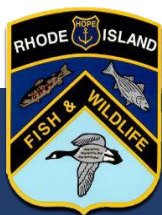


State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Division of Fish & Wildlife

2022–2023 Pheasant Program Summary



Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The ring-necked pheasant is native to Asia and was first brought over to the United States in 1881. Since then, pheasant releases occurred throughout the United States and wild populations became established in suitable habitats. In Rhode Island, pheasants became well established in the early 1900’s from historic releases. At this time Rhode Island’s landscape was dominated by open farmland, pastureland, and grassland. Pheasants could be found statewide, but the largest populations were in southern Rhode Island (e.g., Washington, Bristol, and Newport counties).

State sponsored pheasant stocking began in the 1950’s to supplement declining wild population and to provide additional opportunity for upland bird hunters on state land. At present, the only pheasants occurring on mainland Rhode Island are stocked by the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife or private hunting clubs. The loss of mainland wild pheasant populations in Rhode Island primarily occurred due to landscape changes, with most farmland, pastureland, and grasslands being converted to housing developments and mature forests. This loss of early successional habitat and pheasant nesting cover has similarly caused declines for other species that rely on early successional habitats, including New England cottontail, northern bobwhite, American woodcock, bobolink, prairie warbler, and savannah sparrow. The only remaining wild pheasant population is on Block Island (New Shoreham).

This document provides a summary of the 2022–2023 pheasant hunting season and pheasant hunter survey results, with additional stocking updates for the 2023–2024 season.

2022–2023 Season Dates, Bag Limits and Additional Requirements

The 2022–2023 pheasant season started on October 15, 2022 and ran through February 28, 2023. Pheasant stocking occurred from October 14, 2022 through December 30, 2022, which extended one week longer than planned due to a day of inclement weather during the regular stocking season. A gamebird permit is required to hunt pheasants (outside of RI shooting preserves) and the daily bag limit is 2 birds. Legal hunting hours are sunrise to sunset. This was the second year that

small game check stations were closed and pheasant hunters were not required to register before hunting at Arcadia, Carolina, Durfee Hill, and Great Swamp Wildlife Management Areas.

A youth season occurred the weekend prior to the opener, October 8–9, 2022. Fifty pheasants each were stocked at Durfee Hill, Eight Rod Farm, and Great Swamp Wildlife Management Areas.

2022–2023 Regulation Changes

For the 2023–2024 pheasant hunting season, legal hunting hours are sunrise until sunset, including opening day.

2023–2024 Pheasant Stocking Locations

Note: The number of birds and locations stocked are subject to change

Each [\(MAP\)](#) is linked to an updated georeferenced map detailing pheasant stocking location on each wildlife management area.

Providence County

Black Hut Management Area, Burrillville [\(MAP\)](#), 340 birds/season, stocked 2x/week

Buck Hill Management Area, Burrillville [\(MAP\)](#), 490 birds/season, stocked 2x/week

Durfee Hill Management Area, Gloucester [\(MAP 1\)](#) [\(MAP 2\)](#), 440 birds/season, stocked 2x/week*

Kent County

Big River Management Area, West Greenwich [\(MAP\)](#), 370 birds/season, stocked 2x/week

Nicholas Farm Management Area, Coventry [\(MAP 1\)](#) [\(MAP 2\)](#), 470 birds/season, stocked 2x/week

Washington County

Arcadia Management Area, Richmond/Exeter [\(MAP 1\)](#) [\(MAP 2\)](#) [\(MAP 3\)](#) [\(MAP 4\)](#) [\(MAP 5\)](#), 1590 birds/season, stocked 2x/week

Carolina Management Area, Carolina [\(MAP 1\)](#) [\(MAP 2\)](#) [\(MAP 3\)](#), 840 birds/season, stocked 2x/week

Great Swamp Management Area, West Kingstown [\(MAP\)](#), 840 birds/season, stocked 2x/week *

Newport County

Eight Rod Farm Management Area, Tiverton ([MAP](#)), 340 birds/season, stocked 1x/week*

