Raising Pheasant Chicks

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Raising Pheasant Chicks

The Brooder House and Equipment

The brooder house for pheasant chicks should be weather tight, free from drafts and rodent proof. It can be a special game bird brooder house, one that has been used for rearing chickens, or a part of another building (such as a garage) that can have a penned in portion.

In all cases, the brooding area should allow each bird at least 1 square foot of floor space. The pheasant is a wild creature and tends to be nervous; therefore, a little too much brooder space is better than too little.

Brooder

The easiest way to brood 50 pheasant chicks is with a heat lamp. This is called cold room brooding, because the heat is directed at the chicks, irrespective of the temperature of the brooder house.

Use a 250 watt, red-end, infrared heat lamp. If possible, get the lamp with a pyrex glass. It won't break if you accidentally hit it with a few drops of water.

The heat lamp burns continuously. If you make your own, be sure it has a porcelain socket. (Ask your light company for plans.) The best heat lamp unit is a commercial one made especially for the brooding of chicks and pigs. This unit generally has a reflector and built-in safety factors.

Heat from the lamp keeps the birds warm, and the red color helps reduce cannibalism. The heat lamp needs no hover, but a reflector is desirable. When using a heat lamp, you can see your chicks at all times, which makes it easier to care for the birds than with a conventional brooder.

Hang the heat lamp from the ceiling, and make sure it can be adjusted to 15-18 inches above the floor.

Hover bulbs with regular light bulbs as a source of heat don't provide constant heat and aren't recommended. Oil, coal and gas brooders heat the whole house and shouldn't be used for hot weather brooding. Battery brooders are unsatisfactory.

Regardless of the kind of brooder used, read and follow the manufacturer's directions.

Feeding and Watering Equipment

Two chick feeders 2 feet long will take care of 50 birds until they're 7 weeks old. Two quart-size chick waterers will also be needed for the first 7 weeks. The addition of a 2-foot trough-type chick waterer is desirable after the second week.

If you buy the plastic-type mason jar waterers, the green-colored ones will attract the chicks and aid in teaching them to drink.

Chick Guard

Use a chick guard to confine the chicks to the brooder the first 3 to 5 days. The guard keeps them from straying away from the heat and prevents floor drafts. Use roll roofing or metal and cardboard boxes.

A 12-foot length of chick guard will make a circle about 3 feet in diameter, which is adequate for heat lamp brooding.

Yard

To grow rapidly and develop into strong healthy birds, pheasants must have sunlight and exercise. A big yard is essential. Overcrowding will contribute to feather picking and cannibalism. The less crowded the chicks are, the better they will be able to adapt themselves to the wild after they're released.

Each chick should have at least 10 square feet of yard space (50 chicks will need 500 square feet of yard). If possible don't yard pheasants on grounds where chickens have been raised. Chickens have many diseases that can remain dormant in soil for long periods and then infect the pheasants.

The birds will do better if the yard has natural grass and weed vegetation. Plant oats or some cereal grain if the yard is bare. The grain should be planted early enough so it will be 4 to 5 inches high when the chicks are ready to go outdoors.

Pheasants like shade; natural bushes are preferred. If there are no bushes, cover a part of the pen with brush, snowfences, old roofing or sacking to provide shade.
What to Do Before the Chicks Arrive

Day-old pheasant chicks are delicate, easily injured and subject to many diseases. Time spent in preparing for the chicks before they arrive in the brooder house is worthwhile.

Remove all the old litter from an old brooder house. Scrape the floor and walls if necessary. Scrub the walls and floor with a disinfectant (lye used as directed is good), and make sure all cracks are cleaned and disinfected. Don’t use a tar or asphalt sanitizer unless the house can stand empty for at least 30 days—they burn the chicks’ feet and may cripple them. Clean and disinfect the feeders and watering equipment (lye will damage galvanized metal).

As soon as the house is dry, put down a good litter. Expanded vermiculite is one of the best because it’s fireproof. Shavings or commercially processed flax straw are also good. Peat moss can be used if it isn’t too fine. Sand isn’t recommended because it may get into the eyes of the chicks and blind them.

Put a layer of paper (the kind made for starting chicks) or a white muslin cloth over the litter for the first 5 days. Turn the paper or cloth over when it becomes soiled. This is to keep the chicks from eating the litter and starving to death rather than learning to eat the feed meant for them. Don’t use a slick paper like wrapping paper; the chicks slip on it and may develop leg trouble.

