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A HISTORY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RING-NECKED PHEASANT IN CALIFORNIA¹

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Introduction

Surprisingly, many persons living in California are under the impression that the ring-necked pheasant is a native bird. It is easily understood for this princely gamebird has been present within the boundaries of the State longer than the earliest memory of the majority of the population. Its presence dates back more than a half century although there was no legalized hunting until 1933 in most parts of the State. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to trace the history and development of the ring-necked pheasant population in California. This present study is a part of a general investigation into the life history and management of the ring-necked pheasant in California.²

Information concerning early attempts at pheasant acclimatization was obtained from the Biennial Reports of the California Fish and Game Commission and those of its parent body, the State Board of Fish Commissioners. Later data was procured from copies of the quarterly California Fish and Game, from records of the Hayward State Game Farm (no longer existent) and from those of the present state game farms.

Grateful appreciation is extended to Mrs. Hilda Grinnell for the use of the bibliography begun by the late Dr. Joseph Grinnell and kept current by her, to Miss Susan Chattin for the use of files of literature and publications in the library of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, and to Mr. Howard Twining, leader of the present pheasant project, for valuable suggestions and helpful criticism in the preparation of the manuscript. Thanks are also due present and past Fish and Game personnel who have given much helpful information.

Early Liberations

The earliest state liberations of pheasants occurred in 1889 when, because of the success which Oregon experienced in acclimatizing pheasants, Mr. W. H. Shebley was sent by the State Board of Fish Commissioners to Oregon to procure ring-necked pheasants from farmers and from others breeding the birds. He obtained about 140 birds, at \$10 a pair, which were released in Monterey, Sacramento, Marin, and Nevada Counties, and in some localities in the San Joaquin Valley.

However, private liberations had already been made of English pheasants, a strain developed by centuries of hybridization between the Chinese ring-necked pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus torquatus*) and the black neck pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus colchicus*). According to Belding (1890) a liberation was made in the woods of Santa Cruz County

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but nothing has been seen or heard of them since. This liberation must have been made in the late 1870's or in the early 1880's for the information was based upon a report dated October 12, 1885, by Mr. Ramon E. Wilson of the California Sportsman's Association, in which he dates it "Some years ago * * *."

English pheasants were released at San Mateo at very nearly the same time and, although a flock of 22 was subsequently seen, the experiment was not considered a success. The Country Club of Marin County introduced English pheasants prior to 1889 but the birds soon disappeared. As frequently was the case with early attempts, glowing reports of success were made immediately following the liberation. A period of silence ensued to be followed by the dour admission that no trace of the liberation remained.

In 1891 the State Legislature passed an act protecting introduced game birds for a period of four years; a violation of the act would be constituted a misdemeanor.

In the spring of 1894 Mongolian pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus mongolicus*) were obtained and 67 were distributed by the State Board of Fish Commissioners to private aviaries in various counties where it was believed the birds would do well. The plan was to liberate all birds produced from this parent stock upon public grounds. After the flush of excitement had subsided it was admitted that the experiment had not been altogether successful. A few birds were released but the locations were not noted. In addition to this indirect method an unknown number of pheasants were imported and released in different sections of the State in 1895 or 1896, notably in Santa Clara, Kern, and Tehama Counties by the State Board of Fish Commissioners.

In the fall of 1897 an agent was again sent to Oregon to purchase Mongolian pheasants. Three hundred twenty-three were purchased and released in five-pair lots in almost every section of the State. Reports from almost every shipment reported that "nides of young birds have been seen during the past season * * *."

During this same period, according to the Biennial Report for 1899-1900, 93 Mongolian and 150 English ring-necked pheasants were purchased and liberated subsequent to September 1, 1898. The Mongolian pheasants were imported from Hong Kong at a cost of 75 cents per bird while the English pheasants were procured in Oregon, cost unknown. Reports of success were all of a negative nature with the exception that "nides of young birds have been seen in Humboldt, Santa Clara, and Fresno Counties." Ultimate success of the liberations was then considered doubtful except in the moist regions of the State. One wonders whether that author lived to see the successful pheasant populations in the Sacramento Valley during rice cultivation.

