

# RING-NECKED



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# PHEASANTS

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Hunting these handsome birds  
gives young and old a taste for nature

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by Linda Saucerman

**W**hen warm summer breezes turn into stiff, leaf-strewn wind gusts, that's when crock-pot season begins in my house. One of my slow-cooker staples, especially for get-togethers, is white bean chili. But when guests partake of my chili, they know that it's best to slurp rather than chew, to avoid chomping on a shotgun pellet. This is because my recipe doesn't call for chicken, but for pheasant.

The pheasants used in my chili, soups and casseroles come from my dad's hunting trips near my home town in Indiana. But Granite Staters don't have to travel to the Midwest to experience hunting for this colorful game bird. For more than a century, New Hampshire hunters have enjoyed the fall ritual of pursuing stocked ring-necked pheasants. The 2010 season will run from October 1 through December 31.

## **STOCKING THE BIRDS**

While hunters can search for this iridescent bird on any parcel of land where hunting is permitted, their chances of seeing one are greatly increased if they visit one of the 70-plus sites in 50 towns (listed at [www.huntnh.com](http://www.huntnh.com)) where ring-necked pheasants are released annually by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. The birds are distributed over three full stockings at all sites, with selected additional late releases. The 400-acre Bellamy Wildlife Management Area in Dover is one of these sites, and that's where Julie Robinson was headed on the second day of pheasant hunting season in 2009.



“We had already stocked this site earlier in the week, before the season got started, with 92 pheasants.”

As Robinson crouched to open each crate, the pheasants burst forth and took strong flight. The colorful birds didn’t stay in the air long, instead making a beeline for the abundant cover found at Bellamy.

### CENTURIES OF TRADITION

This program of stocking farmed birds for the pheasant hunt is not unique to New Hampshire. In New England, the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New York and Rhode Island all coordinate pheasant stocking and hunting seasons. Nationwide, thirteen other states also purchase, stock and operate a pheasant hunting season.

Native to Asia, pheasants were introduced and hunted in Europe for centuries, then distributed across the U.S. and Canada. They were successful in the grasslands of North America’s central plains, but cold New Hampshire winters and limited habitat kept the birds from becoming established here.

Ring-necked pheasants were first released onto New Hampshire lands in the late 1700s, a time of ideal pheasant habitat because the forested landscape had been greatly changed as trees were felled for farming, sawmills and shipbuilding. “Gov. Wentworth of New Hampshire experimented [with] stocking [pheasants] in the woods of Wolfeborough as early as 1790,” recounted Helenette Silver in *New Hampshire Game and Furbearers* (1957).

The roots of the current program date back to the



*Males (top) have iridescent green-blue head and neck, a dapper white neck ring, bright red featherless patch around eyes, and a long brown and reddish brown-speckled tail. Females (above) are drab brown all over, with no white ring around neck.*

At 6:30 on this particular morning, Robinson was at Fish and Game headquarters in Concord loading up her work truck with 23 crates, each of which contained two pheasant roosters and two pheasant hens. These 92 pheasants were part of the 13,500 birds that Fish and Game had purchased that year from a game

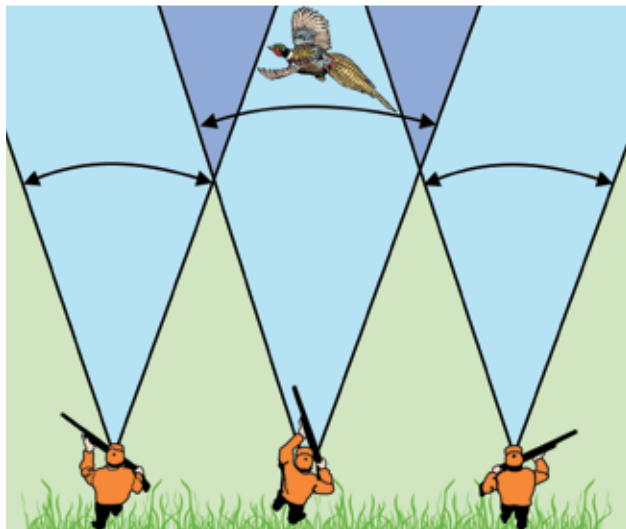
farm in Massachusetts. Robinson was working fast: Fish and Game strives to get crates onto trucks and en route as soon as possible to minimize stress on the birds.

