

EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTS OF RAISING THE PHEASANT BAG LIMIT TO THREE BIRDS PER DAY AFTER THE FIRST SIXTEEN DAYS OF THE SEASON

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In Minnesota Session Law 2006, Chapter 281, Article 2, Section 54, Pheasant Season Report, the Minnesota Legislature has asked the Commissioner of Natural Resources to report to the house and senate committees having jurisdiction over natural resources regarding the impact of allowing a limit of three pheasants after the first 16 days of the pheasant season.

Background:

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) regulates season lengths and bag limits to both provide opportunity to the public to hunt authorized game species as well as to conserve their populations to ensure that adequate breeding stock remains for future generations. MS 97B.711 allows for up to 5 pheasants to be taken daily. However, under MR 6234.0400 current pheasant bag limit is set at 2 birds per day with a possession limit of 6 birds. Season lengths have been increasing in recent years. In 2006 the season ran from October 14th to January 1st for a total of 80 days; one of the longest seasons on record.

Analysis:

The bag limit has been two birds per day since 1963. The possession limit is six birds. The majority of the pheasant harvest in Minnesota occurs during the first two weeks of the season. As the season progresses there are fewer birds remaining to harvest and those still alive after the first couple of weekends have become much warier. By late in the season roosters have matured significantly and are much more difficult to kill. They are truly trophy birds. As the season progresses the law of diminishing returns suggests that harvest will taper off as fewer birds remain and they become more difficult to kill. This is in fact what our observational data indicate. Thus extending the season gives hunters additional opportunity to hunt but has minimal effect on the overall harvest.

There is no biological reason why the bag limit cannot be raised with roosters only hunting. Pheasants are a promiscuous species; one male can breed many females. The MN/DNR has kept bag limits at two birds per day to distribute harvest among hunters and over time. We believe that this is particularly important early in the season when a relatively few "super hunters" have the time and wherewithal to harvest a significant number of birds early and cause them to become warier earlier. Thus the "average" hunter may in fact have a decreased opportunity to harvest birds. In effect bag limit has been kept low due to social factors rather than biological factors.

Successfully harvesting a limit of birds directly affects hunter's feelings of satisfaction. A pertinent recent example comes from duck hunter satisfaction ratings. Even though bag limits have decreased from six to four ducks, hunters report being more satisfied when they obtain a limit. Thus increasing the bag limit, particularly later in the season when it is more difficult to harvest a bird, may actually decrease hunter satisfaction.

It should be noted that current pheasant populations and pheasant harvest are the highest levels since the mid-1960s. This is directly due to the impacts of the 2002 Federal Farm Bill, which continued the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The CRP has created over 1,000,000 acres of grass within the pheasant range. Much of this acreage will expire within the next few years. If the new Farm Bill does not continue the CRP legacy, grassland acres, and subsequently pheasant populations will decline.

As an alternative to raising the daily limit, increasing the possession limit to five times the daily bag limit would provide additional opportunity for people who travel long distances to hunt in rural Minnesota while still allowing hunters to "bag out" easily. Local hunters would also benefit by not being required to reduce their possession limit (through eating or giving birds away) as frequently.

An informal poll of participants at the 2007 Pheasants Forever State Convention indicated that approximately 80% of the nearly 150 people present (who tend to be the chapter leaders) were opposed to increasing bag limits. Conversely there was almost universal support for increasing possession limits.

Conclusions:

Should the Legislature decide that an increased bag limit after the first 16 days of the season is an important additional opportunity that the MN DNR should be providing, we would recommend that the Legislature direct the MN DNR to use the Good Cause Exemption as the mechanism of implementation. Our preference for this is due to the fact that bag limits for pheasants and other small game species have always been regulated via rule rather than statute and it is easier for DNR to use the Expedited Rule process to make season or bag limit changes should populations decline and necessitate additional restrictions.

According to our limited information, at this time there appears to be more support from the public for increasing possession limits rather than bag limits.

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