

FROM THE COMEDIANS

Looking for the good news
 "The good news for John McCain, returns in key battleground states show him with a comfortable lead over Ralph Nader."

— Jay Leno



ABOUT TOWN

Join the club
 The Idaho Alpine Club's 48th annual membership drive begins at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 270 N. Placer Ave. All outdoor enthusiasts are welcome to attend and share food, along with stories and pictures of their outdoor adventures. Call 787-2601.



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SECTION B

OUTDOORS

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The feathers are flying

The debate over planted pheasants

By **KRIS MILLGATE**
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Pheasants are hiding in the fields at the Mud Lake Wildlife Management Area, targets as soon as the biologist empties them from a crate.

For some hunters, such as Ralph Ingram, they provide a chance to hunt.

"I didn't have a lot of luck on the opening," said Ingram, a disabled hunter who finds it hard to get out because of a bad back. "There were a lot of hunters in this area and not quite enough birds to go around, so I decided to come out today and take my chances."

Chances are, Ingram will leave with his limit. He tries to hunt on planting day, driving the roads looking for a short walk.

It works for Ingram.

It doesn't for Tim Woodard. He sees planting as a handout.

"Hunting released birds is like going to a trout farm and paying to catch fish that have been fed dog food," Woodard said.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game spends an estimated \$250,000 annually stocking 13,000 pheasants statewide. It has done it — off and on — for more than 30 years. And it has always been a heavily debated hunt.

Hunters in training

Woodard hunts with Moose, a somewhat trained golden retriever pup. He spends more time with Moose than most parents spend with their children.

"He's not a seasoned hunting dog, that's for sure, but he's a good dog," Woodard said. "He finds the birds right away and he's on them."

Woodard has a lot riding on Moose and they spend every free day in the field nosing around for pheasants, regardless of their nonexistent success rate. They chase birds until the dog loses interest.

"About the time he starts hunting mice, I've dropped my gun off my shoulder. If a bird did flush up, I wouldn't make the shot."

Moose and Woodard average 20 hours a week realizing a meekly pay-off of chasing up three hens and two roosters so far, but they're all wild. Woodard hasn't seen a pheasant in a wildlife management area and he hasn't seen a release.

"I don't have the time to go to a WMA and sit all day and wait for Fish and Game to release the birds," Woodard said. "I have to go when I have time, and that's usually after they've released them and they've all been shot. My timing isn't there, and I go for wild birds anyway."

Hunters in waiting

Ingram has the time. He has 60 years of bird hunting experience under his belt. His dogs also carry a collar full of experience, and they hop in the car every time he dons an orange hat.

Murphy, a 15-year-old Lab, lounges in the back seat. Moe, an 8-year-old cattle dog, rides shotgun. Murphy is the official bird dog, but Moe is the one most likely to point, if at all.

"Like their dad, they're getting a little old, but they still enjoy it. They tag along rather than hunt," Ingram said. "They just want to be right by my side. At 15 years old, that's the best they can put out."

Ingram drives to Mud Lake from Idaho Falls several times during pheasant season. If his visits happen to fall on planting days, he leaves with his two-a-day limit in the trunk.

"This is the best area for me as a handicapped hunter because I can drive the roads, step off and shoot at a bird close by," Ingram said.

Hunting for hunters

In eastern Idaho, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game plants pheasants in the Cartier Slough, Market Lake and Mud Lake wildlife management areas. (Others are stocked at Sterling near Aberdeen.)

Rising costs reduced eastern Idaho's planting from 2,500 birds to 1,950 this year.

Although the program has its benefits, it's a thorn in the department's side.

"For the guys who come out and do it and enjoy themselves and are able to get their dogs on pheasants, it's definitely worth it," said Curtis Hendricks, a wildlife biologist in the Upper Snake Region. "For a person who doesn't like the pheasant release program and sees general Fish and Game dollars subsidizing it, they probably don't like it. They'd rather see us do something else."

Planting days are not publicized, but Hendricks expects a crowd anyway.

He shows up alone in his truck but quickly sees a caravan of cars in his rearview mirror.

"Over time, the hunters have gotten a lot better as far as etiquette and understanding what we're doing for safety," Hendricks said. "When it first started, it wasn't a very fun place to be. There was a lot of bad behavior, but it's gotten better."

Some hunters and their dogs jump the birds as soon as they fly the coop, bagging their daily limit before the release is finished.

Others, like Ingram, hold their fire to watch the show. "You notice I didn't shoot until well after the birds were out," Ingram said. "I take my time. Never get in a hurry. Seem to do all right by that."

Idaho used to have good pheasant hunting. Many still remember it, but when farming practices changed from flood irrigation to pivot systems a few decades ago, the pheasant numbers began to drop off.

Farmers also became more efficient with using the edges of their land, and that cut down on cover and food.

Fish and Game compensates for the loss by spending almost \$17 a bird, not including labor costs.

"I think WMAs are good for the guy who can't walk five miles looking for birds like I do," Woodard said. "But I think it could be more fruitful. Maybe we can put that money into growing habitat where wild pheasants can live."

WMA hunting permits cost almost \$24 and allow hunters six birds per permit with no limit on the number of permits purchased.

In round figures, hunters pay \$24 for \$102 worth of pheasants. Although the program doesn't pay for itself on the books, it does in the field, Ingram said.

"Don't harass the Fish and Game Department," he said. "That's the No. 1 rule. They do a whale of a job for us hunters and we should appreciate it much more."



Kris Millgate / www.tightlinemedia.biz

Curtis Hendricks, an Idaho Department of Fish and Game wildlife biologist, releases 50 pheasants at a time at Mud Lake on undisclosed planting dates.



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ABOVE: A crated pheasant awaits release at the Mud Lake Wildlife Management Area. LEFT: A recently released pheasant seeks cover in a corn field.



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Bird hunter Ralph Ingram drives along the pheasant release route watching the birds fly. As a disabled hunter with a bad back, hunting the Mud Lake Wildlife Management Area is a good option for Ingram because he doesn't have to walk too far.

By the numbers

2,500: Average number of pheasants released in the Upper Snake Region

1,950: Number of pheasants released in the Upper Snake Region in 2008

22: Percent reduction in released birds because of rising costs

\$16.85: The cost per pen-raised pheasant in 2008

\$23.75: Permit to hunt pheasants on state's wildlife management areas

2: Limit per day. Hunters must validate tag immediately.

6: Birds you can shoot on one permit. Unlimited number of permits.

Be aware

As you travel, always be aware of the nearest places where you can take shelter if the weather turns bad. Constantly look around and identify structures that offer protection from wind and precipitation.

— www.outdoorlife.com

THAT'S ODD

Hot shot

In Seiku, Wash., a woman who had inadvertently dropped a 22-gauge shotgun shell inside her stove was surprised when she later turned the stove on and it shot her in the thigh.

— Reprinted from the Portland Oregonian's "The Edge"



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