

Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board
Winter '09 /'10

NEWSLETTER UPDATES

I need to take a moment and remind our readers that if you have any updates that need taken care of (change of address, change to online viewing, etc) we need to be made aware as soon as possible to update our paper and email listings. We truly appreciate it. Thank you!

New Glenwood High School Prairie Site

This fall one of our board members came to us inquiring about the possibility of putting a prairie site on the grounds of the new high school. Mr. Brad Rasmussen, who is also the Glenwood High School Science instructor, suggested the site would help control erosion and it would also function well as an outdoor classroom and a learning tool. Of course we were thrilled with the idea. He received the necessary approval, and we moved on from there. MCCB Naturalist, James Gates, arranged a field trip to allow Mr. Rasmussen's students to visit several MCCB properties and to collect seed from native grasses and forbs that would be used in the seeding at the new high school. The students learned to identify some of the different native grasses and several forbs species as well. The seed collected from these sites was then used at the new high school's selected prairie site. The students were present during the seeding and were able to assist by applying seed by hand before James used an ATV and small native grass drill to drill more seed into the soil. With any luck at all, the students will be able to see some of the emerging plants this spring and when they return for their class reunions in the future.

Pre-Registering for MCCB Public Programs

Some of you may have noticed recently that we have begun requesting pre-registration for public programs held by the MCCB. There are multiple reasons why we are now requesting pre-registration. Some of the reasons are:

- a) To get a rough head count
- b) Determine if extra staff or volunteers will be needed
- c) Disaster management tool – allows us to contact people if programs are postponed or cancelled
- d) Time and resource management

Pre-registration can be done by calling the MCCB office at (712)-527-9685. If no one is available to get your information there is an answering machine, please leave your name, the event you wish to attend, your phone number and the approximate number of people in your party. Programs will still be provided and performed for free; the only change is the pre-registration for MCCB hosted public programs.

Guest Presenter at Owl Prowl I Program

We will be hosting our first Owl Prowl program for the new year at Pony Creek Park on February 13th, 2010 at 7 pm. Denise Lewis from Raptor Recovery Nebraska has agreed to be our special guest speaker for the evening. We will begin the evening with an introduction to some of our native owls by Denise and several of her lively feathered friends. After her presentation, we will work our way through the north trail at Pony Creek Park, calling to owls and listening for their responses.

You will need to dress warmly and provide your own flashlight. Please be sure to pre-register for the program by calling 712-527-9685.

Meet Your WILD Mills County Neighbors!

Some of you may know this issues "neighbor" pretty well. You may see the brightly colored male and drab brown colored female birds along the roadsides as you drive to work in September, but they disappear come opening day in late October. We are talking about *Phasianus colchicus*, the elusive Ring-necked Pheasant.

Ring-necked pheasants are rather intriguing birds. Much like the Peacock, the rooster (male) is highly colorful with a mix of copper, brown, gray, black and rust colors on the body, a shimmering dark green neck with a white ring (hence the name) and bright red wattles on the head. The females are a light brown with black marks on the feathers. Juvenile birds have color and markings similar to the female birds until they are 10 weeks old, at which point they begin to show colorings of their sex. By 16 weeks old, the juveniles will appear similar to the adults.

The roosters have a spur on each leg. The spur is made up of keratin, the same substance that our fingernails are made of. The younger males spur is nearly 3/8 of an inch long, whereas the adult males have spurs that are nearly an inch long. A rooster uses the spurs to establish a breeding territory and to defend its harem of females from other males. The male will also "whistle" as it flies, but the female is generally very quiet. The male would be a distraction to a predator allowing the hen to escape. More than once I've stirred a rooster up while walking through CRP and seen a female within 5 feet of me running away through the tall grass.

