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PHEASANT RAISING

By P. SMETANA, Poultry Adviser.

THERE has been increased interest in pheasant raising in Western Australia over the past few years, mainly as a result of more sophisticated eating habits and the associated restaurant boom, as well as farmers in country areas looking for more profitable sidelines.

Generally, pheasants can be divided into two groups—the ornamentals, which are kept mainly for their attractive appearance, and the game birds used for commercial meat production and shooting reserves. Although over 100 varieties of pheasants are known, there are probably no more than 10 different varieties in W.A.

Pheasant varieties

The best known ornamental pheasants available here are the Silver, Golden, Lady Amherst and Reeves, all of which have males with spectacular colouring and long tails. Game birds are restricted mainly to the Chinese Ringneck and a few Mutants, Mongolians and Blacknecks to be found in some aviaries.

To keep pheasants, it is necessary to buy a pair or trio of adult breeders, as day-old stock is not generally available. Breeders vary in price according to demand and supply of the birds, and can range from $15 to $35 a pair.

Breeding and hatching

Pheasants normally breed from October to January or February. The hen will lay 20 to 50 eggs and can be used to hatch out the young, but more eggs will be laid if they are removed from the hen and placed under a broody bantam or in an incubator. The eggs take 23 to 28 days to hatch, according to breed.

Incubators can be used to hatch pheasant eggs in the same way as for fowl eggs. Where forced draught incubators are used it is usually best to transfer the eggs to a still-air machine four days before hatching. Although good hatchability has been reported overseas from artificial incubation, local results have often been unsatisfactory.

Fertility is usually good until the end of December, after which it tends to fall off markedly. Hatchability ranges from 10 per cent. to about 60 per cent. Breeding by selection for hatchability would seem to be essential before consistently better hatchability is obtained in W.A.

Another problem often encountered in W.A. is the large number of incubator-hatched poults which have a severe leg weakness from hatching. The legs are usually twisted and the poults walk on their hocks or are unable to move, depending on the severity of the leg weakness. Both incorrect parent bird feeding and faulty incubation are possible causes.

Housing

Pheasant breeding pens must be completely enclosed with wire as the birds are strong fliers. Each bird needs a minimum of about 10 sq. ft. of floor space, and some cover is desirable, although a solid-roofed area is not essential.

Most pens are at least 7 ft. high and should have loosely strung wire or fish netting over the top rather than a solid roof, as pheasants are very nervous and will often fly straight upwards when frightened. Loose netting will break the impact and avoid a certain amount of head injury.

It is also advisable to sink sheets of iron into the ground around the pen to prevent entry by foxes. The iron can be continued to about 18 in. above the ground to reduce the risk of injury from fright, and this will also prevent pheasants continually pacing up and down the pen as they are prone to do, particularly after being transferred.

Incubator-hatched pheasant poults can be raised the same way as chickens, with heat supplied for the first 5 weeks. A normal brooder can be used for large groups or an electric light globe over a box will be suitable for just a few birds. Pheasants start to fly after the first week and the brooding compartment should be fully enclosed.
Feeding

Pheasants have nutritional requirements similar to those of turkeys, and need a balanced food. For quick growth, maximum egg production and hatchability, turkey feed should be used, preferably in pellet form. During the non-breeding season, adult breeders can be maintained on a simpler, mainly grain diet until just before production is due to start.

About 13 lb. of feed will be needed to rear a Ringneck pheasant to mature size at 18 weeks. A further 1 lb. of feed per week will be needed for maintenance until the laying season.

Diseases

Pheasants are prone to most of the diseases of poultry, but losses of adult birds from infectious diseases are rare because of their general hardiness and the absence of large concentrated flocks. The odd bird will die from any of a number of diseases, but the most common losses are from self-inflicted injuries. Cannibalism, excessive fighting and egg eating are very common vices of pheasants and they can also fracture their skulls by crashing into the roof of aviaries in full flight after being disturbed.

Pheasant meat production

The importation of frozen pheasant meat into W.A. from New Zealand and the Eastern States has prompted some investigations into the prospects of commercial pheasant meat production here. At present there is one local commercial unit raising Ringneck pheasants for meat.

Probably the most important point is that demand is limited and likely to remain so while pheasant prices are high. To reduce the price it would be necessary to overcome some problems and thereby lower the cost of production.

The Ringneck and related varieties are the most suitable for meat production. They are usually marketed at about 20 weeks, when the males have their colourful adult feathers. At this age the males should weigh 2½ lb. and the females about 2 lb. liveweight, which means that the birds will average under 2 lb. dressed.

The local stock available for breeding is unimproved (in the United States, game pheasants weighing up to 7 lb. have been developed), in short supply, expensive, and lays an average of only 30 to 40 eggs per bird over a limited period. Egg fertility is often low, hatchability in an incubator is generally less than 50 per cent. and 10 to 20 per cent. mortality in the young poults can be expected.

There will also be the problem of making satisfactory processing arrangements if large numbers of birds are involved. Special containers are required if the live birds are to be transported to the processing plant as wire crates have been found to be unsuitable.

Importation of breeding stock

A total embargo exists on the importation of any birds from overseas and the Stock Diseases Act prohibits the import of any pheasants, other than day-old poults, from the Eastern States because they can act as carriers of Infectious Laryngo Tracheitis, a serious disease affecting poultry.

Pheasants have recently been declared vermin in W.A. which will probably mean that they can only be raised by permit holders in approved aviaries, and special permission will be required to bring in day-old stock from other States.

The legislation concerned with the vermin declaration is not yet finalised but one of the aims is to prevent the establishment of shooting reserves where pheasants are released. This eliminates a profitable aspect of pheasant raising which has been associated with commercial pheasant development in other countries.

Against these difficulties is the fact that pheasant meat seems to have a special appeal and in many countries it is possible to buy pheasant in the supermarket at reasonable prices. All the production problems outlined could be overcome in time and, as long as there is a demand or it can be created, commercial pheasant production could develop in W.A.

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