

Pheasant, and legends of pheasant



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

As a kid, I spent every possible hour outside in pursuit of fish and game. Immediately upon arriving home from school, and sometimes instead of school, I would grab my fishing rod, 22 rifle or shotgun, and hit one of the neighboring farms, a patch of woods, or a creek, pursuing my quarry, depending on the season that was open.

When the sun settled into the west, I would barge into the kitchen, usually looking for something to eat. On the rare occasion that I actually brought home some fish or game, to say that my grandmother was less than enthralled, would be an understatement.

Grandma was an old country woman and had seen her share of hard times and always knew the importance of game and fish to the family larder. She also knew that a dried-up old trout, carried around in a hot creel all day, or a single dove that was stuffed in the back pocket of my hunting coat, was a lousy excuse for a pork chop. "Land sakes boy, it's bad enough you expect your old granny to cook this stuff for you, but you could

at least clean it before you got home," would be the closest thing to praise I ever got from her.

There was, however, one game bird that would make the old woman jump in the air and click her heels together, and that was a pheasant. On the rare occasion I walked into the kitchen with a pheasant in my hand, she would happily take the bird, clean it, and prepare it in a roaster for supper.

Mention pheasants to any long-time Colorado resident, and they will immediately sit back in the chair, fold their hands in front of them reminiscently, and begin to tell stories of pheasants running free all around our area, and hearing their cackle in the morning, and a beautiful pheasant dinner. I am no exception.

The most common pheasant, the ring-necked pheasant, is not native to North America. He hails from regions in China, Mongolia, and Siberia. Over time, they were introduced to other parts of the world, including Europe and North America, where they are now common.

Pheasants have been in the U.S. for over 200 years, first brought here in 1773. The Old English Black Neck pheasant was first to arrive in 1773, brought here by the governors of New York and New Jersey, but the birds were not strong enough to survive.

Owen Nickerson Denny, an Oregon Native, brought the first Chinese Ring-necked pheasant here in 1881. He had 60 of them shipped here and brought them to Oregon. Most did not survive the trip, but the



A rooster ringneck pheasant, showing off his beautiful plumage in a stubble field. (Courtesy photo/Dave Henke, USFWS)

few that did were released along the Columbia River. He released more birds in 1882, and again in 1884. In the late 1800's, and into the 1900's, many more pheasants were imported from English gamebird farms and released across the United States. Today, the pheasants, who are in the phone book under *Phasianus colchicus*, are in 40 states, with the largest population being in South Dakota.

Male ringnecks have a distinctive white ring around their neck with body plumage of gold, brown, green, purple, and white. A rooster's head has plumage of blue and green with a distinctive red wattle. Females are not nearly as colorful, having mostly drab brown and tan feathers.

A mature rooster that is not on the South Beach Diet may reach 3 pounds, while the girls rarely top 2 pounds. A male will measure up to 3 feet long, but his tail can account for up

to 20 inches of his length. Hens have a very short tail.

All pheasants dine on corn, seeds, and insects. Corn stubble, and the adjoining CRP grounds and overgrown ditch areas, undisturbed grass, are prime habitat to find these birds. When jumped, they can top close to 50mph for a short distance in flight, although they aren't the best flyers. Running is what pheasants prefer to do in the cover when pursued.

Roosters usually have a harem of several females during the spring mating season. Hen pheasants' nest on the ground, producing a clutch of about 12 eggs over a 2-to-3-week period from April to June. The eggs are incubated for 23 days. The hatch success is generally about 50%.

Pheasants are generally near the bottom of the food chain, as they are a prey species. Their main nest predators are the fox, raccoon, skunks, and feral cats. The predators of the adult birds include fox as the

main one, with the hawk and owls a close runner-up.

Rarely does a pheasant die of old age. They can reach 5 years in the wild, and over 10 in captivity, but in the wild, the deck is not stacked in their favor. The average life span is less than 1 year. These poor birds face major sources of mortality beginning the day it is laid in the nest as an egg.