Sapowet Management Area, Tiverton ([MAP](#)), 240 birds/season, stocked 1x/week

Simmons Mill Management Area, Coventry ([MAP](#)), 40 birds/season, stocked 1x/week**

* Additional stocking for youth weekend not included in total birds/season

**No December stocking at this location

Special Hunt Opportunities, 2023–2024

A youth pheasant hunt will be held on October 14–15, 2023 at the Great Swamp, Durfee Hill, and Eight Rod wildlife management areas. Each site will be stocked with 50 pheasants prior to the youth weekend. Youth pheasant hunters must have either a Junior Hunting License or Hunting License and a Game Bird Permit. Junior hunters must be accompanied by a 21+ adult with a valid Hunting License.

Pheasant Hunter Survey Results, 2022–2023

A total of 1,560 game bird permits were sold during the 2022–2023 hunting season. This is a decrease from the 1,620 permits sold during the 2021–2022 hunting season and may be due to a return to a more normal schedule following the COVID19 pandemic. All hunters who purchased a game bird permit and had a valid email address in the online licensing system were sent a pheasant hunter survey and we obtained 624 responses. Based on the hunter survey, 81% of respondents who purchased a game bird permit hunted during the 2022–2023 season, while 19% did not hunt. This equates to an estimate of 1,263 pheasant hunters in Rhode Island. Pheasant hunters harvested an average (mean) of 4 birds during the 2022–2023 season, the same average harvest as the 2021–2022 season. Pheasant harvest ranged from 0–40 birds, with 30% of hunters harvesting > 4 birds. Although we expected a steep decline upon the cessation of pheasant stocking on December 31, pheasant hunters chased birds from opening day until the close of the season on February 28 (Figure 1). When asked about weekday and weekend hunting, 49% of respondents said they hunted on both weekends and weekdays. Weekend only hunters accounted for 39% of the responses and even fewer hunters (12%) hunted on weekdays only. A small portion of hunters, 10%, restricted their pheasant hunting to only the day after birds are stocked. More than half of the pheasant hunters in Rhode Island hunted over dogs (66%), and one-third of respondents mentioned, at least in part, that incorporating a dog into their pheasant hunting is a reason why they hunt pheasants. Furthermore, pheasant hunters that hunted with a dog harvested over 3 times as many birds as those that hunted without a dog (Figure 2).

