



# Roosters for Recruitment Summary

February 21, 2023



## Introduction

During the 2021 Legislative Session, HB 637 was passed authorizing Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to purchase pheasants to be released on state lands. Using the funds authorized in HB 637, FWP partnered with the Department of Corrections to raise pheasants for this program. Fiscal year 2022 (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022) was the inaugural year for the program at the Deer Lodge Prison. This is a summary of the efforts of the first year to date.

## Pheasant Releases

A total of 6,689 pheasants were released across all seven regions on 16 FWP properties (Figure 1) during the fall 2022. These releases were conducted in multiple phases, with the first round occurring across the state between September 21-23 prior to the youth hunt weekend on September 24-25. Subsequent releases occurred on FWP properties throughout the season until the end of November.

Region	FWP Property	Total Number of Pheasants Released throughout season	Number of Releases	Quantity Released Prior to Youth Hunt
1	North Shore Wildlife Management Area	326	2	100
1	Foys Bend Fisheries Conservation Area	190	2	100
2	Warm Springs Wildlife Management Area	305	2	0
3	Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area	1250	4	140
3	Lake Helena Wildlife Management Area	152	2	47
4	Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area	515	3	104
5	Grant Marsh Wildlife Management Area	300	3	300
5	Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area	350	3	350
6	Vandalia Wildlife Management Area	64	1	0
6	Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area	269	3	40
6	Sleeping Buffalo Wildlife Management Area	306	2	160
6	Fresno Reservoir Wildlife Management Area	240	2	160
6	Rookery Wildlife Management Area	474	3	72
6	Dodson Dam Wildlife Management Area	153	1	0
7	Isaac Homestead Wildlife Management Area	705	2	309
7	Amelia Island Wildlife Management Area	90	1	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>6689</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>1849</b>

## Collaboration

Groups that participated to make the youth hunt events successful included Pheasants Forever (PF), Ducks Unlimited (DU), Teller Wildlife Refuge, Rattlesnake Duck Club, Highline Sportsman Group, local trap clubs, hunter education instructors, dog trainers such as the Bold Triangle Sporting Dog Club and Dave Heine, and other community mentors. Partnership highlights with PF included establishing new and expanding existing connections with local chapters, and the recruitment of new members. Collaboration with DU provided an opportunity for a youth to hunt at the Teller Wildlife Refuge with a DU member and their dog, and a giveaway contribution of a shotgun at the event in Region 6. Local trap clubs and shooting ranges provided ideal locations to host events, offering engaging shooting opportunities.

## **Events**

The Communication and Education Division held events across the state to engage youth and their families leading up to the youth hunt opening weekend. During the opening weekend, staff also were present at FWP properties where pheasants had been released prior to the youth opener.

Locations for pre-opener events included FWP regional offices, Montana WILD, and local trap clubs and shooting ranges. Events generally included refreshments, with some regions hosting barbeques. Regional events were supported by members of partner organizations, each bringing varied skillsets to enhance the youth attendees experience by offering hands-on activities. Opportunities included throwing clays and letting youth practice shooting with shotguns from the hunter education program, learning about rules and regulations with a game warden, practicing bird identification with staff from the Teller Wildlife Refuge, and hands-on experience with inert bear spray. There were also opportunities to fine-tune stewardship skills. This included practicing requests for permission to hunt with a local landowner, signing into a Block Management Area, how to read maps, and enrolling in the Apprentice Hunter program. Some regions combined a waterfowl component into their activities and offered a station to learn about calling birds and layout blinds. Partner organizations also contributed to the excitement with donated items, including two shotguns.

