

Ring-Necked Pheasant



[Pheasant Initiative](#)

[How to clean a Pheasant](#)

[Upland Bird Forecast](#)

[Seasons](#)

[Pheasant Crowing Survey - 2012](#)

The ring-necked pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) may be the most popular game bird in the state of Kansas, with between 110,000 and 150,000 hunters pursuing the species each season. Estimated annual harvests have ranged from a low of 425,000 to a high of 824,000 cocks since 1990, typically placing Kansas in the top 3 or 4 pheasant hunting states in the U.S.

Ring-necks were first introduced in Kansas with the release of 3,000 birds in 84 counties in the spring of 1906. The species adapted well to Kansas conditions and populations gradually increased in response to the excellent interspersed grain fields with permanent habitats and to the relatively primitive agricultural practices of the time. The first pheasant season in Kansas was opened statewide from December 1st to 15th in 1917. Following a period of season closure from 1921 to 1931, limited hunting seasons on ring-necks resumed in 1932. Seasons were gradually liberalized over the next 5 decades until a stabilized season format was instituted in 1982 (

read more: A Century of Ringnecks). The season began on the second Saturday in November and ran through January 31 with a bag limit of 4 cocks per day until 2006. In 2006, the pheasant season was opened on the first Saturday in November and ran through the end of January. The daily bag limit did not change.

The ring-necked pheasant is a polygamous species. This means that one rooster will mate with many hens, just as a buck deer can mate with many does. Kansas' cocks-only harvest regulations, and those of other pheasant states, are designed with this in mind. It has been scientifically estimated that 80 to 90% of the ring-neck roosters present in fall can be safely harvested through hunting without hindering reproduction the following spring. Ratios of pheasant cocks to hens in spring indicate that Kansas' pheasant harvest is very conservative, never remotely approaching this maximum allowable harvest. Under the cocks-only format, a reduction in season length or bag limit will do nothing to increase pheasant populations, although such requests are sometimes received from well-intentioned members of the public.



The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks monitors pheasant populations through the use of 4 different types of surveys. The Pheasant Crowing Survey is a listening survey conducted from April 25th to May 15th by KDWP staff along 63 permanently-assigned routes throughout the Kansas pheasant range. The Summer Brood Survey involves KDWP field staff recording all their pheasant observations between mid-July and the end of August. The Rural Mail Carriers Survey is performed 4 times a year with the invaluable assistance of 400-500 rural mail carriers stationed around the state. The Small Game Harvest Survey allows KDWP staff to estimate overall harvest of pheasant and other small game species with the help of hunters who provide their hunting results on a questionnaire following the close of the small game seasons.

Each of these surveys provides rangewide and regional "indices" to annual change and long-term trends. These indices are not suitable for county-to-county comparisons by hunters seeking to maximize hunting success. Hunters should consult the annual upland bird hunting forecast, usually available in mid-September, in that regard.

Most pheasants in Kansas typically begin initiation of egg-laying in late April or early May, leading to a hatching peak that usually occurs in the first or second week of June. Some of the very earliest nests may hatch as early as late April and the latest as late as mid-August. Wheat is a very important pheasant nesting habitat in Kansas and ring-neck production, in any given year, is often linked to the quality of the wheat crop. Moisture and weather conditions that lead to strong early growth of wheat, a prolonged period of maturation, and a later-than-normal wheat harvest will usually result in good pheasant nesting success. Conversely, drought or excessively warm conditions often stunt initial wheat growth, accelerate maturation, and result in an early wheat harvest, all of which reduce pheasant production success ([read more: A Pheasant Odyssey](#)).

Annual fluctuations in Kansas pheasant numbers tend to be driven more by spring and summer conditions than by winter conditions. While Kansas certainly sees its share of dangerous blizzards, losses of adult pheasant during such events generally do not reach the level of magnitude as potential summer losses. Severe drought and/or exceptionally hot spring or summer conditions may result in proportionally greater pheasant production losses by reducing habitat quality and by directly stressing the birds, especially chicks. Drought can also reduce the availability and quality of cover and food during the subsequent winter. In most of Kansas' pheasant range, except possibly the northeast, above average precipitation is usually beneficial for pheasant production.



Historically, Kansas' best pheasant populations were in northwest and southwest Kansas, with northcentral Kansas also producing good populations. Long-term changes in agricultural practices have produced significant declines in pheasant numbers in far western Kansas ([read more: Legacy Lost](#)). In recent years, Kansas' greatest pheasant densities have occurred in a band that includes the eastern 5 tiers of counties in KDWP Region 1 and the eastern 4 to 5 tiers of counties in Region 3, excepting counties along the Oklahoma border. However, significant pheasant hot

spots outside this band do sometimes occur further west in Regions 1 and 3, the westernmost counties of Region 2, and in northern or western counties of Region 4. Pheasants have never established significant populations in southeast Kansas, despite historical releases. They are absent from most of Region 5 or exist at very low densities in the northern and western tiers of counties in this region.

Brood rearing habitats (areas of broad-leaved plants such as annual weeds or perennial legumes) are generally considered most limiting for pheasants in Kansas, but better winter habitats (weed patches, shrub thickets, tall grasses) are also needed in some areas. Over the past decade, KDWP biologists and land managers have focused heavily on providing better brood cover on public lands and on finding ways to integrate quality brood cover and winter cover into cropping systems on private farmlands. KDWP staff have worked cooperatively with USDA officials to improve the quality of habitats provided through federal farm legislation, particularly through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Great potential to intersperse permanent habitats with existing croplands exists within provisions of the Continuous Signup of the CRP ([read more: The Beauty of Buffers](#)). In cooperation with Kansas State University agronomy staff in western Kansas, KDWP biologists have also developed and researched a set of recommendations for wheat cropping systems in western Kansas (particularly wheat-fallow) that are beneficial to both pheasants and farm profitability ([read more: New Life for Wheat-Fallow](#)). Kansas landowners interested in improving pheasant habitat should contact their nearest KDWP District Wildlife Biologist.