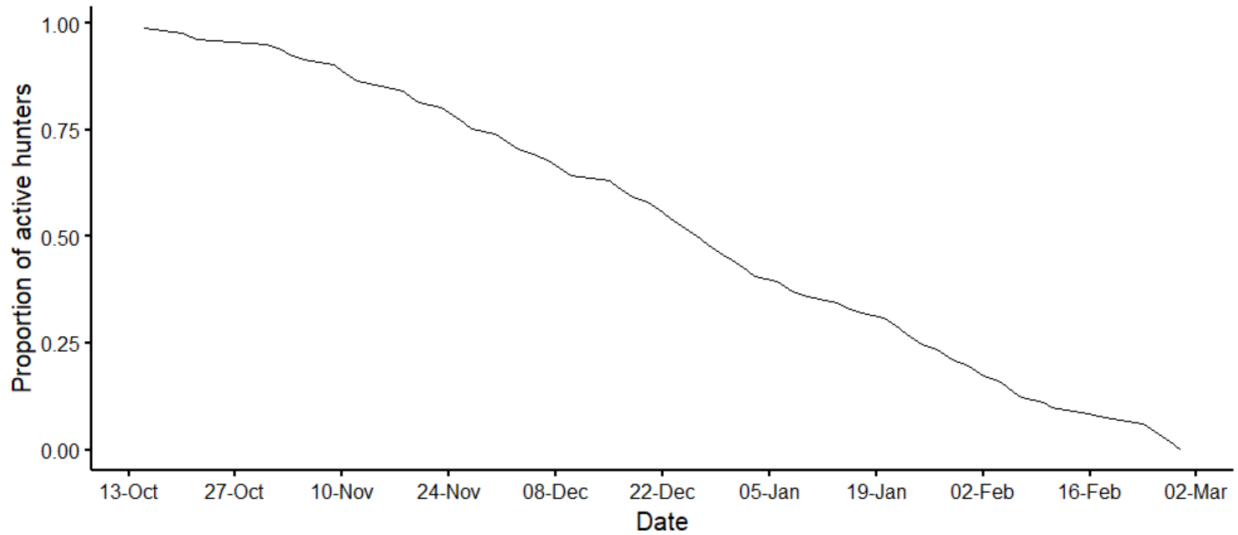


Figure 1. Pheasant hunter activity throughout the 2022–2023 season from self-reports of the last day hunted. Figure based on 423 respondents.

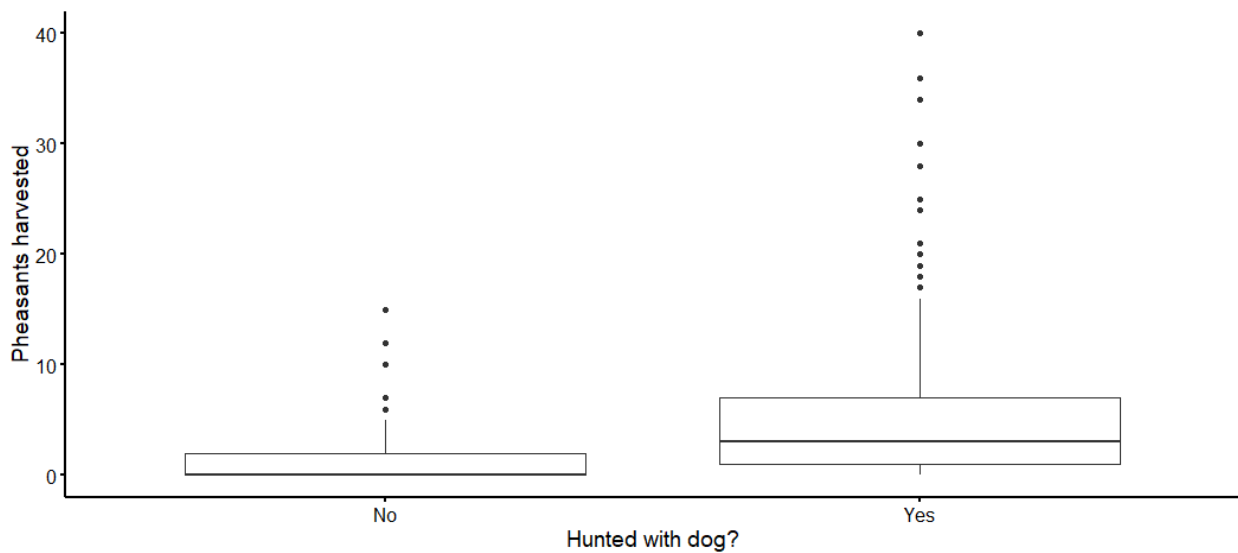


Figure 2. Based on self-reports of the number of birds harvested, hunters that hunted with a dog harvested significantly more pheasants than those that hunted without a dog. On average, those that hunted without a dog harvested 1.5 pheasants and those that hunted with a dog harvested 5 pheasants during the 2022–2023 pheasant season. Figure based on 432 respondents.

Most hunters (64%) who purchased a game bird stamp only harvested/targeted pheasants and did not harvest other small game species while pheasant hunting. A proportion of pheasant hunters also harvested woodcock (21.8%), squirrel (10.5%), cottontail rabbits (11.0%), and mourning doves (12.7%; Figure 3). A handful of hunters harvested other species including waterfowl, snipe, quail, coyote, and fox. Rhode Island pheasant hunters have on average 14 years of pheasant hunting experience with a range of 0-65 years.