The event in Region 1 was well attended with nearly 50 families participating at the local trap club. The weather was mild, which helped generate a strong turnout and made for a fun and simple way to generate excitement for the season. One of the Flathead Valley release locations is a limited entry site, facilitated by a reservation system, and slots for the youth weekend were booked with event attendees. While the turnout for the pre-event in Region 2 was not as substantial, it provided a positive experience by offering families an opportunity to get the resources they needed, be it a conversation, training, or an extra boost of confidence to get into the field. The event also generated excitement from partners like Ducks Unlimited who expressed interest in helping more by expanding the conversation to make connections statewide between FWP and others in their organization. Region 3 had a modest attendance that included one-on-one mentoring of families, and featured wardens and biologists providing tips for success and what to expect when hunting at Canyon Ferry. Multiple events were held in Region 4, with a pre-event held at a shooting range drawing over 40 participants. Additional activities held the Saturday and Sunday of the youth opener drew about 10 kids each day for practice shooting clay pigeons before heading out in the field. Region 5 held a kickoff event at the Rattlesnake Duck Club which had a 24-child limit. At a local trap club, Region 6 hosted about 30 youth, with exceptional participation from partner organizations, and engaging hands-on stations that the kids enjoyed. Region 7 saw about 20 people, including nine kids, over the weekend at Isaac Homestead, and feedback was supportive of placement of the pheasants, happy with the youth opener, and generally good attitudes overall. Most kids attended both days, as they enjoyed the first day so much.

In a debrief with FWP staff, everyone thought the events should be continued and expanded in future years.

## **Survey Results (Figures 2, 3, and 4)**

An online survey (Appendix A) was sent via email (Appendix B) on September 28, 2022, to approximately 74,000 Montana residents that held an Upland Game Bird (UGB) license. Invitations to complete the survey online also were distributed to participants at the youth events via signage and cards. The online survey received engagement from 533 people, with 325 respondents indicating they did not, or did not know, if they hunted at a WMA where pheasants had been released.

Forty-nine youth who responded to the survey indicated they participated in pheasant hunting during the youth upland game bird and waterfowl weekend opener at one of the 12 FWP properties where pheasants were released prior to the youth opener. Of those that answered the questions about satisfaction, 10 youth reported they were dissatisfied with the hunt, 11 were neutral, and 28 were satisfied or very satisfied.

Half of the youth respondents provided additional commentary on their hunting experience. These responses included comments regarding having a great time; experiencing a successful first hunt; gratefulness for opportunities with partner organizations; and expressing concerns about the age and development of the birds, difficulties in distinguishing between roosters and hens, ratio of hens, and number of birds released relative to the size of the WMA.

An additional 159 respondents that did not identify as youth also completed the survey following the youth opener. While the survey did not explicitly ask if they were hunting with a youth, twenty-one responses indicated their hunting experience included accompanying a youth, with over 70% ranking their experience as satisfied or very satisfied.

Nine commenters mentioned they hunted with a dog and some reported that birds did not fly which confused their dogs. Others appreciated an opportunity to train their dogs and a few indicated dogs caught birds on their own. Some ranked the experience as very satisfied citing a high number of birds; an opportunity to provide guidance for a youth hunter; and a new adult hunter learned about pheasant habitat, hunting, and trained their 10-month-old puppy.

Some responses submitted post-youth hunt identified a variety of complaints including seeing more hens than roosters and more hunters than birds. Some did not notice a difference in the number of pheasants compared to previous years, others felt not enough birds were released commensurate with the publicity of the program or that releases needed to be more frequent, and others did not see any birds at all. A common theme centered around a lack of tail feathers and difficulties this presented for identification. Some expressed their disagreement with the roosters for recruitment program, stating that stocked birds do not present a true hunting experience and made clear their preference would be to redirect funds to habitat and access programs.

Many others encouraged the program's success, with accolades that FWP staff were very friendly and helpful. Participants reported their appreciation for the opportunity, an enjoyable experience for their kids, and the releases were perfect for the youth hunt.

An additional survey invitation was sent on December 15, 2022, to approximately 111,000 resident and nonresident hunters that held an UGB license, including recipients that received the survey invitation in September. This second survey garnered 4,898 responses. Seven hundred and seventy-one responses were from hunters that participated in a pheasant hunt on FWP properties where pheasants had been released. The remaining 4,127 respondents indicated they did not, or did not know, if they hunted at a property where pheasant releases had occurred. Only three of the 771 respondents identified as youth. None of the youth provided any commentary on their experiences, but one ranked their experience as satisfied and the other two as very satisfied.