The ring-necked pheasant is polygynous, meaning a single rooster will mate with multiple hens during the breeding season (March leading into April). A single mating with the rooster will allow the hen to produce eggs for up to three weeks. A hen will lay an egg a day, depositing up to 12 eggs in the first nesting attempt. If successful, the young emerge in 23 days, with the majority hatching in June. Hen pheasants will reneest up to 4 times per year if the previous nest was destroyed. The first nest

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would be the best, due to the amount of energy expended on the eggs. Each attempt to re-nest reduces the number of eggs deposited. If none of the attempts are successful, the hen will simply try again next year, if she survives.

As the young develop, they will pursue insects, slugs, spiders and other invertebrates for food. As they mature, they will eat fewer insects, moving more to plant seeds, berries and grains like corn & soybeans. The birds also draw water from their food.

The ring-necked pheasant is not native to North America. It was brought from Asia to America in the early 1880s and introduced in Iowa around 1900. A farm in Cedar Falls, IA had ring-necked pheasants in holding pens and some 2,000 of them escaped when a storm destroyed their pens. According to the Iowa DNR, these escapees then spread north and west and are considered Iowa's original ring-necked pheasant stock. In 1910 the state began to stock pheasants in Iowa, with most regions having good numbers by the mid 1930s.

Since their introduction, the ring-necked pheasant has become Iowa's most important upland game bird. Historically, the regions with the best pheasant numbers have shifted several times. The original NW and North Central regions had many wetlands and good hayfields, but when these areas were modified in the 1970's, population growth shifted to the southern part of the state. The CRP program, introduced in 1985, shifted the numbers back to the northern and eastern part of the state.

There is one primary factor controlling Iowa's pheasant population: habitat. Bad nesting or winter habitat is detrimental to the birds. Other factors such as accidents, hunting and predation will obviously contribute to pheasant mortality as well. Predators are unbiased and will claim eggs and young as well as a smaller number of adult birds whereas pheasant hunters are only allowed to target roosters. When pheasants have good habitat, their production the following year will typically make up for these losses. However, an excessively wet spring nesting season or a harsh winter will result in a lower pheasant population. Short term population fluctuations are typically caused by severe weather, whereas long term population changes are an indicator of habitat quality and quantity.

Pheasants will use multiple areas for different activities. They prefer areas with tall grasses for roosting at night. Areas larger than 40 acres that are enrolled in CRP would be great for pheasants, since smaller areas have higher mortality rates since they are easily searched by predators. Open brushy areas are commonly used in the winter because they are fairly well protected and they can sun themselves without a high risk of predation. Wetland marshes, with large stands of tall cattails and bulrush also provide crucial winter habitat. They rarely travel more than ¼ mile to feed during winter.

This year, Iowa's pheasant season opened on October 31st and runs to January 10th. Hunting licenses cost \$17.50 and the habitat stamp fee (also required) costs another \$11.50, for a total of \$29.00 for Iowa residents to pursue a few roosters. Regulations state you can harvest 3 roosters per day, but you are only allowed 12 in your possession. Pheasant hunting is one of the least expensive hunting activities in terms of equipment, since all you need is a good pair of boots, warm clothing and a shotgun. A good bird dog is optional. I've never used one for pheasant hunting. Not saying I wouldn't like to, just that I've never had the pleasure. Personally, I use a 20 gauge Mossberg 500 with 2 ¾ inch shells loaded with # 7 shot. Due to regulations, you have to leave something on the bird to identify it as a male (head, leg w/ spur). I gut them in the field and the rest takes place at home. The meat can be used in nearly any of your chicken recipes.



UPCOMING EVENTS

January 23 10 AM Pony Creek Park
Winter Bird Watching & Feeding

We will once again gather at Pony Creek Park to observe some of the feathered winter residents of Mills County.

February 13 7 PM Pony Creek Park
Owl Prowl I

We will have a guest speaker and her friends present! We will also review familiar owls & their calls before going out on the trails. Please dress accordingly and bring your own flashlight. Pre-registration requested.

March 20 9 AM Pony Creek Park
GPS & GEOCACHING!

Individuals will learn how to operate a simple handheld GPS device and use the device to locate waypoints within Pony Creek Park. Pre-registration requested.

To register for MCCB Programs or to ask questions, please call James at (712) 527-9685. Thank you.