The next Biennial Report spoke optimistically of increases in pheasant populations, with Santa Clara County probably at the head of the list. It was reported that pheasants numbered about one thousand on the Morrow Ranch near San Jose, Santa Clara County. Favorable reports also came from Fresno, Humboldt and Santa Cruz Counties, with occasional occurrences noted in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties. The author of this report felt that these counties offered the best game warden protection for the birds and that this was solely responsible for the increase.

The succeeding report again handed the bouquet to Santa Clara County, followed by favorable reports from Fresno, Humboldt, Santa Cruz, and Kern Counties. By 1905-06 the price of imported ring-necked pheasants had risen to a point that the Commission decided it would be more economically sound to encourage private individuals to raise pheasants than to purchase them for liberation. No further state liberations were made until after the inception of the first state game farm.

The Hayward State Game Farm

With the desire for ring-necked pheasants in California, a state game farm was authorized in 1908. Mr. J. R. Argabrite, a successful raiser of pheasants in Ventura County, was engaged as superintendent. F. W. Van Sicklen, a member of the State Fish and Game Commission, was instrumental in establishing this program. The choice of a site finally fell upon some 45 acres located one mile west of Hayward, Alameda County. The pheasant breeding stock came from various sources: Oregon and California breeders and from Wenz and Mackensen of Yardley, Pennsylvania, importers of European stock.

Of the twelve hundred young pheasants raised during the first season, about eight hundred were distributed to the "best" sections of the State. Siskiyou, Humboldt, and Inyo Counties received the largest numbers, ranging from 75 to 80 birds in each liberation. Twenty counties received pheasants from the Hayward State Game Farm during the first year of its operation.

TABLE 1

Ring-necked Pheasant Liberations, Hayward State Game Farm
1909-1918, Inclusive

| Year | Number liberated | Year | Number liberated |
|------|---------------------|-------|---------------------|
| 1909 | 573 | 1915 | 591 |
| 1910 | 94 | 1916 | 95 |
| 1911 | 112 | 1917 | 58 |
| 1912 | 1,355 | 1918 | 164 |
| 1913 | 1,141 | | |
| 1914 | -- | Total | 4,183 |

TABLE 2

Estimate of 1916 Ring-necked Pheasant Population

| Locality | County | Number |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Williams | Colusa | 200-300 |
| Eureka | Humboldt | 700-800 |
| Fortuna | Humboldt | 500 |
| Big Pine | Inyo | 1,000 |
| Cloverdale | Lake | 500 |
| Susanville | Lassen | 100 |
| Snelling | Merced | 150 |
| Pacific Grove | Monterey | 200 |
| Napa | Napa | 300-500 |
| Grass Valley | Nevada | 100-200 |
| Milpitas and Coyote | Santa Clara | 2,000 |
| Watsonville | Santa Cruz | Several hundred |
| Lodi | San Joaquin | 75-100 |
| Fort Jones | Siskiyou | 75-100 |
| Greenview | Siskiyou | Several hundred |
| Yreka | Siskiyou | 200 |
| Porterville and Lindsay | Tulare | Several hundred |
| Total Estimated 1916 Population | | 6,900-8,150 |

