# Ring-necked Pheasant Status Report, 2026

*Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 26-1*



Photo by Adele Hodde

**Ring-necked Pheasant in Illinois**

Pheasant hunting in Illinois was very popular in the 1960's and 70's when 250,000 hunters harvested over a million birds per year several times. Due primarily to changes in land use and farming practices, this game bird that had been such an abundant by-product of the agricultural landscape began a dramatic decline in the mid 1970's (Figure 1). By the year 2000, pheasant hunters had declined to 59,000, while harvesting only 158,000 birds. The small, diverse farms of the 1950's had abundant small grains (wheat, oats etc.), livestock, and hay fields with lots of fencerows and hedgerows separating small fields. Today, two crops (corn and soybeans) have replaced most of the small grains, pastures, and hayfields so common in the 1960's and 70's. The hedgerows and fencerows separating small fields and providing cover for game, have been removed or 'cleaned up' with herbicide. Remaining pastures and waterways are often planted to cool-season grasses (brome and fescue). These grass stands lack diversity and become too thick to provide quality habitat for pheasants or quail.

Field size and the size of equipment have also increased dramatically in the last 50 years, leaving larger tracts of tilled acreage on the landscape. Most fields are disked soon after harvest, covering most crop stubble early in the fall. There is very little cover left for wildlife over the winter and crops get planted quickly in the spring. Illinois farmers have been slow to adopt conservative tillage and soil health practices (annual no-till and cover cropping). Such practices have been used widely and with great success in other parts of the pheasant range, like Nebraska and the Dakotas, and more widespread use of these practices would likely benefit pheasants. During the summer, 'recreational' or aesthetic mowing of roadsides and non-crop areas often occurs during prime nesting season (April – August) for the ring-necked pheasant and other grassland birds. The changes to the landscape and the loss of habitat have occurred slowly, over several decades, but the additive effects on pheasant and quail populations are dramatic.

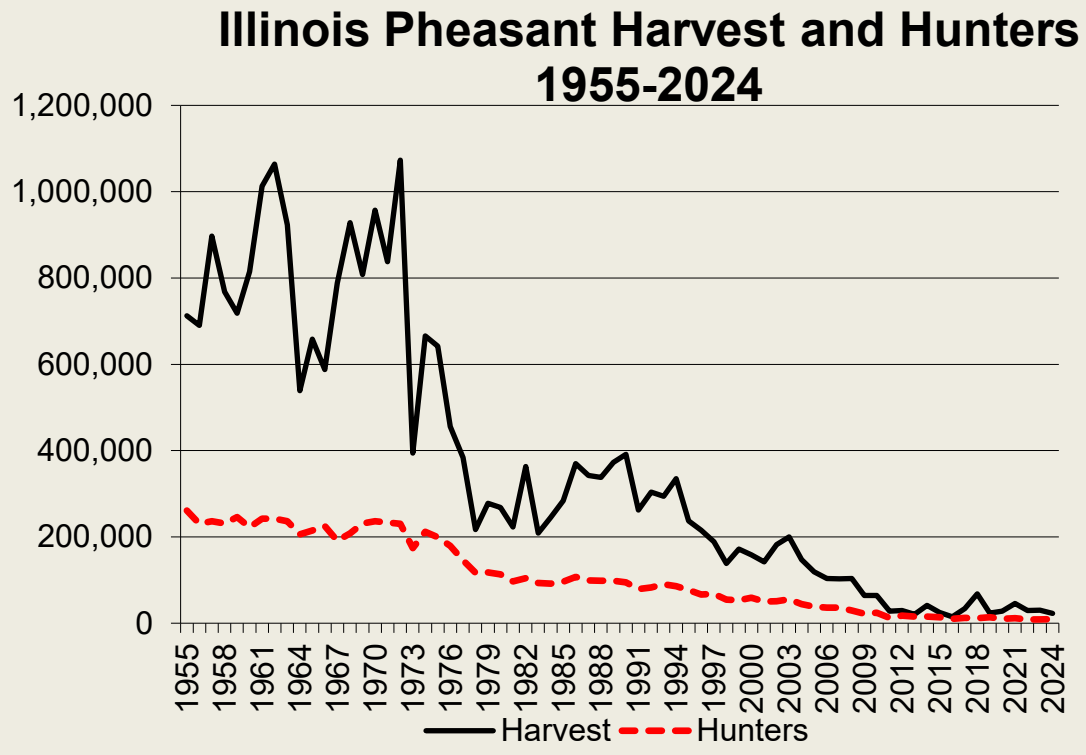



***Figure 1 –* Ring-necked Pheasant Harvest and Pheasant Hunters 1955 – 2024.***

**2024-25 Hunter Harvest**

Harvest and hunter participation estimates are based on responses from the annual Illinois Hunter Harvest Survey. Results from the most recently summarized survey from 2024-25, estimate that 7,516 hunters harvested 17,573 wild pheasants in Illinois, compared to 2023-24 totals of 8,995 hunters and 29,895 wild birds harvested. 2024-25 set a new all-time low for pheasant hunters, and the harvest was the second lowest harvest ever recorded (2016 harvest estimate of 14,831 pheasants). Birds harvested per hunter were down a full bird in 2024-25 at 2.34, as compared to the 2023-24 season (3.32).