The majority of adult responses regarding their experience hunting on a WMA where pheasants had been released ranked as a three, or neutral. Of those that provided commentary, feedback referenced desired improvements and recommendations, such as improving the quality of the birds and number of roosters released. There also were requests to publicize how many birds were being released at each site to make



an informed decision about where to hunt. Others expressed that it provided a great opportunity for training dogs. Some recommended limits to the number of hunting parties per site (Lake Helena), while others felt there was a low turnout on sites they hunted.

About 50 commenters indicated a perception of a high hunter density, extreme pressure, and an unsafe hunting experience. Feedback from those that support the program generally voiced staggering releases throughout the season and increasing the number of sites to disperse hunters. The hunter survey has potential to provide more information and additional questions may be added in the future.

### **Program Cost**

House Bill 637 appropriated the funds for the purchase of pheasants to be released on state lands. For each fiscal year, beginning July 1, 2021, \$500,000 from the state special revenue fund and \$500,000 from the federal special revenue fund, both established in 87-1-601, is allocated to the program.

In fiscal year 2022, from July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022, the program expended \$605,554.14, of which \$151,388.54 was funded by general license dollars and \$454,165.60 was funded by federal Pittman-Robertson dollars.

In the first year of the program at the Deer Lodge Prison, much of the cost was for infrastructure that will contribute to the implementation and success of the program over its lifespan. Some equipment included an enclosed cargo trailer, retrofitted with fans and ventilation, for transport and delivery of birds, and a tractor with attachments for setting fence posts. A second cargo trailer was reallocated from the existing FWP fleet to be used for the pheasant program. A variety of supplies and materials were needed to construct the breeding, incubation, hatching, and flight pen areas that will continue to be used throughout the program. These supplies included lumber, electrical and plumbing components, fence materials and netting, and a heating and cooling unit for the hatching room.

### **FY 2022 (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022)**

Expenses	General License fund	Pittman-Robertson	Total
Salaries	\$16,115.88	\$48,347.63	\$64,463.50
Hourly Wages	\$468.07	\$1,404.20	\$1,872.26
Employee Benefits	\$5,516.17	\$16,548.51	\$22,064.68
Other Services (Contracts)	\$8,036.34	\$24,108.99	\$32,145.33
Supplies & Materials	\$93,230.52	\$279,691.58	\$372,922.10
Travel	\$1,672.92	\$5,018.77	\$6,691.69
Rent	\$247.50	\$742.50	\$990.00
Utilities	\$20.01	\$60.02	\$80.03
Repair & Maintenance	\$3,003.54	\$9,010.59	\$12,014.13
Other Expenses	\$914.63	\$2,743.89	\$3,658.52
Goods Purchased for Resale	\$984.48	\$2,953.43	\$3,937.90
Equipment	\$21,178.50	\$63,535.50	\$84,714.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$151,388.54</b>	<b>\$454,165.60</b>	<b>\$605,554.14</b>

During fiscal year 2023, beginning July 1, 2022, through December 29, 2022, the program expended \$496,991.27 of which \$197,885.42 was funded by general license dollars and \$299,105.85 was funded by federal Pittman-Robertson dollars.

Equipment expenses incurred in FY23 for one-time overhead purchases included a complete hatchery system and a Bobcat. A large investment was also made for a pheasant waterer system and lumber and metal sheeting for the flight pens. Using the current infrastructure, the prison expressed confidence in being able to scale up production to at least 10,000 birds annually.

