

2018-19 EASTERN PLAINS PHEASANT & OUAIL FORECAST



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Pheasant populations across the eastern plains of Colorado appear to be similar to 2017. In 2018 in northeast Colorado, pheasant call count surveys showed an increase from 2016, suggesting that pheasant populations are doing well. The crowing count data, although, makes no prediction about nest success and chick recruitment, which is expected to be fair but not optimum considering dry early conditions and the number of intense hail storms which were common to the core pheasant range in 2018.

In southeast Colorado, counts are lower than the northeast, which is very typical for the area, and not at all helped by severe drought over the spring and summer. Severe weather conditions have a much larger and more frequent impact on breeding populations of pheasants and habitat quality in SE Colorado, when compared to core ranges in northeastern Colorado. This makes southern populations very prone to huge variation between years. Generally speaking, when drought impacts nesting and brood-rearing seasons, it can get pretty difficult for pheasants and quail, although in 2018, the forecast is for an average season. Hunters may find significant amounts of corn still standing by the opening day.

It is important for hunters to note that crowing counts are simply an index of the rooster pheasant population, and represent an incomplete picture of the population. They provide a look at the population trend between years and over the life of the survey. Pheasant crow counts provide no information detailing or predicting nesting success or brood survival, both of which are critically vital to fall hunting populations.

Measuring nesting success and chick survival is an imprecise estimate at best, when done without radio-marking hundreds of hens and chicks, which would be much too costly to accomplish. Instead, some states conduct summer brood counts, in which the surveyor drives a predetermined route, counting and classifying all pheasants seen by age and sex.

This method is used in Colorado occasionally, however, it provides a very unreliable index of the fall population, due to the method requiring multiple replications during very specific weather conditions (high humidity resulting in dew, which forces birds to the roads to dry off in the morning). In Colorado's core pheasant range, the technique generally doesn't provide much value, because in seasons with high humidity, vegetation growth along roadsides often hides pheasant broods from detection. Conversely, in dry years with little humidity there is little reason for pheasant broods to congregate along a road.

That being said, it is a safe assessment that as weather conditions were not optimal in most locations on the eastern plains, pheasants populations are doing OK. Although, most likely they did not show large population increases, as hunters experienced in 2010-11. While some individual locations will be much better than last year, overall, the forecast is for an average year. As in most years, populations will be spotty particularly in or near the hailstorm tracks that fell in late July and early August. When looking at the landscape as a whole, it appears that Colorado finally caught up with the significant losses of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), as there is just not much grass cover on the landscape.

NE Colorado (Yuma, Phillips, Sedgwick, Logan, Washington, Morgan and SE Weld Counties):

Populations across the region should be similar to 2017. Conditions were drier than optimum last winter, which slowed nesting cover development and early brood habitat. Conditions improved in May, regressed in July, and in some areas, remained very dry through the rest of the season. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) receives several reports from landowners during wheat harvest, and the overwhelming reports from landowners in July were observations of good numbers of broods, but broods were small in the number of chicks present.

Habitat is in decent condition due to the levels of precipitation that large portions of the area received in late summer of 2017, however, it is also obvious that precipitation was absent from large portions of these counties in July-Present time-frame, leaving some areas very dry through the summer brooding period, furthering the spotty nature of the forecast. In addition, it is important to note that total CRP acres have greatly declined across the core pheasant range. While some new fields have been established, the relatively low numbers of new fields versus the loss of thousands of acres significantly tilt in the direction of lost acres.

HUNTER NOTICE: Most of the northeast corner of the state has been extremely dry since late summer, resulting in increased concerns regarding fire danger. Please be considerate when parking vehicles. Refrain from smoking while in the field. Similarly, road conditions can deteriorate quickly when precipitation falls, making unimproved roads virtually impassable. Also, note that Walk-in Access (WIA) sprinkler corners are closed to WIA hunting when the landowner is harvesting the associated crop. This closure is in effect to allow harvesters to work efficiently, and to minimize safety concerns for hunters and harvesters. Corners are posted with closure signs in addition to WIA boundary signs. As of October 24, 2018, corn harvest is estimated to be at most 25% complete, which is lower than normal. Rain or snow could delay the progress of harvest over the next few weeks, but if significant precipitation does not hamper harvest, a fair percentage of corn should be harvested by the pheasant opener. Expect significant acres of irrigated corn to be standing for the opener.

South Platte River (eastern Morgan, Washington, Logan, Sedgwick):

Bobwhite quail populations remain a question mark for 2018. Populations are improving slowly, but cover will be very good, which can reduce hunting success. In many areas on the South Platte, cover can be too tall and dense to hunt effectively. Landowner reports have been highly variable in 2018, while CPW staff has reported some bobwhite broods and coveys on State Wildlife Areas. Bobwhite whistle counts improved in 2018, and cover should be more conducive to successful bobwhite hunting than in 2017.

East Central Colorado (Southern Yuma, Kit Carson, Cheyenne, Kiowa Counties):

Pheasant populations should be similar to 2017. Expect similar conditions to the NE portion of Colorado with very site-specific conditions in terms of habitat and pheasant population recovery. Some areas experienced severe hailstorms and populations will be lower in these areas. Expect to find better conditions in Cheyenne

County, where conditions and populations have improved somewhat over recent history. Pheasant densities will increase within the areas that provide sprinkler irrigation fields. In Kit Carson County, hunters will note a significant loss of CRP acres, which has impacted populations to some degree as well as the amount of land available to hunt.

Hunters should note that many areas in WIA in Kiowa County are enrolled primarily for their value for light goose hunting, including some fields that will offer little cover for pheasants and quail.

Extreme SE Colorado (Baca & Prowers Counties):

Populations of pheasants were severely impacted by drought from 2010 through the spring of 2013. After improvement in 2017, conditions have regressed this summer to severe drought through July 2018 in core pheasant areas, and populations have suffered. Hunters should expect decent pheasant populations where habitat is conducive to bird populations - but across the landscape as a whole, these areas are relatively uncommon. Locally, hunters will find pockets of habitat that have pheasants in the heavily irrigated Arkansas River valley, but core populations of pheasants are located farther south in southeastern Prowers and Baca County.

Quail populations are expected to be similar to 2017 but lower than 2016 in southeast Colorado. Rain returned to the core pheasant range in southeast Colorado late this summer, but probably too late to positively impact pheasant production. Quail, however, may have been able to take advantage of the better conditions. Quail populations recover much faster than pheasants generally speaking, so hunters may want to focus their efforts on quail in 2017.

Hunter Notes:

- ✓ Hunting on private land requires permission. With the exception of land enrolled in Walk-In Access (Colorado Parks and Wildlife has leased WIA lands opening them to hunting), you must obtain permission to hunt private land, whether that land is posted or not.
- ✓ Landowners are very perceptive of the actions of hunters, whether on their land, WIA properties, or their neighbor's property. Trespassing, leaving trash, carcasses or damaging property leaves a poor image with landowners, while courteous and respectful hunting gives a good image.
- ✓ Fall harvest is a very stressful period for landowners. Interrupting harvest or stopping a combine to ask for hunting permission is not a good idea. Standing at the end of the field waiting for the combine to flush birds is not recommended. Both are likely to draw the ire of the landowner, and are questionable activities at best when considering how important landowner relations are to gaining and maintaining access.
- ✓ Be respectful of other hunters.