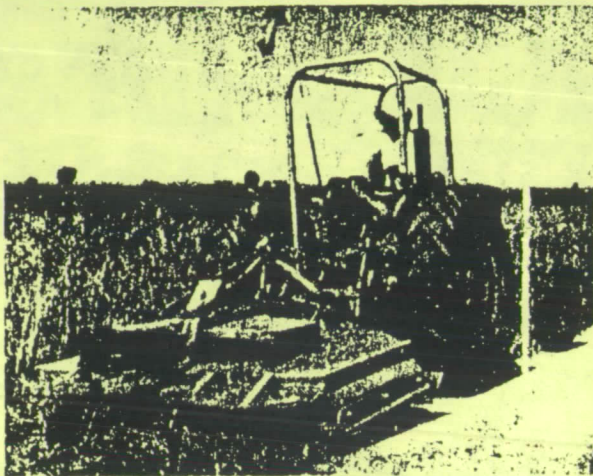


# ROADSIDES FOR WILDLIFE

How you  
can help



Illinois  
Department of  
Natural Resources



Moving in June and July destroys wildlife.

## THE PROBLEM

The intensively-farmed cash grain region of east-central Illinois has traditionally supported a variety of prairie birds. In this part of the state, the pheasant has prospered since its introduction into Illinois more than 80 years ago. Intensive agriculture seems to favor pheasants and other prairie birds — up to a point. When most farms had forage crops and small grains in rotation with row crops, pheasants and other prairie birds benefited from these agricultural practices. Pheasant numbers reached a peak in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Things have changed dramatically in the past 25 years however. Pheasant abundance declined two-thirds from 1961 to 1976. Much of this decline was the result of the replacement of forage crops with corn and soybeans.

In past years hayfields produced the major portion of pheasant chicks each year. Since the early 1960s, agricultural economics has shifted land use toward more acres of corn and soybeans. The result has been less land in small grains, pastures and, most important, hay — the prime pheasant nesting cover in east-central Illinois. Other prairie birds, such as the red-winged blackbird, bob-o-link and meadow-



Pheasant nest and hen destroyed by mowing.

lark have been affected by the decline in nesting cover as well.

## FARMING ROADSIDES FOR WILDLIFE

In east-central Illinois, roadsides, averaged about 8 acres per square mile and are about the only areas that are not farmed. Most farmers, however, mow their roadsides several times each summer to control weeds and to maintain an acceptable appearance. What happens when roadsides are turned into "hayfields" (by seeding of grasses and legumes) that remained unmowed during the nesting season? Would pheasants make greater use of these roadsides than those which are unseeded and frequently mowed? Would the "hayfield" roadsides control weeds well enough that farmers would mow only once in late summer after most pheasants and songbirds have completed nesting?

In 1962 the Illinois Department of Conservation and the Illinois Natural History Survey began a cooperative study to answer these questions. Ten miles of township roadway (40 acres of roadsides) in Ford County were selected for study plots. Each contained portions seeded to a mixture of grasses (brome, timothy and

orchard grass) and legumes (alfalfa and red clover) and an equal portion left unseeded. Both seeded types of plots were searched twice each summer to determine their relative value to nesting pheasants. Some of the findings of the study showed that:

1. The number of pheasant nests hatched on seeded roadsides was 2.7 times higher than on typical unseeded roadsides where mowing was not controlled.
2. Once the seeded grasses and legumes became well-established, seeded roadsides had a uniform appearance and controlled weeds to the extent that they were acceptable to farmers and township and county road officials.
3. Seedlings were sufficiently long-lived (at least 15 years) to justify seeding costs.
4. Other prairie birds also benefited from undisturbed roadside cover.
5. Seeded roadsides did not increase the number of pheasant collisions with cars.

A pilot program of seeding roadsides over a large area was initiated in the summer of 1968. This effort resulted in refinements of the seeding technique and indicated that it was feasible to seed roadsides over a larger area. Comparison of this area with a nearby area without



Roadside seeded to brome and alfalfa for wildlife nesting cover.

seeded roadsides, indicated that pheasant numbers increased and remained 2-3 times higher on the area with seeded roadsides.

Since 1972 free seeding of roadsides has been available in east-central Illinois for cooperators who agree to delay mowing until after the nesting season. Seeding roadsides that have existing sod (usually bluegrass) is most successful in late summer (August 1 - September 10). Graded roadsides and other bare soil sites such as pond and stream banks, idle farm areas and terraces are priority seeding sites during the spring seeding season (about March 1 - May 15). Native warm season grass (primarily switchgrass) seeding is also available for idle farm areas where snow drifting is not a problem.

Free terrace seeding is available only to roadside cooperators. Primarily because of their steepness, terraces are considerably less attractive to nesting pheasants than are roadsides. Consequently, delayed mowing of roadside cover is a requirement for terrace seeding. If existing roadside cover is not providing sufficient weed control for delayed mowing, roadsides will be seeded. Seeding terraces with switchgrass is an option also available on a limited experimental basis.



Pheasant nest in safe cover.



Seeding a roadside.

## OUR PROPOSAL TO YOU

The Department of Conservation offers a program to reseed graded roadsides, sod roadsides, and selected idle farm areas with wildlife nesting cover. The program is financed primarily with money paid by hunters for license fees. This service is free to landowners, farm operators, and road districts in a 16-county area in east-central Illinois.

Your permission to seed the roadsides along your farm and your agreement to delay roadside mowing each summer until after August 1, is all that is necessary in order to enroll in this program. Once you have agreed to these conditions we will:

- Seed smooth bromegrass and alfalfa,
- Apply fertilizer to the roadside,
- Provide signs, if requested, for installation on each seeded roadside to inform the pub-

lic about the seedings and why they remain unmowed during the summer.

## YOU ARE ASKED

- To mow as often as necessary during the first growing season to control weeds.
- To spot mow problem areas the second growing season, delaying a complete mowing until after August 1.
- Not to mow seeded roadsides thereafter until after August 1 each year in order to permit pheasants to nest successfully.
- To mow the seeded roadsides completely in late summer to keep drifting snow off the road.
- Mow only narrow strips (not to exceed 2 feet in width) along the road edge, patches of noxious weeds, or around field entrances and lanes in order to provide a clear view of traffic.

# **ROADSIDES FOR WILDLIFE**



**DO NOT MOW  
BEFORE AUGUST 1st**

**ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION**

## **PLEASE REMEMBER:**

Mowing seeded roadsides before August 1 results in destruction of nests and incubating hens.

**For further information contact:  
Division of Wildlife Resources  
Roadsides for Wildlife  
506 East Seventh Street  
Gibson City, Illinois 60936  
Phone: 217/784-730**

**217/784-4730**

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