



"I'M HERE!" By crowing at dawn during the May mating season, a rooster pheasant announces his presence to potential mates and rivals, similar to the bugling of a bull elk.

Counting Crows

FWP biologists listen closely each May to get a fix on pheasant populations.

By Parker Heinlein

SCOTT THOMPSON PARKS his truck at the edge of a gravel road a few miles outside Malta and turns off the engine.

It's still dark, but the Larb Hills to the east are visible against the dawning sky. It seems every bird in Montana is singing on this brisk morning in early May.

Thompson gets out, walks a few yards away from the truck, and stops. After glancing at his watch, and with head slightly bowed, he begins listening to the avian chorus.

For exactly two minutes he doesn't move. He simply listens. And while he hears geese and ducks, red-winged blackbirds and meadowlarks, it's the hoarse crowing of rooster pheasants he's focusing on, tallying each crow. "I counted 49," he says. "That's about the same as last year."

Thompson climbs back into his truck and heads another mile down the road before stopping to repeat the procedure. The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist is conducting a crowing count, an annual ritual he and his colleagues conduct each May across central and eastern Montana.

A Butte native, Thompson spent seven years as an FWP biologist in Culbertson before transferring to Malta in 2010. Biologists have been surveying the route he's working today each spring since 1983.

The department conducts population surveys of almost all game animals. Biologists aren't looking for exact tallies—that would be

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impossible—but rather population trends, up or down, from year to year. They survey mountain goat, bighorn sheep, antelope, and goose populations from airplanes. They tally sage-grouse by counting the number of birds that show up at mating leks. And to get a handle on pheasant numbers, they count the number of rooster crows they hear from the same spot at the same time each spring—a technique developed in 1949 by a biologist for the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks.

While roosters might be heard crowing, or cackling, any time of year, they are noisiest during the breeding season in early May.

Information gathered from the crowing counts isn't used to set bag limits or adjust the length of the hunting season—for pheasants, those don't need to change except when populations severely decline. Instead, it "gives us an idea of winter survival and, when we later factor in summer chick production and survival, what hunters can expect in the fall," says Brent Lonner, FWP biologist at Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area near Choteau.

The route Thompson surveys provides a good example of how pheasant numbers rise and fall. The highest count on the route came in 2000, when the average was 55. The lowest numbers were in 1985 and 1986, with an average of 9. "It was probably drought related," Thompson says. The ten-year average for this route is 35 crows per stop.

Cory Loecker, an FWP biologist in Great Falls, heard average numbers of rooster

crows during his 2012 survey from Ulm to Cascade. He was encouraged by what he heard on his route east of Geraldine. "In 2009, '10, and '11 there was no hatch there whatsoever," he says. "But this year [2012] is setting up to be very good."

Fortunately, pheasant populations rebound almost as quickly as they plummet. "It just takes one good hatch," Loecker says.

After learning how pheasants fared during winter, biologists closely watch the skies. In a few weeks, when the roosters quiet down and hens take to their nests to lay eggs, weather becomes critical. "If chicks get wet, they're pretty much done for," Loecker says. Over the past several years, cold, wet Junes in parts of central Montana have hampered pheasant production, even in areas with decent crowing counts.

Though they don't keep roosters from crowing, wind and rain make it difficult for biologists to hear the birds. So do passing trains, highway traffic, and, apparently, age. Thomp-



ALL EARS South of Malta, FWP biologist Scott Thompson listens for roosters at sunup.

son tells of a veteran FWP biologist whose crowing count numbers began dropping for no apparent reason. It turns out the pheasants weren't declining, just his hearing.

Thompson makes one last stop on the route south of Malta. The sun is up now and, as the day has brightened, the count has gone down. Crowing peaks shortly after sunrise, and the biologist hears only a couple of faint crows during this final two-minute stop. Like barnyard roosters, pheasants have little to say in the full light of day. But come tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn, they'll be back in full voice.

It's early May in Montana, and pheasants have a lot to crow about. 🐓

LEFT TO RIGHT: DEJA VOGEL; PARKER HEINLEIN