**FY 2023 (July 1, 2022 – December 29, 2022)**

Expenses	General License fund	Pittman-Robertson	Total
Salaries	\$5,606.26	\$16,818.79	\$22,425.05
Hourly Wages	\$1,176.06	\$3,528.19	\$4,704.25
Employee Benefits	\$2,282.87	\$6,848.60	\$9,131.47
Other Services (Contracts)	\$14,526.47	\$829.42	\$15,355.89
Supplies & Materials	\$72,299.31	\$216,897.91	\$289,197.22
Travel	\$152.28	\$456.85	\$609.13
Rent	\$90.00	\$270.00	\$360.00
Utilities	\$216.19	\$648.57	\$864.76
Repair & Maintenance	\$51.45	\$154.34	\$205.79
Other Expenses	\$1,645.07	\$36,217.11	\$37,862.18
Goods Purchased for Resale	\$11.58	\$34.73	\$46.30
Equipment	\$99,774.82	\$16,242.15	\$116,016.97
Communications	\$53.07	\$159.20	\$212.26
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$197,885.42</b>	<b>\$299,105.85</b>	<b>\$496,991.27</b>

**Looking Forward**

The prison retained 1,050 pheasants (900 hens, 150 roosters) as brood stock for the 2023 season. Additionally, the prison is overwintering 550 pheasants that could not be released due to adverse weather conditions towards the end of 2022. These pheasants were hatched in late July/early August, making them approximately 16 weeks old in early December when the decision was made not to release them. These birds may be released in the spring where potential augmentation may be more likely. The primary intent of the release program is to drive hunter recruitment by providing opportunity, so releases will continue to occur immediately before and during the hunting season unless extra birds are kept overwinter.

The loss of tail feathers was identified as a crowding issue during feeding, encouraging birds to peck each other. This will be rectified this coming year. The relatively small size of birds may have been from a delay in moving them outside. Flight pens were not ready in early summer 2022 because of supply chain issues, and chicks were kept inside longer than anticipated. Now that infrastructure is in place, future hatchings will be transitioned to the flight pens earlier to accelerate development. Additionally, no birds younger than 20 weeks old will be released in future years.

In response to hunter requests for transparency on locations and quantity of birds being released, a general release schedule will be prepared in advance of the upland game bird season. The schedule may change due to poor release conditions (e.g., weather). We anticipate increasing the number of pheasants being released every year.

Perceptions of hunter crowding requires further analysis, whether through additional questions in the annual survey, or a site-specific approach to capture responses from those using lands where pheasants are released.

Pheasant production yields roughly an even mix of male and female birds. While only roosters can be harvested, hens are being released as well. Future discussion regarding the disposition of hens will occur in the coming year.

The roosters for recruitment program was a success if you look at the program's intended purpose – to engage youth hunters. Much was learned during the program's inaugural year to support improvements and guarantee success in future years. FWP looks forward to working with our partners to involve more youth and recruit and retain them as upland bird hunters.