The Brooder

Check the heat lamp to see that it works. Check the hanging apparatus for ease in raising and lowering the lamp. Be sure the lamp can’t fall into the litter. If it should fall it may cause the brooder house to burn and destroy the chicks. Adjust the heat lamp according to the weather when you put in the chicks. Follow the directions that come with the lamp.

Feed

You will need at least 2 pounds of gamebird or turkey starter for each chick until they’re released when 7 weeks old. Don’t use chicken starter for pheasant chicks, since it’s too low in protein (starter should be at least 27 or 28 per cent protein).

After the first 3 or 4 days, fresh green weeds and other plants should be cut daily for the chicks. Be sure to provide several natural roosting sites of fresh tree branches for the birds to hide in. Make sure numerous roosts are available to avoid crowding and possible cannibalism.

Secure and have on hand by the 4th week chick scratching grain or screenings from your grain cleaning operations. If you use screenings, run them through the fanning mill a couple of times with a high wind to get rid of the chaff. The screenings should contain broken kernels of grain as well as wild millet, buckwheat and pigeon grass seeds. The pheasant needs a hard grit (not oyster shell). Four pounds of chick size grit should be enough for 50 birds through 7 weeks.

Care of Chicks After They Arrive

When the chicks arrive, take them out of the boxes, dip their beaks into water and then the feed and put them under the heat lamp. Dipping the beak into water and feed helps the chick learn what it is and where it is.

Adjust the height of the heat lamp so the chicks huddle in a small circle with a vacant spot directly beneath the bulb. If the chicks bunch up directly under the lamp, it is hung too high, and they’re not getting enough heat. If the chicks spread out in a large circle, the lamp is too close to the floor and there is too much heat.

When the temperature is correct and the chicks are comfortable, remember these things:

1. Leave the chick guard up all the time for the first three days (4 days if there’s bad weather). On the 4th or 5th day take the guard down during the day and put it up each night. On the 6th day, remove it entirely, making sure numerous roosts are available by this time.

2. Remove the litter paper or cloth at the end of the 5th day. If it becomes soiled before this time, turn it over, so the chick may use the clean side.

3. Inspect the chicks often during the first week, especially at night, making sure they’re comfortable—not too hot or cold. Be careful not to scare the chicks when you work around them.

4. At the end of the 1st week, raise the light 2 to 3 inches each week to reduce the temperature. Let the chick’s circle under the light be your guide.

5. At the end of the 3rd week, discontinue the heat during the day, weather permitting, and turn it on again at night. By the end of the 4th week, if the weather is nice, it should be possible to discontinue the heat entirely.

6. Allow some ventilation in the brooder house, but be sure there are not drafts blowing directly on the young pheasants.

7. If possible, a veterinarian should examine one or more of the chicks every 4 to 5 days to check their general condition.

Feeding

1. Game bird diseases are easily spread through dirty feeding and watering equipment. Clean all feeders each day in scalding water. The feeders should be thoroughly dry before feed is put back into them.

2. Keep feed in the hoppers at all times, except when cleaning them.

3. For the first 5 days, scatter some crushed starter pellets on paper plates or squares of rough paper, and put them inside the guard with the hopper—this helps the chick learn to eat. If you buy paper plates, get green ones; they attract the birds to the feed. Brightly colored marbles in the feeders often help attract the chicks to feed.

4. Sprinkle a small amount of chick-size grit over the feed the first day and every 4th day after that. Be careful not to use too much grit, or the chicks will go on a grit binge and not eat enough feed to make them grow strong and healthy.

5. When the chicks are allowed in the yard put a feeder there, so they won’t have to go back into the house for food.
6. At the end of the 3rd week, sprinkle a small amount of chick scratch grain or screenings on the feed. At the end of the 4th week, put the grain or screenings in a separate feeder.

Watering
1. For the first 3 days, give the chicks warm water. After that they can drink cold water. (Adding brown sugar to the water during the first 3 days helps train the chicks to drink.)
2. Put small stones in the chicks' water fountains for the first few days, to keep the chicks from falling in and drowning. Put a fountain on each side of the heat lamp inside the chick guard, so they don't have far to go to drink.
3. Scald the water founts every day and change the water twice a day. Chicks like water free of litter and dirt.
4. Move a water fountain into the yard as soon as the chicks are allowed outside.
5. Some raisers use an anti-biotic and vitamin solution in the water (check with your veterinarian).