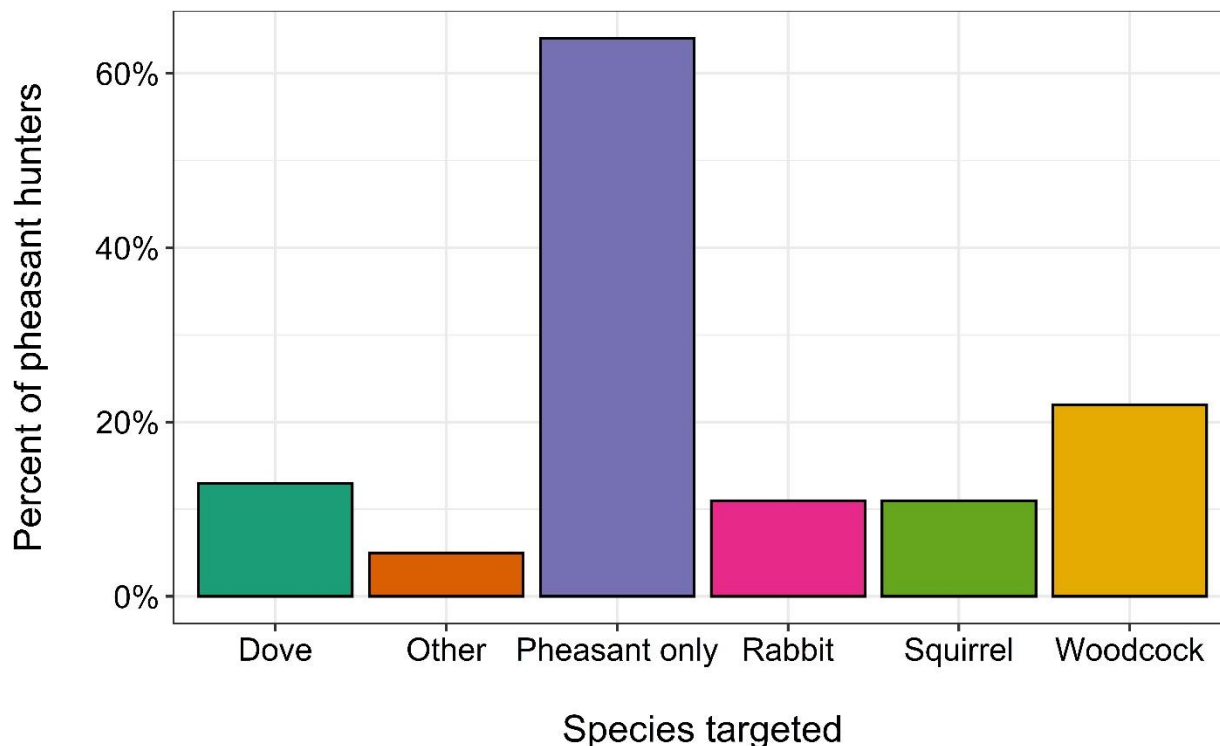


Figure 3. Small game species targeted by hunters who purchased a game bird permit during the 2022–2023 hunting season in Rhode Island. Figure based on 354 respondents.

Most pheasant hunters participate in other hunting opportunities in Rhode Island. Only 23.0% of pheasant hunters only hunted pheasants in Rhode Island. Some of these hunters are out of state hunters from Connecticut and Massachusetts and travel to Rhode Island for Sunday hunting opportunities. Pheasant hunters participated in waterfowl (50.1%), small game (43.9%), white-tailed deer [muzzleloader] (42.2%), white-tailed deer [archery] (40.1%), white-tailed deer [shotgun] (37.6%), spring wild turkey (34.8%), and wild turkey fall (11.6%) hunting. A small portion of pheasant hunters (3.5%) participated in trapping. The Rhode Island pheasant season opens before many other fall seasons and provides an important early-fall hunting opportunity.

Hunter use was highest at the Arcadia, Carolina, Durfee, and Great Swamp management areas during the 2022–2023 season (Figure 4) in both number of hunters which use an area and days afield. Simmons Mill management area had the lowest use overall, but only has one wildlife opening for pheasant stocking. Hunter’s use was generally correlated to the size of the wildlife area, with more hunters spending more day’s hunting at Arcadia wildlife area (Figure 2). Arcadia is the largest wildlife area in Rhode Island and has many fields in which pheasants are stocked.