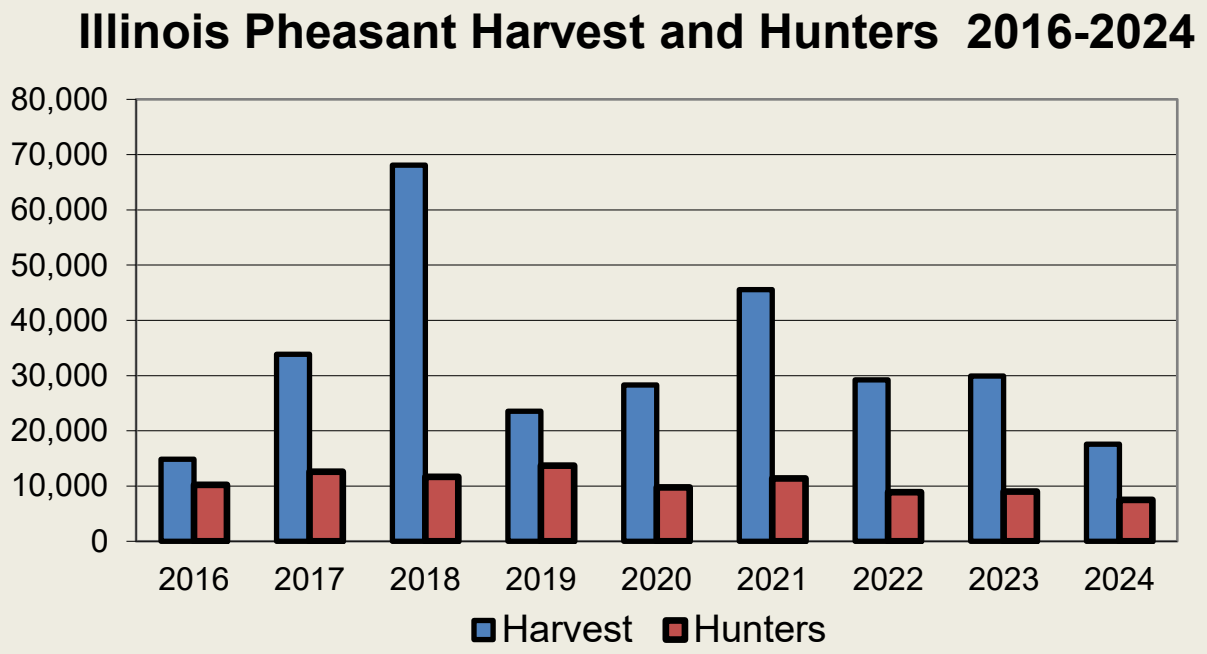
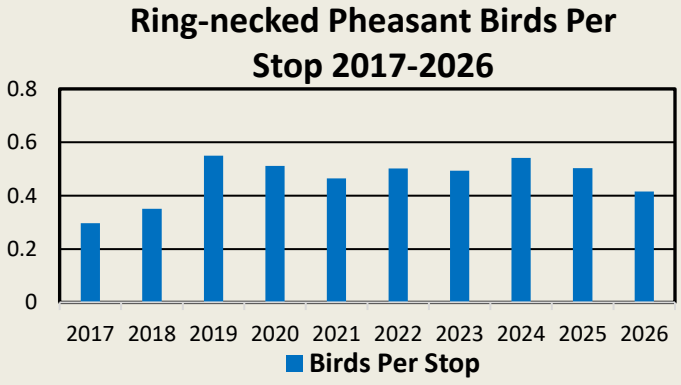


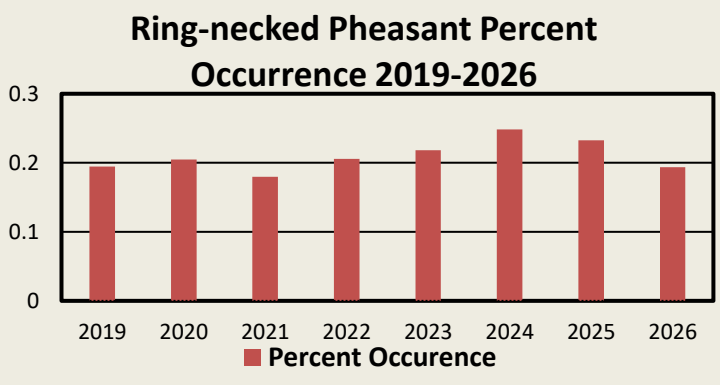

*Figure 2 – *Pheasant Harvest and Pheasant Hunters 2016 – 2024.*

**Pheasant Population Index**

There are established survey routes across the state that biologists run two times annually during the breeding season. The first run is completed during the peak breeding window for ring-necked pheasant (May 10 – June 10). Each route has 20 stops and biologists record individual birds heard or seen during a 3 minute time period for each stop. The number of routes surveyed annually depends on staff availability, but as many of the surveys are completed as possible.