Yarding and Ranging
1. When the chicks are a week old, let them run in the yard on warm sunny days. Chicks can squeeze through a 1-inch mesh wire until they're about 10 days old, so put a board along the bottom of the wire to keep them in. A strip of tarpaper or chick guard will prevent crowding.
2. Provide shade for the yard. Natural bushes are the best, or put tree branches (evergreens are good) or sacking over the top of the yard. Be sure the floods are abundant. Pick plenty of fresh greens daily for the birds. Spread the greens throughout the pen. Sufficient greens can usually be obtained from road ditches.
3. Drive the young pheasants into the brooder house each night and let them out in the mornings until they're 5 weeks old. After this, give them free access to both house and yard. Brooder houses should have rounded corners to prevent crowding.
4. Put small stones in the chicks' water founts for the first few days, to keep the chicks from falling in and drowning. Put a fountain on each side of the heat lamp inside the chick guard, so they don't have far to go to drink.
5. Scald the water founts every day and change the water twice a day. Chicks like water free of litter and dirt.

How to Release the Birds
The success of this program depends on releasing the birds directly from the rearing pen into good, adequate cover. This way the pheasants will be able to take to cover with the least amount of disturbance.

To release the birds, open the gate of the yard and allow the birds to wander out. Don't drive them out of the yard. Place a feeder and waterer outside the yard, so the birds can slowly become accustomed to their outside surroundings. In a few days the birds will adapt themselves to their new life in the field.

At this stage the young birds are easy prey for predators. A variety of predatory animals find young pheasants tasty. Some of this loss can be eliminated by making sure the birds have a dense stand of brush and weeds to live in. Confining the family dog and cats for a few days will also help eliminate possible losses.

Predator control is no substitute for good habitat, but intensive predator control on private land may increase the survival of birds until the hunting season.

This control should be directed only at unprotected mammals, especially stray dogs, cats, skunks, raccoons, foxes and other small predators.

Under no circumstances should you attempt to kill hawks, owls or eagles! These birds are all protected by state and Federal law, and anyone who kills them is subject to large fines and imprisonment. If you need assistance with predator control, contact any Game, Fish and Parks employee or the Extension wildlife specialist at South Dakota State University.

If the birds are to be released away from the farm, be sure to pick a place where good food and cover are available. A natural supply of water also helps. Good cover would be dense stands of sweetclover, sunflowers, marsh vegetation, mature shelterbelts or any of the annual weeds. Dense, brushy draws that haven't been grazed closely by livestock will also give the young pheasants a better chance to survive. The release place should be close to fields of corn or grain, so the birds have a convenient supply of food.

Releases into areas where populations of wild pheasants already exist may do little to increase the numbers of pheasants in the long run. The wild birds are already adapted to their surroundings, and will increase only to the point the cover, food and weather will allow.

When releasing the birds from crates at a site away from the rearing pens, open the crates and walk away quietly. Let the birds wander out by themselves. Don't shake them out or throw the birds into the air to make them fly away.

Place a supply of grain near the crates so the birds will have food until they're accustomed to their new surroundings. Leave the crates at the release site for a couple of days, if possible.

Releasing pen-raised pheasants is a controversial subject. Birds are often released at 7 to 10 weeks of age. Some people will hold them until they're more mature, and release them during the hunting season for "put-and-take" hunting. Regardless of when you release your birds, always remember that the wilder they are, the better chance they have for survival and providing good hunting. Tamed birds rarely survive for more than a few days after their release.
Even with the best management and care, you may harvest only 25 per cent of the birds you release. Don't expect many birds to survive the winter, for research has shown that less than 3 per cent of released birds survive the winter to reproduce the following spring. The reasons include: the good habitat that is available to the released birds through the winter is likely to already be supporting the maximum of wild pheasants, and hens are not able to compete with the cocks for food during the winter. Since hens are important for reproduction during the spring, it is important that 80 to 90 per cent of the cocks be harvested during the fall, so more hens can overwinter. In the spring one cock will mate with as many as 12 to 15 hens.

If you want to know what quality of pheasants you are raising, band every pheasant you release. Keep records of how many pheasants you band and release, and how many bands are returned during the hunting season. This will tell you how well your program is working, especially if you continue it over several years.

Cover, Food and Water Requirements

No matter how good a job you have done in raising the pheasants, they must be able to find adequate cover and food upon release, or they'll have difficulty in surviving. Good pheasant range should have the following percentages of the various land-use types: cropland—60 to 85 per cent; grassland—10 to 20 per cent; undisturbed weed vegetation—5 to 10 per cent; and woody or shrub cover—1 to 5 per cent. These cover types must be well-mixed, not in large blocks.