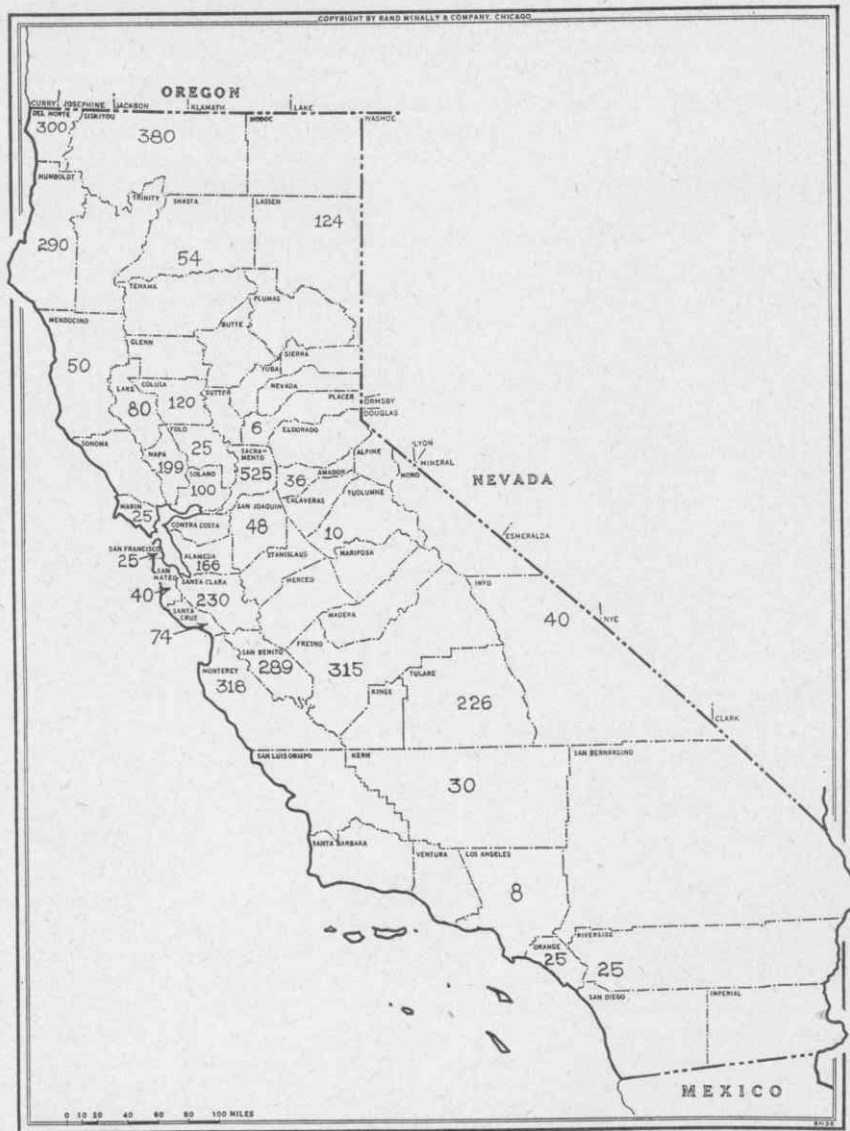


FIGURE 1. Ring-necked pheasant liberations from the Hayward State Game Farm, 1909 through 1918, inclusive. Figures are the numbers liberated within each county.

This auspicious beginning was followed by a succession of happenings which tended to remove the aura of success being ascribed to the game farm. Vandalism included the opening of pens allowing the birds to escape and the scattering of poisoned wheat in the remaining pens.

In 1911 Mr. William N. Dirks was engaged as superintendent of the Hayward State Game Farm. Through his far-sightedness in retaining records of all game farm transactions and through his cooperation by furnishing information for the preparation of this manuscript, it has

been possible to determine the numbers and general locations of pheasant liberations. These records are now in the Fish and Game Library, located in the Ferry Building, San Francisco. Thirteen hundred fifty-five pheasants were liberated in 1912. According to Grinnell, Bryant, and Storer (1918) the total number of pheasants liberated by the Fish and Game Commission up to 1916 was approximately five thousand. Table 1 lists the total annual liberations of pheasants from the Hayward State Game Farm while Figure 1 indicates in which counties the liberations were made and the numbers involved.

In 1916 Fish and Game Commission deputies made estimates of the then existing pheasant populations. These estimates are presented as Table 2.