The pheasant population has taken a beating in the U.S. Back in 1968, habitat began declining, and along with it, the pheasant population. The population decline has continued, and the cause basically is a lack of good habitat.

Pheasants are raised by more than 100 farms in the United States. They are released by clubs, individuals, and government agencies to be enjoyed for sport and their tasty, lean meat. Restaurants and grocery stores purchase the processed meats for resale to consumers. The largest pheasant farm in North America is MacFarlane

Pheasants, Inc. and they produce some 1.3 million chicks annually, with 500,000 being raised to maturity.

In Colorado, the severe drought of 2020-23 and the severe winter of 2022-23 severely decreased the pheasant population. The hunter harvest of pheasants in Colorado for the 2023-24 season, was 16,000 birds, the lowest on record. The good news is, weather conditions in 2024, being fairly warm and dry in May and June, probably helped the hatch and survival of chicks, which can be hampered by wet, cool conditions right after nests hatch. The spring cull counts show a 65% increase in Northeast Colorado.

As a teenager, I spent many a day in Northeast Colorado hunting pheasants. I have many fond memories of those game birds, but the fondest is walking into the kitchen and seeing my grandmother's scowl turn into a big smile, when I held out a plump pheasant for our dinner.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for The Nautical Mile, and other saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

It's the season for all things pumpkins, gourds, and squash

Gardening From A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

It's the season for all things pumpkins, gourds, and squash

If you don't want to go straight from Halloween to Christmas decorations, many of those pumpkins, gourds, and squash can be used for late fall decorating as well as for Thanksgiving. Better yet, some pumpkins and squash could be eaten! After all, they helped sustain the Pilgrims through their hard winters. So don't toss them after Halloween is over.

Maybe you're wondering, what's the difference between pumpkins, squash, and gourds. Actually all

three of them are in the same Cucurbitaceae family but there's over 900 species and over 100 different genera, so I won't go into all of that. I'll just say they're all technically fruits because they develop from the flowering part of the plant and contain seeds. I'm thinking you might not want to refer to them as fruits around most people though unless you're trying to dazzle them with your astounding intellect or get laughed out of town.

Here's where it gets crazy. Pumpkins are a type of squash, but not all squash are pumpkins. What? The distinction is often based on shape and common usage rather than strict taxonomy. They say Pumpkins are typically round, orange, and used for carving or baking

but I have to disagree with that. Have you seen some of the cool pumpkins that have been developed in recent years? Take knucklehead pumpkins for example. I'm thinking there are two camps when it comes to these guys. You'll either love them or hate them. You'll know what I mean if you've seen them. I refer to them as "warty" pumpkins. I think they're really cool and I'm sure most kids would love these green, orange, and yellow pumpkins that are covered in wart-like bumps. The "warts" are actually created by the buildup of excess sugars in the flesh. These pumpkins were genetically engineered to look this way! It took over ten generations of cross-breeding to produce these knuckleheads and they finally received

a patent for them in 2008. The warts grow larger as the pumpkin matures. I thought I'd save some seeds from one of the pumpkins and grow my own but I found out you need to buy the seeds or they won't be true to the parent pumpkin and you'll probably end up with a wart-less pumpkin.

With that said, some pumpkins will develop "warts" because of disease or over watering. These warts aren't very cool looking and are more like pocks or sunken spots and are not the same. I haven't tried eating knucklehead pumpkins but I'm told they have a mild, sweet, flavor. You can use these in almost any way you can think of. You can use them to make cake, muffins, soups, or any way that you might use your



Your Halloween landscape could easily be transformed into a festive Thanksgiving display. So don't toss those Halloween pumpkins. They might have a lot of life left in them. Let those autumn decorations live on well into the Thanksgiving season. (Photo/Linda Corwine McIntosh)

typical pumpkins. You can even roast the seeds and eat them.

In general, thin skinned

See PUMPKINS page B3

GREAT OUTDOORS Company

Cross-Country, Skate & Back-Country Equipment In Stock

FISCHER

ROSSIGNOL

10 SOUTH SELIG AVE

MONTROSE, COLORADO 81401

970-249-4226