Pheasants need several different types of cover to give them a safe place to feed, rest and nest. Cover must protect the birds from their natural enemies and shelter them from the weather. Some of the kinds of cover needed by pheasants are:

1. Winter Cover
Winter cover consists of shrubs, shrub and tree combinations or tall weedy vegetation, such as marsh vegetation, sweetclover or annual weeds. These areas should be large enough or arranged in such a way that part remains free of drifting snow. Large, thick shelterbelts and wetlands are the best winter cover.

These areas should be located near a good food supply, such as a picked, but unplowed, cornfield. Winter is a critical period for pheasants as well as other wildlife. Severe winter storms will often kill birds by packing snow around their beaks and nostrils, causing them to suffocate. Heavy, dense cover makes it possible for pheasants to survive these storms.

2. Escape Cover
Escape cover is about the same as winter cover, plus areas with vegetation of at least medium height and density. This provides a place for pheasants to hide from their natural enemies.

3. Loafing Cover
Loafing cover is provided by any vegetation described for winter and escape cover. Field or cover edges also provide loafing cover.

4. Nesting Cover
Nesting cover is medium height grassy or weedy vegetation of medium density or also unused or lightly grazed bunch-type vegetation. To assure good nesting success, at least 5 to 10 per cent of the land should provide undisturbed nesting cover during May and June.

In many areas intensive mowing destroys nests as well as killing hens and chicks. Intensive grazing eliminates suitable nesting cover. By delaying mowing, especially roadsides, until after July 15 you won't destroy many nests or young broods.

5. Roosting Cover
Roosting cover is medium to tall vegetation, including annual weeds, alfalfa and small grain stubble during snow-free months. Areas of sweetclover, tall annual weeds and tall marsh vegetation provide the best roosting cover during the winter.

6. Food
Wild pheasants eat many things. When young, they eat great quantities of insects, gradually relying more on farm crops of corn, barley, oats and millet that are waste grains in the fields. Various weed seeds and green leafy materials are also taken. These feeds are staple foods.

Emergency foods consist of the fruits of some trees and shrubs, such as Russian olive, wildrose and boxelder. Fall plowing has caused a serious winter food shortage in many parts of South Dakota.

Sometimes pheasants have difficulty in finding enough food, especially when freezing rain covers the ground with ice or when the snowfall is heavy. This doesn't happen too often in areas where corn is raised and cattle are fed grain in feedlots.

7. Water
Water from ponds, lakes and streams usually isn't required, except during periods of drought or extremely hot weather, when dew is lacking. Lack of free water during these times may be critical.

8. General
A pheasant doesn't wander too far during a year's time, if it has the things it needs in a small area. Movement studies in southeastern North Dakota have shown year-round movement to be 3 miles or less, but all of the birds' requirements should be within one-half mile for maximum populations.
Pen-raised birds sometimes move long distances after being released, probably because they don’t find adequate cover where they are released. Solve this by releasing your birds in good cover.

The year-round needs of pheasants should be duplicated as many times as possible on any farm to maintain the highest populations.

Good Luck!

### PHEASANT RAISING CHART

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<tr>
<th>First Week</th>
<th>2nd wk.</th>
<th>3rd wk.</th>
<th>4th wk.</th>
<th>5th wk.</th>
<th>6th wk.</th>
<th>7th wk.</th>
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<td>1</td>
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#### BROODING
- Keep guard around brooder: X X X
- Remove guard in day, replace at night: X X
- Remove guard entirely: X
- Use litter cloth: X X X X X
- Keep brooder lamp at proper height to insure proper brooding temperatures: X
- Brooder left on day and night: X X X X X X X X X
- Brooder off in day, on at night: X

#### FEEDING
- Have proper feed in hoppers all the time. Clean and refill hoppers daily.
- Put feed on rough paper plates or egg case cup flats inside guard: X X X X X
- Add chick grain to starter: X
- Have grain and starter separate: X X X
- Have feed hoppers in house and yard: X X X X X X X

#### WATERING
- Clean and refill water founts daily.
- Give chicks warm water (cold water all right after third day): X X X
- Have small stones or large marbles in base of founts: X X X X X X X
- Have founts in house and yard: X X X X X X X

#### RANGING
- Keep chicks in brooder house: X X X X X X
- Let chicks into yard if weather warm and dry: X
- Drive chicks into house at night, let out in day: X X X X X
- Give chicks free run of house and yard, both day and night: X X
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