By 7:30 a.m., Robinson was on the road with her load of pheasants, a flurry of feathers trailing behind her truck all the way from Concord to Dover.

“Bellamy is probably one of the most heavily used pheasant sites,” said Robinson, Small Game Project Leader and wildlife biologist for Fish and Game.

## PHEASANT HUNTING SAFETY

It is critically important that bird hunters know their surroundings and the whereabouts of their hunting partners before taking a shot. When a bird goes up and you are not sure where everyone is, hold your fire. Control the muzzle of your firearm at all times, and always maintain a safe zone of fire. Wear safety glasses and hunter orange on your head, back and chest.



### ZONE OF FIRE:

A hunter’s zone of fire changes with every step. Remain alert and aware of your companions’ locations at all times.



## PHEASANT LICENSE

Pheasant hunters in N.H. must hold a regular hunting (or nonresident small game) license and a pheasant license. Pheasant license revenue may only be used for the purchase or propagation of pheasants. The fee increased to \$26 for the 2010 season (\$1 goes to the agent and \$25 to the program). In 2009, 13,500 pheasants were purchased at a cost of \$9.22 per bird; pheasant license revenues did not cover the full cost, so dwindling reserves from previous years were used to cover the difference. At a public hearing, pheasant hunters strongly supported the option of increasing the fee this year, rather than reducing the number of birds stocked. The increased fee is expected to sustain the program at its current level well into the future.

late 1800s. Silver wrote: “A few were planted here in 1893 by an unnamed sportsman, and releases by John Gould, in Lebanon, and the first stocking of the Fish and Game Department followed shortly. In 1895 the Legislature appropriated \$500 for the introduction of foreign game birds.”

By the early 1900s, much of the state’s pheasant-friendly habitat of open fields and farmland had gradually transitioned to forests and human habitation. Without open habitat, pheasants were not able to establish and grow their numbers, so Fish and Game has stocked these birds annually since 1921 – at times even owning or leasing rearing facilities. In recent years, the birds come from commercial game farms.

“We are the second-most heavily forested state in the U.S.,” explained Karen Bordeau, a wildlife biologist who has coordinated the pheasant stocking program for nearly 20 years. “We don’t have ideal habitat for pheasants. They need farms, grain and high grass, and we don’t have an abundance of that cover here.”

But pheasant hunting enthusiasts love their pastime. Their hunting license fees help sustain Fish and Game’s wildlife management programs, and their pheasant license fees pay for the birds that are stocked. “We sell about 6,500 pheasant licenses each year, and that money can only be used to purchase birds,” said Bordeau.

## FAMILIES AFIELD

The program is not without controversy. Some question why the state makes the effort to stock a non-native species just so it can be hunted. Many hunters cite tradition as the main reason for the pheasant stocking. Peter Keravich Jr. of Barrington, looks back at his nearly thirty years of pheasant hunting and appreciates how it has become a yearly ritual for him and his family.

“I’ve been pheasant hunting since I was ten, when my dad first took me,” said Keravich as he and his dad, Peter Keravich Sr., walked along a hedgerow at Bellamy. Keravich was continuing the father-son tradition that day by bringing along his 8-year-old son Christopher to Bellamy. Wearing a blaze orange vest, Christopher and his dad and grandfather began their trek through the high grass in search of pheasants.

The Keravich family’s hunting tradition is an aspect of pheasant hunting that Fish and Game would like to see continue and expand to other families.