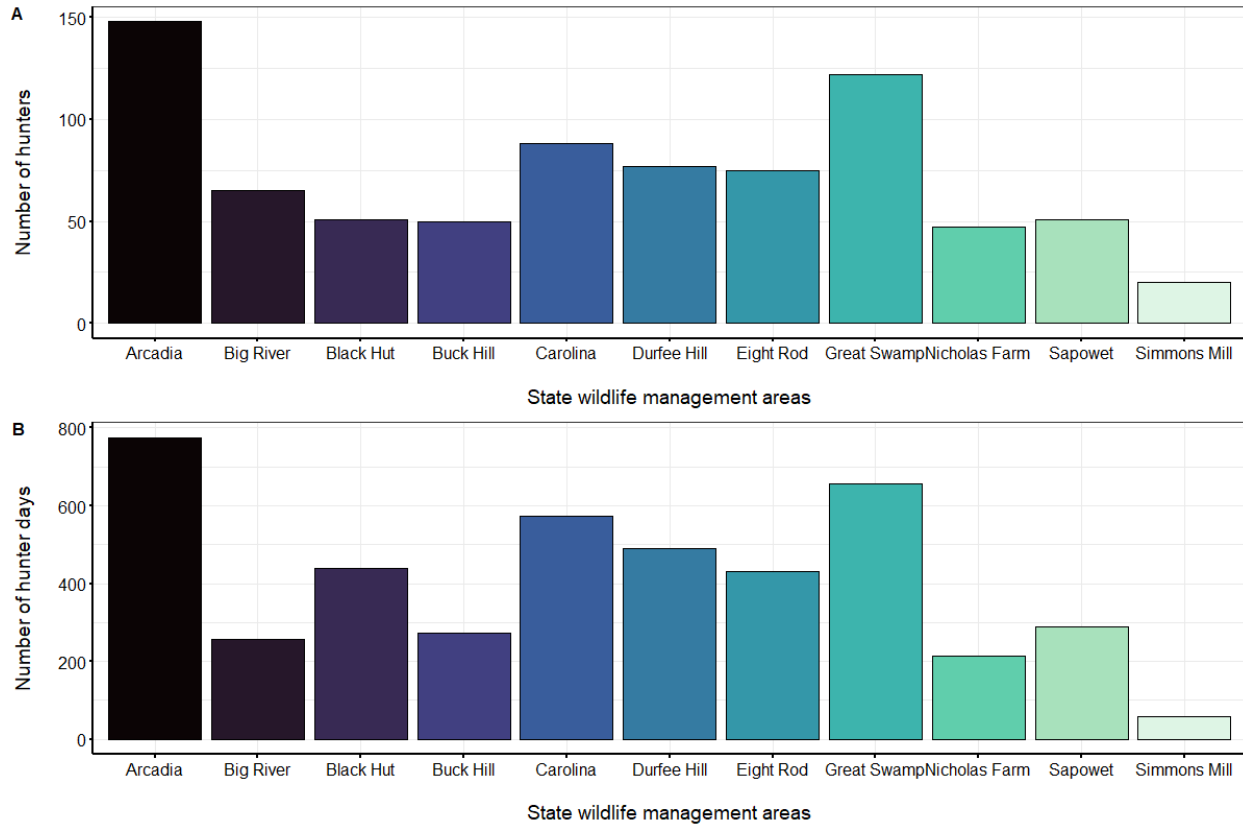


Figure 4. The number of pheasant hunters that used state wildlife management areas during the 2022–2023 pheasant season ranged from 20 to 148 (A), but the number of days hunters spent at each management area varied widely (B), with Arcadia being the most heavily hunted area. Figure based on 417 respondents.

For the third year in a row, 6,000 pheasants were stocked on state wildlife management areas during the 2022–2023 season. The addition of 2,000 stocked pheasants has increased pheasant hunter participation by 14% with 1,560 hunters purchasing a Game Bird permit in 2022, up from 1,365 permits in 2020 (when 4,000 pheasants were stocked).

