



Festive Pheasant

Thanksgiving is a tough time to be a turkey, but it's always pleasant to be a pheasant!

Luckily for the tasty pheasant, it missed the first Thanksgiving by about 200 years, so most Americans carve a traditional turkey for their holiday meal. Pheasants are in the same order of birds as turkeys and chickens, but they are not native to Ohio or the American continent. Pheasants were brought to America from China in the 1800s, and quickly made themselves right at home.

Today, ring-neck pheasants are popular game birds, and are common in open woods and on farmlands with plenty of brush, hedgerows, and cornfields. The ring-neck male pheasant looks festive with its bluish-green head, red cheek patch, distinctive white ringed neck, and speckled body feather. The female ring-neck pheasant is smaller than the male with tan, cream, and brown feathers. The ring-neck pheasant can reach on average 21 to 36 inches from head to the tip of their tail feathers and may weight up to 3 lb. The average life-span of a pheasant in the wild is only 10 to 20 months.



Fowl Play

The months of April and May are mating season. Male pheasants looking for mates warn other males to stay away by making a loud "Erk-erk" call followed by a short burst of noisy wingbeats. The male pheasant will then strut, spread his tail, and fluff out his feathers in his courtship display for the female.

The hen (female pheasant) starts building her nest in early April before the mating season starts. After mating, the hen will lay from 6 to 18 eggs in a two day period. She will sit on the eggs for up to 26 days until they hatch. Once the eggs hatch, the mother hen will teach her brood of chicks to hunt for food in fields. The chicks will start to learn to fly at 10 days old. Once the chicks' soft downy feathers dry out, they begin to resemble adult pheasants and will soon leave the nest.

Seeds, Insects, and Berries! Oh My!

The ring-neck pheasant's diet consists of seeds from field crops like corn, wheat, oats and soybeans, as well as insects, wild berries and grapes, and seeds and fruits from weedy plants like ragweed, smartweed, poison ivy, bittersweet and sumac. Pheasants prefer to skip lunch, and look for their food in the early morning and at dusk.

Pheasants fatten up for winter by eating mostly insects in the late summer and fall. They do not migrate to warmer places, but pheasants do travel a short distance for winter. The males gather together in small groups, and the females gather together in larger groups, away from the males. The pheasant flocks roost near areas of standing corn, brushy wooded lots, dense field borders, and woodland edges. They uncover food by scratching with their feet or digging through the snow with their beaks.

Pesky Predators!

Pheasants can be very bossy around smaller birds, but they are easily startled when they sense danger. Coyotes, owls, and hawks prey on pheasants for food. Raccoons and skunks love to eat pheasant eggs. To avoid danger, pheasants prefer to run rather than fly, and take cover in the brush. Big critters are frightening for pheasants, but people are the predators pheasants fear the most.

The help keep populations of ring-necked pheasants healthy and large enough for hunting, captive pheasants are raised and released in several state parks and wildlife areas each fall by the Division of Wildlife.

Pheasant Folklore

In Chinese folklore, the colorful male pheasant is regarded as vain and handsome, while the dull brown female is modest and wise. The festive pheasant may be the inspiration for the magical phoenix of Chinese legends. Like a real pheasant, the imaginary phoenix is a colorful bird that hides much of the time, but appears suddenly in the calm after a time of confusion or danger.

When pheasants were brought to Europe over 1,000 years ago, they were considered royal birds and could only be eaten by the rich and powerful. Some historians think that the gift of five golden rings in the old holiday song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” really means five ring-necked pheasants, instead of gold jewelry.

Viewing Opportunities

Pheasants are most visible early in the morning when they come out to dry their feathers from the heavy dew. To see ring-neck pheasants for yourself, try these state parks that offer a good mix of fields and woods: Caesar Creek , Cowan Lake, Deer Creek, Delaware, Dillon, East Fork , Mary Jane Thurston’s North Turkeyfoot area, Maumee Bay, Salt Fork and West Branch.

Photos from left to right: Pheasant chicks • Close-up of a adult male ring-neck pheasant • an adult female pheasant • a adult male ring-neck pheasant