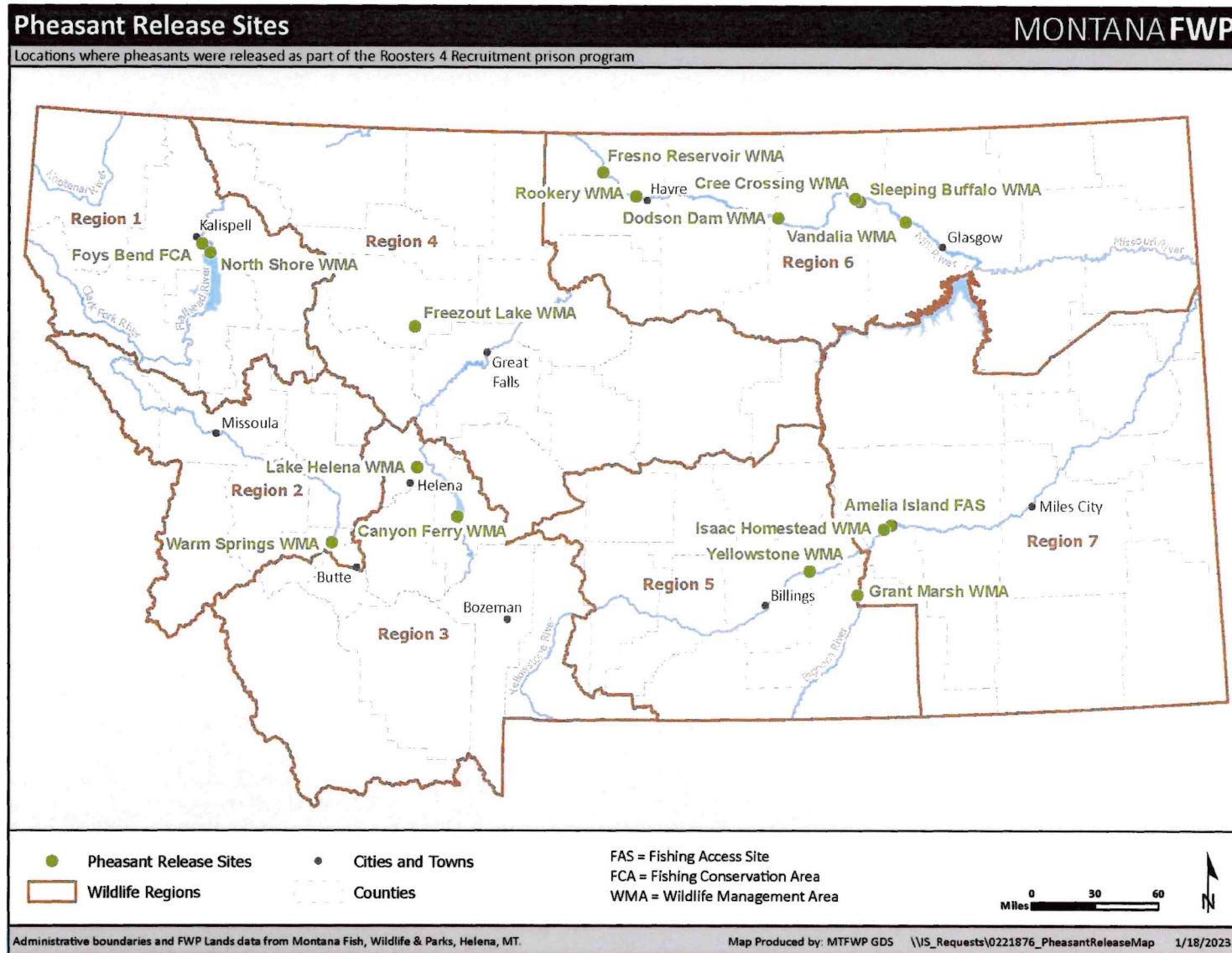


Figure 1. Locations of the 16 FWP properties where pheasants were released during the 2022-23 season



