A reader raised a question after seeing a photograph in the March 2010 issue of *Outdoor*Illinois: Is it legal to harvest hen pheasants?

Pheasant Hunting

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Most upland game hunters know, and they learn at an early age, that when hunting ring-necked pheasants only rooster pheasants can be harvested. Harvesting only rooster pheasants is one of the lessons taught in hunter education courses required of young hunters in many states prior to acquiring a first hunting license. But, when hunting pheasants, are we always restricted to harvesting only roosters? The short answer is no. Hunters may harvest hen pheasants as well as roosters on some hunting areas operated by the Department of Natural Resources, and on more than 200 private properties licensed by DNR.

The public hunting areas operated by DNR where both rooster and hen pheasants may be harvested are referred to as controlled pheasant hunting areas. Hunting regulations in the Wildlife Code and in DNR administrative regulations specifically allow the harvest of both sexes of pheasants on these areas. The oldest controlled areas have been in operation since 1946, with the harvest of both pheasant sexes allowed throughout most of their 64 years of existence.

Private properties licensed by the DNR on which both sexes of pheasants may be harvested are called Game Breeding and Hunting Preserve Areas or, for short, licensed hunting preserves. Wildlife Code regulations enacted in 1939 enabled hunting preserves to be licensed in Illinois and established a number of special hunting provisions for these areas. These regulations now provide for a hunting season from September 1 to April 15 or, on some, throughout the year. These regulations also allow for the hunting of captive-reared bobwhite quail, chukar, Hungarian partridge, mallards and turkeys. Some hunting preserves feature all of these game birds; some may specialize in only one or two species. There are no daily bag or possession limits for these game bird species on licensed

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For additional information on controlled pheasant hunting and game breeding and hunting preserve areas visit anddnr.illinois.gov/hunting/Pages/UplandSmallGame.aspx.

hunting preserves. All hunting preserves have the common goal of providing quality sport hunting in safe and pleasant surroundings.

Hen pheasant harvest is allowed on DNR-controlled pheasant areas and on licensed hunting preserves because hunters can harvest only released, captive-reared pheasants. Hunting released, captive-reared pheasants has little bearing on wild pheasant populations. Since these pheasants either come from the DNR's Wildlife Propagation centers or, in the case of the four public/private partnership controlled pheasant hunting areas and licensed hunting preserves from private game farms, harvesting both sexes is a matter of practicality and economics.

In captivity, pheasant chicks are hatched in approximately a 50/50 ratio of males and females and it's necessary to be able to use both sexes. Many hunters might urge the release of the captive-reared hens, disallowing their harvest, to add birds to the wild ring-necked population. The premise of these releases being that enough would survive to increase the wild pheasant population in time.

With nearly 220,000 pheasants released annually on DNR controlled pheasant hunting areas and licensed hunting preserves combined, more than 100,000 hen pheasants could be released. The problem with this premise is that a very small percentage survives. Most are lost to depredation. The result would be a waste of sparse wildlife and private funds. There also would be the loss of the hen pheasant hunting resource with no significant beneficial effect on the wild pheasant population.

How do we know most are lost? Research studies conducted over the last half of the 20th century determined that releasing captive-reared pheasants with the aim of significantly improving wild pheasant populations has little effect. When wildlife biologists point to the results of research studies, some hunters counter with anecdotes or personal experiences where they either know of or have seen the survival of released, captive-reared pheasants or other game birds. While it would be incorrect to state that captive-reared game birds never survive in the wild, it is equally incorrect to state that game birds raised in captivity survive in substantial enough numbers to have a significant effect on wild game bird populations.

Consider also the economic effects. If no released hens were harvested, twice as many pheasants would have to be produced to cope with the current hunting demand, greatly increasing costs for the propagation centers and private game bird producers, costs that would translate into nearly doubling the expenses for captive-reared pheasant hunters.

It's better to release the hens for hunting.

Whether captive-reared or wild, hens typically hold for pointing dogs better than roosters, and flush and fly just as well as roosters when put to flight by flushing dogs.

Hunting captive-reared pheasants—roosters and hens—on DNR controlled pheasant hunting areas and on licensed hunting preserves provides hunters more opportunities for successful days afield.

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Released, captive-reared hen pheasants may be harvested on controlled pheasant hunting areas operated by DNR and on licensed Game Breeding and Hunting Preserve Areas, or hunting preserves.