During 2026, observers recorded an average of 0.42 pheasants per stop (a 17.4% decrease from 2025). Ring-necked pheasants were recorded at 19.4% of the stops (percent occurrence was a 16.7% decrease from 2025).




*Figures 3 and 4 – *Birds per Stop and Percent Occurrence Trends for Pheasant on Upland Routes*

**Weather 2025-26**
Outside of three weeks in January, the winter of 2025-26 across the pheasant range of Illinois was mild. However, during the three-week stretch mentioned previously, the temperatures remained well below normal, with few seeing temperatures above the freezing point throughout that time. Also, winter precipitation was in play, with much of the pheasant range blanketed in several inches of snow during that stretch. The remainder of the winter was mild, with the mild temperatures carrying over into spring, although severe weather, including hail and tornado events, sparked earlier than normal in late February and early March.

After a wet March and April in which the northern third of the state saw several heavy rain events and record tornadic activity, May brought drier weather, which bode well for nesting activity. Then came June, where heavy, wide-spread rain events likely negatively impacted the tail end of some nest attempts and corresponding broods. Hot and dry conditions settled in in July, potentially benefiting re-nesting hens, but then heavy rains with widespread flooding events, reared up in August.

Nesting and brood rearing conditions this season were poor across the board, though pockets of good habitat should have produced some young. The great variation in weather conditions throughout spring and summer dealt us a poor hand this year, and Illinois simply lacks enough high-quality habitat to offset what Mother Nature threw at our pheasants.

**2026-27 Season Outlook**
Based off this spring's survey results and the poor summer weather, hunters can expect to find fewer birds across Illinois this hunting season as compared to last year. **Prepare for a poor pheasant season.** The key to a successful pheasant hunt will be finding high-quality habitat. Focus on areas with relatively new CRP plantings, or recently managed grasslands, with hay and/or small grains nearby. Within these areas, look for abundant skeletons of forbs (broad-leafed, flowering plants) mixed in with scattered clumps of grasses.

**Management Tips**

- An important management tip to benefit pheasants (as well as many other grassland birds) is to break up mowing times to leave some quality habitat throughout the year. This strategy is also important to provide nectar sources for pollinators like monarch butterflies, as well as habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife from early spring to late fall.

- Avoid mowing during peak nesting season, from April 15 – August 15. Mowing during the nesting season can destroy nests and often kills the hen as well.

- It is important to ensure there will always be quality nesting, brood-rearing and escape cover in your grassland. This means only managing a portion (1/3 or 1/4) of your habitat at any one time and planning ahead for which types of cover you are managing for on each part of your grassland.

- Fall mowing or burning in September or early October can clear away thatch and stimulate vigorous regrowth of cool-season grasses that invade stands of native grasses. Once this new growth reaches 6" – 12" in the fall, read and follow label directions for a foliar application of herbicide like glyphosate to set back areas of tall fescue, brome, bluegrass or reed-canary grass. A second herbicide application may be needed the following spring before native grasses begin growing and/or the following fall when native species go dormant.

- Early fall is also a good time to spray and/or disc small blocks in existing grasslands that have become too thick. These blocks should provide good brood habitat the following summer.

**For additional information on pheasant or pheasant management:**

- Hunt Illinois, **Upland Birds** (https://huntillinois.org/upland-and-small-game)

- Illinois Department of Natural Resources, **District Wildlife Biologists** (https://wildlifeillinois.org/idnr-district-wildlife-biologist)



Photo by Don Kahl – Finfrock PHA in DeWitt Co., IL

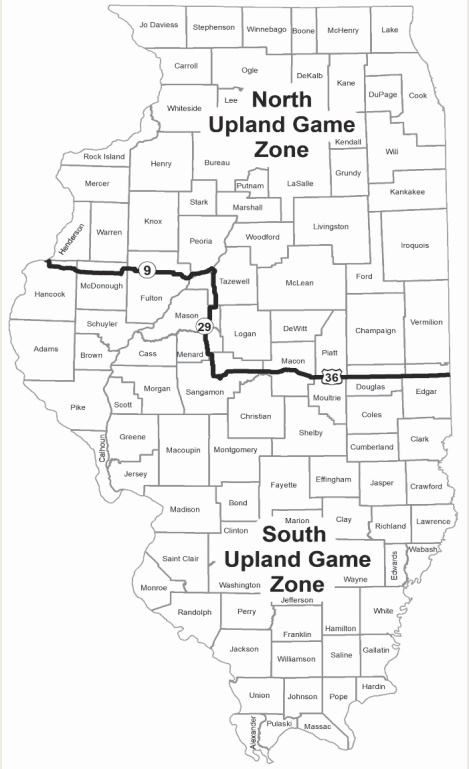
*Thank you for your interest in the ring-necked pheasant. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2026!*

**Season Dates Update**
November 7, 2026 – January 8, 2027 (North)
November 7, 2026 – January 15, 2027 (South)

**Hours**
Sunrise to Sunset

**Bag Limits**
2 per day with 6 in possession after the 3rd day of the season

*Prepared by Don Kahl 10/20/26*
*Illinois Department of Natural Resources*
*Division of Wildlife Resources*




**values from previous years' data were adjusted to correct for calculation errors*

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