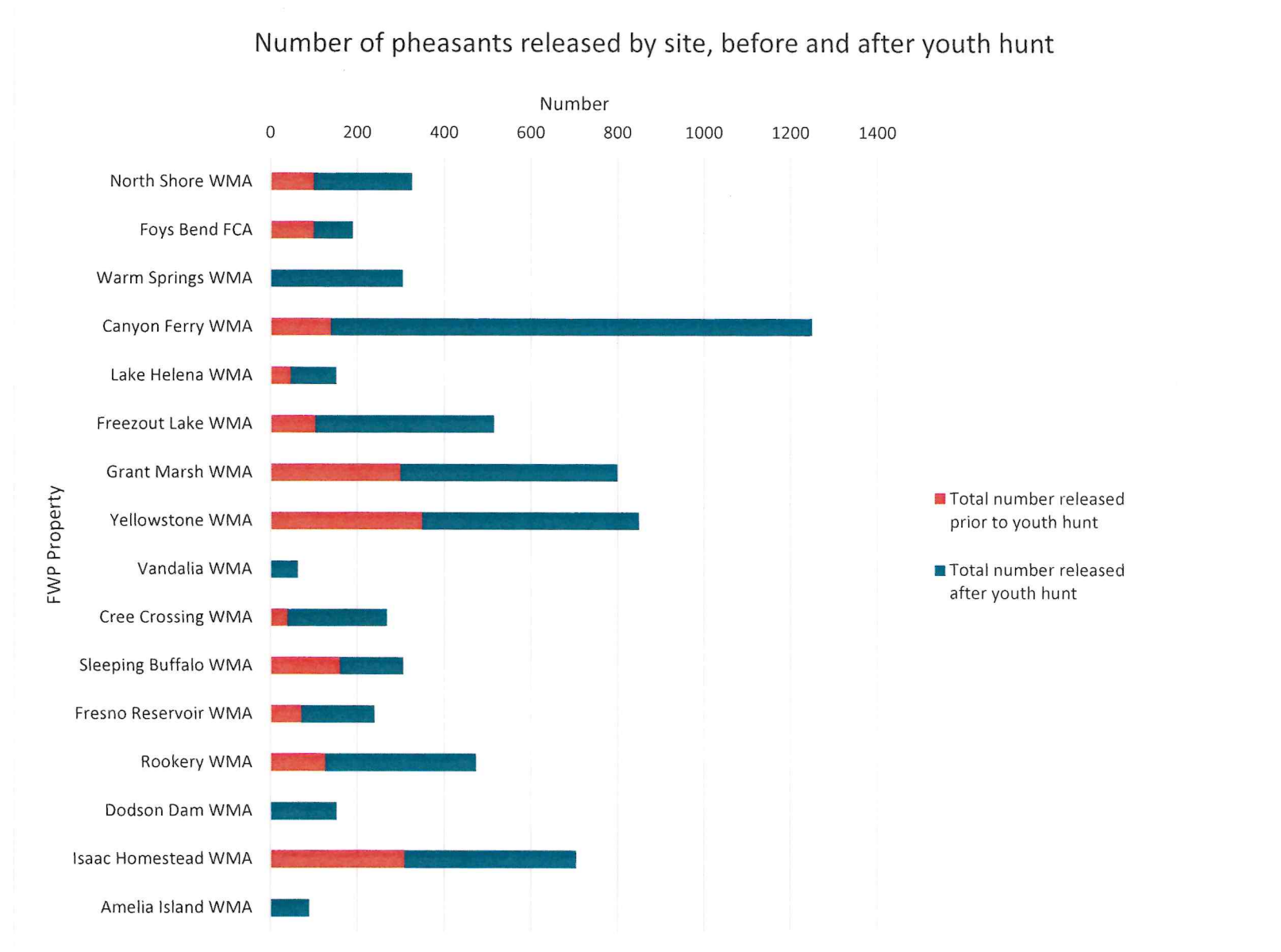


Figure 2. Number of pheasants released on each property during hunting season.



Figure 3. Adult hunter satisfaction ranked on a scale of 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied).