After fifty pheasants had been liberated near Coyote Lake, Santa Clara County, encouraging reports were received in 1904 from this locality, according to Grinnell, Bryant, and Storer (1918). The Commission had previously issued encouraging reports for this county as early as 1900 and had placed it at the head of the list in 1902. By 1916 pheasants were well scattered over the Santa Clara Valley, especially in the Alviso-Milpitas area, north of San Jose.

Mr. J. S. Hunter reported seeing two broods of young and several adults on the Forgeus Ranch near Williams, Colusa County, in June, 1916. This was the first published report of success for a region that was destined to provide some of the best pheasant shooting in the State.

In the Biennial Report of the Fish and Game Commission for the period 1914-15, decision for the abandonment of the game farm was announced. It was believed that sufficient attempts had been made to stock the State with ring-necked pheasants. During the 10 years of its operation the Hayward State Game Farm raised for liberation 4,183 pheasants. Many of these were shipped by express and although no record of subsequent losses were kept, the actual number of birds liberated was probably less.

Limited though its facilities and output were, liberations had been made in at least 31 of the 58 counties. Some of these liberations were successful and formed established nuclei for later large populations. It is known that sites in Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Inyo Counties have supported limited pheasant populations from the time of early releases, possibly to the carrying capacity of the particular habitat. As the entire State is surveyed, probably other original successful sites will be discovered.

Pheasant Establishment

About the time of the termination of the Hayward Game Farm, there were indications that pheasants were becoming numerous in certain areas. Seven ranches in Santa Clara County reported destruction of nests by mowers. Crop damage by pheasants was reported from Owens Valley with a request that there be either an open season on pheasants or that they be entirely unprotected. Reliable observers reported that pheasants were especially numerous in this area between 1924 and 1926 before the inception of the present state game farms system and their mass liberations.

In a letter to Dr. Joseph Grinnell dated December 9, 1920, Mr. W. A. Strong wrote in part " * * * in regard to the ring-necked pheasant I

find that they are pretty well established around Milpitas and April 24th, Mr. D. B. Bull took me to a nest containing 16 eggs far advanced in incubation * * *. The orchardist informed us of several nests that were destroyed by the mowing machines * * *. A few days later, upon another trip I noted three more ring-necks, near Alviso, on the same road. The last few days I read in the papers of hunters killing three more and paying one hundred dollars fine each * * *."

In 1921 Mr. Charles Follett of Merced wrote that " * * * as many as 50 or 60 birds could be seen in morning flocks in the vicinity of Antioch." He further stated that teen-aged boys would " * * * bring barley sacks as full of pheasants as they could get them and some in their coats * * * to be sold to restaurants of Isleton, Rio Vista, Ryde, Walnut Grove, Locke and Courtland."

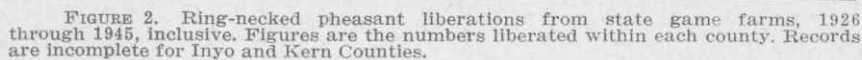
The Inter-Game Farm Period

Demand for liberation of additional pheasants became strong in the 1920's so the Fish and Game Commission contracted with Mr. E. H. Lewis, a private breeder, to furnish five thousand ring-necked pheasants. Inyo County received three thousand five hundred of these in 1925 in the vicinity of Lone Pine, Independence, Bishop, and Round Valley. This information was furnished by Mr. Carl J. Walters, deputy at Independence at the time, who made the liberations with Mr. Lewis. Eight ranches in San Diego County received one thousand three hundred birds and two hundred fifty more, augmented by fifty purchased by the local sportsmen, were released in the Modesto area.

That pheasants had increased phenomenally in Inyo County is indicated by the opening of a pheasant season during 1925. The area included Inyo and Mono Counties (District 4 $\frac{1}{2}$). Hunting was permitted from December 1-7 with a limit of six birds per season. The pheasant population was heavily hunted and the season was not reopened the following year. At this same time the pheasants were being deprived of suitable habitat by the drying up of Owens Valley. This was accomplished by the Los Angeles Water System which operated a series of wells and reservoirs feeding the Los Angeles aqueduct.