“Pheasant hunting gives kids a picture of where the birds are living and how important this habitat is to songbirds, mammals, amphibians – just a whole array of wildlife,” said Bordeau. “We also hope that the adults are teaching the kids to show appreciation



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*(Clockwise from top) Wildlife biologist Julie Robinson releases pheasants; Bird dog “Piper” takes a break after a successful hunt; Open farmland makes great pheasant habitat; Positive landowner relations are integral to maintaining pheasant sites – Fish and Game’s Pheasant Hunter Landowner Relations Project currently has 40 volunteers working to maintain access to 37 pheasant sites (over 4,000 acres).*



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Hunting  
license fees  
help sustain  
wildlife  
management  
programs,  
and pheasant  
license fees  
pay for the  
stocked birds.

and respect to the landowners for letting them walk and hunt on their land. The number of private lands where we have permission to stock far outweighs the state-owned land. If it weren't for the generosity of the landowners, the program probably wouldn't exist."

### BIRD DOG HEAVEN

And then there's the dogs. During Christopher's hunting trip, he watched as his grandfather gave instructions to Connertini, a 5-year-old mixed breed – one of several mutts Keravich Sr. has trained over the years to become bird dogs. Such hunting dogs are helpful because pheasants' camouflage makes them nearly invisible in the tall brush. These birds can run extremely fast and only take flight as a last resort. A hunter without a trained dog could walk for miles and miles without ever knowing a pheasant was nearby.

Along with Connertini, many other bird dogs romped around Bellamy that day, and nearly all of them met Conservation Officer Josiah Towne. By 9:30 a.m., there were 28 vehicles in the Bellamy parking lot; Towne looked over licenses and answered hunters' questions as excitable hounds leaned out of truck windows and whined for the action to start.



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Three generations of pheasant hunters (left to right): Peter Keravich Jr., Christopher Keravich (age 8), Peter Keravich Sr., all of Barrington; and their mixed-breed pheasant dog "Connertini."

"She is rock-solid on points," said Gerry Gajewski of Barrington, as he patted Piper, his 4-year-old Gordon setter. "The dog is half the fun of being out here. Around the middle of September, she seems to notice a change in the air and starts to get excited, and every year I take the first week of October off to hunt with her."

Thanks to Piper, Gajewski would be bringing

home a hen and rooster from that morning's hunt – another reason why he likes pheasant hunting season.

"I mainly use this meat as a substitute for pork in pork pie," said Gajewski. "You have to be sure to marinate it, especially the ones with the long spurs."

So, in addition to fresh air, exercise, family time, camaraderie, working with dogs, and nature appreciation, it seems that hunters can add one more delicious reason to the list of why they enjoy New Hampshire's pheasant season – game dinners. **W**

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## White Bean Chili with Pheasant

### Ingredients:

Field-dressed whole pheasant  
4 cups low-sodium chicken broth  
2 cans of 15-ounce size great Northern beans (not drained)  
2 onions, chopped  
1 tablespoon ground cumin  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1 teaspoon chili powder  
Olive oil



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Gently boil whole pheasant in covered pot for 90 minutes in water seasoned with Old Bay, salt and pepper, and a few bay leaves (or boil in vegetable or chicken stock).

Once meat is falling off the bone, remove pheasant and let cool until it is comfortable to handle.

Shred pheasant meat while doing a diligent search for shotgun pellets. Pay special attention to areas where feathers look to be stuck under the skin – this is the entry point for a shotgun pellet, so one or more may be found here.

Once meat is shredded and shotgun pellets have been removed, add meat, broth, beans, chili powder and cumin to the slow cooker.

In skillet, brown onions and garlic in olive oil, then add to slow cooker.

Cook in slow cooker for as little as 4 hours, or cook longer for a thicker chili.

Serve with sour cream, shredded Monterey Jack cheese and tortilla chips.

**Tip:** If you doubt your ability to find shotgun pellets in your cooked pheasant, the Savertooth can be very useful. This mini-metal detector can be used on all game meat ([www.savertooth.com](http://www.savertooth.com)).