

# PRAIRIE NEWS

<http://SD-PheasantHunting.com>  
1-855-SD Lodge

April 2013

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Kimball, SD 57355

## **Lodge Update:**

Our target practice stand is nearing completion. Watch for pictures in next month's newsletter!

## **Pheasant Ecology:**

The pheasant life cycle is simply fascinating. In a recent Conservation Digest from the South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks, Travis Runia authored a six-part series detailing issues and trivia for pheasants through each season. We wanted to share some of Mr. Runia's key points so that you can better understand the challenges and successes that pheasants experience in our great state.

### ***Nesting and Brood-Rearing Season:***

Pheasants average an annual survival rate of only 50%, due to harsh winters, predators and inadequate foraging habitat. However, pheasants benefit from a high reproductive potential. In late April, hens seek nesting cover such as undisturbed grasslands and lay their first nest in May. Typically, hens lay one egg per day until a full clutch of 10 to 12 eggs is achieved. During the 23-day incubation period, the hen rarely leaves the nest even for limited amounts of food and water. This process is so demanding that hens can lose 75% of their body fat and 10% of their body weight in just one month.



Only about 25% of nests are successful, but pheasants will re-nest up to four times in a single season. The chicks hatch with their eyes open and can feed themselves within one day of hatching.



However, in the first week they cannot regulate their body temperature and can die in 30 minutes if temperatures dip to 43°F. Therefore, cold snaps in June can greatly reduce chick survival. Pheasant chicks need abundant insects, aerial concealment and the ability to move at ground level. Insects are the best food for chicks because they are high in protein, which is needed for muscle tissue and feathers. Broadleaf plants are like insect factories and also provide aerial concealment from predators and shade during hot summer days. Even with good habitat, one-third of the chicks may still die from predators, extreme weather and farm machinery.

### ***Summer Season:***

July and August are quite relaxing for rooster pheasants in South Dakota. After finishing molting in late June, they need only prepare for winter by gaining weight. Meanwhile, hens are recovering from the energy demands of motherhood and are at their poorest physical condition in August. Severe summer heat can also be an important factor. When temperatures climb above 102°F, pheasants must pant similar to a dog to stay cool. Chicks are busy in the summer, gorging on insects and seeds to grow. While their parents molt once in the summer, chicks molt twice. By early July, chicks trade their baby down for hen-like flight feathers. Then in August, these juvenile feathers are replaced with adult plumage.

### **Early Fall:**

In September and October, temperatures are usually reasonable and food sources are abundant, creating optimal conditions for pheasants. Corn and wheat are the primary waste grains available during fall. Corn contains 23% more metabolizable energy than wheat, but wheat contains 60% more protein than corn. Foxtail grass is highly nutritious and abundant. Soybeans are high in energy and protein but contain digestive inhibitors that render it nearly worthless as food for birds. Protein-rich insects remain available through early fall as well.

### **Late Fall:**

Winter is unpredictable in South Dakota and can come early in November and December. Even without snow, the length of daylight is three hours shorter in December than in September and the average low temperature is 35°F cooler than October. Pheasants seek heavy winter habitat such as cattail sloughs, shelterbelts or thick grass stands. The short days and cool temperatures mean that pheasants need 20% more food in 25% less time, so most pheasants feed from before sunrise to after sunset. During blizzards when food is inaccessible, pheasants can easily survive three days without food. Most winter mortality is due to predation and exposure to the elements.

### **Winter:**

Freezing to death during extreme winter weather is the primary threat to pheasants. When their internal temperature declines from the normal 108°F, pheasants can quickly freeze to death. Although thick cover provides protection from the elements, South Dakota's gusty winds can produce very low wind chills and cause pheasants to lose body heat faster than they can produce it. The best winter habitat is shelterbelts with low-growing shrubs and trees, large cattail sloughs or tall grasses. All of these can block brisk winds and provide insulating thermal cover for pheasants.

### **Spring:**



By early March, roosters began preparing for the breeding season. They compete for breeding territories that range from a few acres to more than 100 acres. Roosters begin to gather harems of hens, with up to as many as 20 birds. Hens target specific foods high in protein and calcium, which are critical for egg production. After a hen mates with a rooster, she can lay viable eggs for weeks so she only mates once before initiating her first nest. If hens began laying eggs before their own nest is ready, they "dump" them in other nests. Pheasants are quite proficient at this peculiar behavior.

In summary, the key to pheasant longevity and viability is South Dakota's critical habitats. With grasslands available in the spring and summer for nesting and brooding, woody cover and sloughs providing shelter from winter storms, and food plots for easy meals and predator cover, we can expect South Dakota to continue to be the world-wide pheasant capital.

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### **Prairie Puzzle:**

The answer to last month's question about the age at which male pheasants display their trademark plumage was 18 weeks. Congratulations to winner Ms. Cullen from Georgia and runner-up Mr. Skeels from Ohio!

April question: ***What do hen pheasants eat to maximize their calcium intake?***

**a) Snails**

**b) Egg shells**

**c) Grit**

**d) All of these**

Please submit your answer by April 15, 2013 to be included in the prize drawing for a free Dakota Prairie Lodge & Resort hunting hat. Responses will be accepted via mail, phone, or email. Good luck!