The Present State Game Farms

Plans for a state game farm in Napa County were already under way by this time and Mr. August Bade, who was experienced in raising game birds in the State of Washington, was chosen superintendent. Construction was begun in 1925 and pheasants were liberated in the following year. During the first year of its operation the Yountville State Game Farm liberated 3,032 pheasants, 75 percent as many as were liberated by the Hayward State Game Farm in its 10 years of operation. Production increased at an accelerated rate until 1942 when 43,740 ring-necked pheasants were liberated. In the following few years, because of the influence of World War II, production dropped. During the first 20 years of its operation, the Yountville State Game Farm, the Los Serranos State Game Farm (established near Chino in 1929), and subsidiary game farms, jointly liberated at least 309,428 pheasants. This figure was derived from signed receipts for birds and from game farm reports. However, it is felt that the loss of receipts and the liberation of birds from state-distributed eggs would undoubtedly swell the total to 325,000



Hunter and Fry (1941) record the six leading pheasant counties as being Butte, Glenn, Sacramento, Yolo, Colusa, and Sutter, based upon

estimates derived from questionnaires filled out by hunters. None of these counties were considered possessing good pheasant habitat during early attempts at pheasant acclimatization. Santa Clara County which once held the lead in estimated pheasant numbers, is not mentioned among the leading pheasant counties. The reasons for this change are quite apparent and are primarily the result of changes in agricultural practices. Clean cultivation became pronounced in Santa Clara County in the early 1920's while the opposite condition appeared during World War I in the Sacramento Valley with the introduction of rice culture. Coupled with this change in agricultural practice is the preponderance of small farms and ranches in Santa Clara County while most of the holdings in the Sacramento Valley are large. Generally this latter condition means less disturbance to the resident pheasant population.

The question naturally arises as to whether the rink-necked pheasants are actually established to the point where they can maintain their population or if the birds that are shot are the ones which are liberated in such large numbers. According to Hunter and Fry (1941), the estimated pheasant kill for the six leading pheasant counties shows that a total of 185,700 pheasants were taken during the four-year period of 1935 through 1938. During the same period, 11,151 pheasants were liberated in these counties, or 6 percent of the kill. This precludes that all the liberated birds actually reached the hunter's bag. According to Tubbs (1946) the percentage of return of banded, liberated birds to the hunter's bag during a current year averaged between 1.3 and 9.0 percent, depending upon the time of the year the birds were released. It was also determined that the return to the hunter's bag of banded liberated birds for a period of six years averaged 5.5 percent. If we were to apply this finding to the above, 996 of each 1,000 birds bagged would be birds which had been raised in the wild. While this percentage may conceivably be different in California, it should illustrate that pheasants are here to stay, barring changes in agricultural practices which would be detrimental to pheasant habitat.

TABLE 3
Ring-necked Pheasant Liberations; Present State Game Farms
1926-1945, Inclusive

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Number liberated</i> | <i>Year</i> | <i>Number liberated</i> |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 1926----- | 3,023 | 1937----- | 3,700* |
| 1927----- | 6,362 | 1938----- | 24,300 |
| 1928----- | 6,697 | 1939----- | 24,086 |
| 1929----- | 6,648 | 1940----- | 25,370 |
| 1930----- | 7,211 | 1941----- | 35,919* |
| 1931----- | 11,434 | 1942----- | 43,740 |
| 1932----- | 6,651 | 1943----- | 22,468 |
| 1933----- | 7,246 | 1944----- | 20,336 |
| 1934----- | 10,646 | 1945----- | 29,821 |
| 1935----- | 4,456 | | |
| 1936----- | 9,314 | Total----- | 309,428 |

* Liberations data for these years incomplete and unavailable.

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