staff there conducted breeding and propagation research on multiple species of pheasants along with grouse and prairie chickens.

The facility was moved to Poynette in 1934. The highest number of pheasants produced there in a year was in 1957, when 270,000 pheasants were reared. Now, with the new hatchery and equipment, the Game Farm is poised to continue successful pheasant-stocking efforts into the future.

Notably, none of the work would be possible without the help from volunteers, Maguire said, and even with the recent upgrades, those duties will continue. Volunteers perform specialized functions, with worker numbers carefully determined to maintain biosecurity.

"Like any farming operation, the work here is labor-intensive. Staff will always be needed to care for the birds, collect eggs and raise birds. What the new hatchery brings is more time to do this," she said.

"Volunteers play an important role at the State Game Farm. Hatch days during



MATT AHRENS

The DNR's Pheasant Stamp program generates annual funds to benefit ring-necked pheasants and other grassland wildlife.

the spring and stocking in the fall can overwhelm our small staff. Volunteers are brought in on hatch days to assist with counting and determining the sex of each chick."

Experienced volunteers also are utilized in autumn, she added, when the pheasants are rounded up and shipped out.

"During the fall stocking season, thousands of adult pheasants are caught and put in crates each week to bring to wildlife areas for stocking," Maguire said. "The help of volunteers during these times is invaluable to the program."

Through the work of State Game Farm staff, volunteers and partners, Wisconsin bird hunters can take advantage of hunting on public lands with suitable habitat for pheasants. It's a unique element of the state's autumn landscape. With the purchase of a Pheasant Stamp, hunters contribute key support to the restoration and health of valuable grassland habitat, as well as to the stocking program itself.

And with the new hatchery finally completed in Poynette, the pheasant-rearing program has ensured a bright outlook for Wisconsin hunters and birders alike. 🦌

Nolan Stracke is a communications specialist in the DNR's Division of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

>>> MORE INFORMATION

For details about the State Game Farm, including photo slide shows, hatching and release videos, and contact information for the Day-Old Chick program and other operations, go to dnr.wi.gov and search keywords "Game Farm."