

2014-15 Eastern Plains Upland Forecast

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Small-Game Coordinator Ed Gorman forecasts the 2014-15 pheasant and quail season.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife's 2014-15 Eastern Plains Upland Forecast is just in time for pheasant and quail season opening Nov. 8.

Across much of Colorado's core pheasant range, the effects of drought were clear and significant in terms of the total population of pheasants. Two successive years of drought have finally given way to above normal precipitation, and pheasant populations across the eastern plains of Colorado are slowly improving.

In 2014 Northeast Colorado pheasant call count surveys were down approximately 44% from 2013, averaging approximately 17.5 calls per station, and down 66% since 2012. The 2014 crowing count survey suggests that pheasant populations were much lower than any year since 2003, which is not surprising considering the severity of the recent drought.

In Southeast Colorado, counts were much lower, which is very typical for the area. It is important for hunters to note that crowing counts are simply an index of the cock 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. The 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 when done without the costly task of radio-marking hundreds of hens and chicks. Instead, some states conduct summer brood counts where the surveyor drives a predetermined route, counting and classifying all pheasants seen by age and sex.

This method is occasionally used in Colorado and it provides a very unreliable index of the fall population because the method requires 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 became nearly optimal in many locations on the eastern plains, pheasant populations are doing better than in 2012 and 2013.

Hunters should not expect to see a complete recovery over a single year, as the level of the breeding population impacts recovery in addition to weather and habitat.

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

Populations across the region are better than in 2013. During the initial stages of the nesting season, conditions ranged from poor to excellent across the region, suggesting that hunters would be wise to expect that the highest populations will be highly variable and spot specific this year. Beneficial precipitation continued throughout the summer in many areas, providing ample opportunities for unsuccessful hens to re-nest. There are some areas within this area that did not receive ample precipitation in 2014, or were subject to severe and widespread hail storms during the summer period, both of which contribute to the “spotty” nature of the forecast for 2014.

Habitat is in much better shape due to optimum, in some cases record, levels of precipitation that large portions of the area received in 2014. However, it is also apparent that precipitation did not fall equally across this region, leaving some areas relatively dry through the summer period. Also, it is important to note that total CRP acres are declining across the core pheasant range, a trend which will likely continue as many CRP contracts will expire over the next 2 years.

While drought concerns have moderated, fire danger is always a concern. Please be considerate where vehicles are parked. Refrain from smoking while in the field. Similarly, road conditions can deteriorate quickly when precipitation falls making unimproved roads virtually impassable. Also note that 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 November 3, 2014, corn harvest ranges from 30-60% complete depending on the area, so hunters should expect to find some standing corn present on the opener.

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

Bobwhite quail populations remain a question mark for 2014 due to the impacts of higher water during the spring runoff period. Cover will be greatly improved from what hunters observed in 2013, but that will also impact hunting success because in some areas, cover may be too tall and dense to effectively hunt. Landowner reports have been highly variable in 2014, while CPW staff has reported some bobwhite broods and coveys on State Wildlife Areas. Hunter reports from the upcoming opening weekend will provide another clue as to bobwhite numbers in the South Platte corridor in 2014.

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

Pheasant populations should be higher than in 2012 and 2013. Expect similar conditions in the NE portion of Colorado with very site-specific conditions in terms of habitat and pheasant population recovery. While precipitation levels were much

improved over the recent past, some areas experienced severe hail storms and populations will be lower in these areas, although the habitat may look very good. Expect to find drier conditions in Cheyenne County, where conditions have improved but not to the degree that Kit Carson County has. Pheasant densities will increase within the areas that provide sprinkler irrigation fields.

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. Conditions have improved this summer to nearly normal precipitation in some areas, but recovery of the habitat and population will require additional years of good conditions. Even so, CPW observed a fair number of quail broods this fall. Expect that pheasant populations will be low across the area, although a bit higher in areas with sprinkler irrigation systems.

Some late hatches of quail have been observed, although both bobwhites and scaled quail breeding populations were reduced by the severe 2010-2013 drought. The general feeling is that quail populations are improving but not yet recovered from the recent drought, with some areas that will be better in terms of habitat and population.

Find out more about pheasant hunting at

<http://coloradooutdoorsmag.com/category/small-game-hunting/>.

Not sure where to go? Search more than 215,000 walk-in access acres available at

<http://cpw.state.co.us/thingstodo/Pages/WalkInAccessProgram.aspx>.

A reminder to hunters:

- 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 to 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.

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