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SOUTH DAKOTA PLANTS TREES TO AID PHEASANT SURVIVAL

The planting of shelterbelts and food plants to provide winter protection for pheasants is South Dakota's most promising project under the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid to Wildlife program according to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

South Dakota presents certain unique problems of pheasant management. Its 50,000 square miles of land suitable for pheasant nesting and rearing of young do not provide enough winter range to protect the state's huge crop of birds during winter storms. In extreme winter weather, pheasants are forced to concentrate in cover areas which constitute well under one percent of their summer range in the state.

In South Dakota, unusually hard winters--severe enough to cause heavy mortality among pheasants, reducing breeding populations and limiting hunting possibilities occur about every four to six years.

Existing shelterbelts, while well-used by wildlife in many parts of the state, are inadequate in other sections. Not only are there many areas where there are no shelterbelts or other cover, but some existing tree belts do not have sufficient brushy undergrowth to keep the snow from drifting in and covering the ground. The tree-planting project is designed to correct some of these inadequacies.

By studying movements of pheasants for many years, biologists in South Dakota have determined that the birds will travel a maximum of 10 miles from their summer range to seek winter shelter. Therefore, the state conservationists hope eventually to plant four cover areas in each township. If the shelterbelts are properly spaced, the ringnecks won't have to travel more than a mile and a half to good winter cover.

Unless it is possible for pheasants to find food nearby--weed seeds or waste grain on crop lands--the shelterbelts are of limited value. Pheasants seldom go more than a quarter of a mile from their shelter to seek food during severe winter weather. By planting asparagus and white clover between the last few rows of trees in the belt, some of this food is provided.

The trees planted include such species as Russian olive, wild plum, sandcherry, Chinese elm, green ash, and boxelder. The latter two trees are desirable from the pheasants' point of view because of the good perches they offer above the ground.

Not every state has South Dakota's problem, nor is such a tree-planting program essential everywhere, but South Dakota conservationists believe that this Federal Aid project is one of their most promising undertakings to increase game production. The farmers who provide some of the land for the shelterbelt plantings also benefit. In addition to their aesthetic value in a state where there are too few trees, shelterbelts reduce wind velocity and water evaporation.

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