Rhode Island has one of the lowest rates of hunting participation with 0.7% of residents purchasing hunting licenses and is tied with California and Hawaii. Only 4.3% of pheasant hunters in Rhode Island identify as female and nationally between 9-10% of hunters identify as female. Female hunting participation in Rhode Island is half of the national average, and female hunting participation is one of the fastest growing demographic groups in North America. Similarly, only 1.7% of pheasant hunters were between the ages of 12 to 18 years old and 13.7% were 19 to 30 years old. While there may be some survey bias, with fewer younger hunters participating in the online survey, this general trend indicates that there is little youth participation in the pheasant hunting program. For comparison, 31.4% of pheasant hunters are between the ages of 31 to 45 years old, 31.1% of hunters are 46 to 60 years old, and 21.5% of hunters are 61 years or older.

Spring/Summer 2023 Pheasant Habitat Improvements

In late March/early April, we conducted prescribed burns on 2 wildlife management areas. Prescribed burns help limit the growth of woody species and invasives, burn off the grass thatch layer to promote native, warm season grasses and allow more sunlight to penetrate the ground, and release nutrients to improve soil quality. We conducted prescribed burns of ~16 acres at Pratt Farm off of Summit Road within Arcadia management area, ~2.5 acres in the pheasant field south of Nicholas Road, and ~2.5 acres in the pheasant field north of Nicholas Road within Nicholas Farm management area. We also burned a portion of the forested area north of Nicholas Road. We expect these burns to help produce more robust grasslands and pine barrens and improve pheasant cover.

With a land clearing contract in place, we cut ~8 acres at Buck Hill management area around the northern-most cluster of pheasant fields on the east side of the road. This cut will create an early successional transition zone between grassland and mature forest, with a goal of better holding pheasants in the area and will allow increased sunlight into the fields. We also hope to conduct stump grinding to expand field footprint, depending on staff and equipment availability. The designated land clearing season runs January 1 until April 1 to limit disturbance to hunters in the fall and breeding wildlife in the late spring/summer. We plan to finish this cut next season by expanding the fields located on the west side of the road.

We restructured the agricultural leases at Eight Rod Farm and Carolina management areas to increase quality grassland cover. We replaced a proportion of the buckwheat/sunflower food plots at Eight Rod Farm and Carolina with warm season grasses, increasing pheasant grassland cover by 7 and 13 acres respectively, while keeping a portion of the area in food plots for dove hunting opportunity.

We re-planted 3 fields in 2 wildlife management areas. The seed mix used contains 6 species which in addition to providing pheasant cover, also benefits pollinators and other wildlife.

As discussed internally among biologists and externally with hunters, we minimized mowed paths within the pheasant fields to increase the proportion of grassland cover for birds. Some mowing is still conducted to minimize encroachment by woody vegetation within fields and provide access for stocking trucks and personnel.

Conclusion

The 2022–2023 pheasant hunting season in Rhode Island was a safe and successful season. Pheasant hunter participating a wide variety of Rhode Island hunting programs throughout the fall and winter. Feedback gathered from the hunter survey combined with hunter use of wildlife management areas will be used to guide stocking efforts for the upcoming 2023–2024 season. Six-thousand pheasants will be stocked during the 2023–2024 season from October through December. Our goal is to ensure that we are providing hunters with the best opportunities possible while stocking birds in areas of suitable habitat.

During the 2022–2023 pheasant hunter survey we collected demographic information from participants, and we found that both youth participation and female participation were relatively low for pheasant hunting. Youth participation and recruitment is important to replace an aging hunter community in Rhode Island and ensure pheasant hunting remains a strong tradition in the Rhode Island. Additionally, female participation in hunting is growing nationwide and currently Rhode Island’s female participation rate is half of the national average! Pheasant hunters should take advantage of the youth pheasant season (weekend prior to pheasant opener) to introduce youth to pheasant hunting and should make conscious efforts to create opportunities for more youth and females to participate in pheasant hunting.



Photo credit: Casey Z

Feedback is welcome regarding this report by emailing Elizabeth.Bonczek.ctr@dem.ri.gov