



Ring-necked pheasant hen

Simple steps to bolster game bird habitat

By Scott Hininger

Wyoming's wild game birds – including ring-necked pheasants, turkey, greater sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, and gray partridge – require the basics: food, shelter, and water.

These are all critical to maintain a viable population of wild game birds. You don't have to have all three life-sustaining requirements on your land if one or more of them is available on adjacent land.

Almost any water source will do for wild birds, and water is a fairly easy resource to provide in the form of ponds, streams, or other water developments. Cover is not as easy to establish, but by planting some shrub rows or shrub patches that will grow into a thicket or dense area, you can accommodate for cover.

Food Sources Need Bolstering

Generally speaking, the most deficient resource needed for wild bird habitat is a food source. Start by selecting some type of grain such as corn, oats, wheat, or barley. These crops can provide a good source of nutrition along with cover.

Another crop to consider is Austrian winter pea. This legume is high in protein and also fixes nitrogen into the soil for other plants to use. A person can also enhance a pasture by planting one of the new, improved varieties of grasses, which, in many cases, can be taller and thus provide cover and food.

In a pasture situation, legumes such as birdsfoot trefoil, vetch, sainfoin, alfalfa, and clover can be added – all really enhance bird and wildlife habitat.

When preparing a food plot one acre or larger (this can be in 20-foot rows across a pasture or field) control weeds first. It is best to plant into a field as free of weeds as possible, with noxious weeds a primary concern. Check with local University of Wyoming Cooperative

Extension Service offices for spring planting dates (contact information is at <http://ces.uwyo.edu/Counties.asp>). Generally speaking, planting dates in Wyoming are mid-April in the southern part and mid-May in the northern part. Austrian winter peas are very cold tolerant and can be planted very early in the year, or they can be planted in the fall.

Contact a weed and pest control district for tips on weed control (www.wyoweed.org/).

A key method to control weeds is to use a no-till drill or interseeder to plant the field. These methods do not disturb the land as much, thus reducing weed seeds germinating and also holding more moisture in the ground. Some conservation districts in Wyoming have this equipment for rent. The least effective method is to simply broadcast the seed and then run a harrow over the land. The key to good seed germination is soil-to-seed contact. Contact information for conservation districts in Wyoming is at www.conservewy.com/DISTRICTS.htm.

Protect from Predators

A key point to remember when planting food plots is to make sure they're in blocks or areas large enough to help protect game birds from predators. The bigger the block size, the better (100 acres is better than one acre, for example). It is recommended to not plant in rows as this allows predators such as coyotes and foxes to work down the rows and more easily catch the birds. If the food plots, cover, and water are within one-half mile to one mile apart, this will work; however, the closer the better.

Scott Hininger is a University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service educator serving Johnson and Sheridan counties. He can be reached at (307) 674-2980 or shininger@sheridancounty.com.

Potential Seed Mix

One potential seed mix to produce food for game birds includes 25 pounds of Austrian winter peas, 5 pounds of pubescent wheatgrass, 5 pounds of tall wheatgrass, 5 pounds of grain sorghum, 5 pounds of proso millet, and 2 pounds of vetch per acre. Most feed stores offer mixes, and many organizations such as Pheasants Forever offer mixes and recipes; however, make sure the mixes are compatible for your area. This particular mix will grow in most of Wyoming, but some of the grains may not make as much seed in cooler areas having shorter growing seasons.

Rainfall and soil type will also dictate the amount of production. If irrigation is available, this should really increase production and help ensure a successful planting.

To maintain a successful food plot, you will probably have to reseed the annuals every three to five years.

A rule of thumb is the planting depth should be no more than two to three times the diameter of the seed. So, the bigger the seed, the deeper it can be planted. Most legumes, like alfalfa, should be planted no deeper than a quarter of an inch, and corn can be planted as deep as an inch. Generally, go with a lower seeding rate, particularly if mixing together several varieties of seed. Remember, the object is to have habitat and not necessarily top production.

Variety is a Goal

The more variety of plant species planted, the greater the diversity available for wild birds. This diversity will provide different food

components at different times of the year, which, hopefully, will correspond to the needs of the wild birds.

The other consideration is there are two critical times of the year for wild birds. The first is in the spring. Heavy cover helps protect nesting females from predators, and cover and good food sources are necessary for chick survival. The other is in the fall to provide food and cover for the birds going into winter. So, winter cover and spring hatching cover are very important not only for survival but also for reproduction.

By doing a little planting each year, the number of wild birds should dramatically increase. By working with neighbors, larger blocks of land can be planted or resources combined to provide the needed cover, food, and water.

For additional resources, check the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's *Ring-Necked Pheasant Habitat Development* bulletin and others available at <http://gf.state.wy.us/habitat/ExtBulletins/index.asp>, and the Pheasants Forever Web site www.pheasantsforever.org/page/1/HabitatSection.jsp.



Red clover