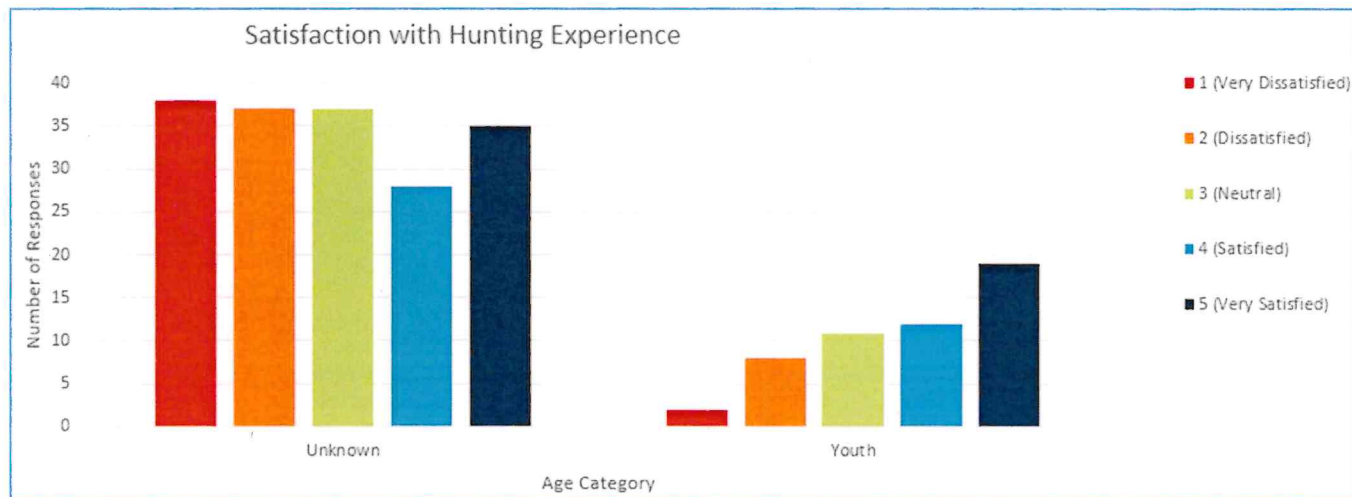


Figure 4. Youth and unknown age hunter satisfaction ranked on a scale of 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied).

Appendix A. Survey facilitated through SurveyMonkey.

## **Pheasant Hunting Recruitment & Reactivation Survey**

**Please complete this survey ONLY if you have hunted pheasants on a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) where pheasants have been released by FWP for the 2022 pheasant hunting season.**

WMAs where pheasants have been released include the following:

- Region 1 - North Shore WMA; Foys Bend Fisheries Conservation Area
- Region 3 - Canyon Ferry WMA; Lake Helena WMA
- Region 4 - Freezout Lake WMA
- Region 5 - Grant Marsh WMA; Yellowstone WMA
- Region 6 - Vandalia WMA; Cree Crossing WMA; Sleeping Buffalo WMA; Fresno WMA; Rookery WMA
- Region 7 - Isaac Homestead WMA

***This 2022 season, did you hunt pheasants at any WMAs where pheasants have been released by FWP?***

- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know
- ☐ Yes

\*Responding "No" or "I don't know" to the above question will end the survey

## **Tell us about your hunt**

***On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to what extent do you agree with the following statement?... "The main reason I hunted pheasants at a WMA where pheasants have been released was because FWP had recently released pheasants there."***

- ☐ 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Strongly Agree)

***On a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), how satisfied were you with the pheasant hunting experience(s) you had on WMA(s) where pheasants were released by FWP?***

- ☐ 1 (Very dissatisfied)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Very satisfied)

Comments:

## ALS Number

To get a sense of how many different people are hunting pheasants on WMAs where pheasants have been released by FWP, please provide your ALS number via the following questions.

- **Your ALS number is your 8-digit date of birth followed by a unique number assigned by FWP.**
- **For example:** An ALS number with a birthdate January 1, 1901 would look as follows 01/01/1901-1. The dash 1 at the end of the birthdate is the unique number assigned to you by FWP.

***Enter your birthdate in the format MM/DD/YYYY:***

***What is the unique number assigned to you by FWP? This is the part of your ALS number that follows the dash after your birthdate.***

## Enter for a chance to win!

**Contact information (required to be entered in the drawing for prizes)**

Name

City/Town

State/Province

Email Address



**Appendix B. Email invitations sent to all Upland Game Bird license holders to participate in survey****Montana Youth Pheasant and Waterfowl Weekend Survey**

*Montana FWP sent this bulletin at 09/28/2022 02:54 PM MDT*

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**FWP.MT.GOV**

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**THE OUTSIDE IS IN US ALL.**

Dear Montana upland game bird hunter:

Did you or your child participate in the recent Montana Youth Pheasant and Waterfowl Weekend? If so we'd really value your feedback by taking a very brief online survey. You could even win a prize.

To complete the survey, please follow this link.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GNW3GKV>

All people who complete the survey will be entered to win.

Thank you,

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

## Pheasant Survey

Montana FWP sent this bulletin at 12/15/2022 04:42 PM MST



THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

## Pheasant Survey

Dear Montana upland game bird hunter:

Did you and/or your family members hunt pheasants in Montana this season? If so we'd really value your feedback by taking a very brief online survey.

To complete the survey, please follow this link.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GNW3GKV>

Your participation provides us with valuable information.

Thank you,

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks