

Pheasant Farm houses endangered species, other fowl

By LAURIE MIHOLER
Special to the Record-Eagle

For most of us, seeing a bird from the list of endangered species would be a thrill, a rare experience.

For Edward and Madeleine Cherry of Maple City, it's an everyday occurrence, yet still a thrill.

The Cherrys own and operate Hillview Pheasant Farm, an enterprise that enables them to maintain their hobby of raising and breeding endangered species of pheasants of the world.

Among their neatly penned and landscaped quarters reside multitudes of other unendangered types of birds as well: quails, partridges, peacocks, wild turkeys, and doves. A man-made pond, filled and aerated year around, hosts a variety of waterfowl.

Their hobby began by accident, literally, over 20 years ago.

"We used to keep live animals," said Ed, "Fox, raccoon, porcupine, skunks, snakes, even a monkey, until one of the kids got hurt."

It happened that one of the raccoons got hold of their son's hand and could not be removed, despite their efforts to pry its jaws open. Ed had to shoot it off.

"So we got rid of all the animals and got into birds," Ed said.

Their first acquisition was a pair of ring necked pheasants.

"Then we heard of someone who had a pair of Golden's, so we got a pair of Golden's, and it just mushroomed from there," he laughed.

To date they have 19 kinds of pheasants, six of which are on the endangered species list. They are awaiting the arrival of a pair of Mikados, an endangered species from Formosa. They've been trying to get a pair for five years.

"There are 52 main species of pheasant, 120 sub species, and none of them is native to the United States," said Ed.

The Cherrys are federally licensed for endangered species and waterfowl, and hold a state license for Michigan game breeders.

Members of the American Pheasant and Waterfowl Society, Madeleine has published an article for the group's monthly magazine.

They raise some birds for sale, mostly Bob White quail and ring necked pheasant, but Madeleine maintains it's just a means to support the hobby.

"It's all hobby," says Ed. "It's a disease," he grins.

The hobby is a tricky one, with the unpredictability of events affecting the hoped for results.

"The endangered birds are difficult to keep," said Madeleine, "They're very high strung."

Birds in captivity are a lot different from the way they are in the wild, she said.

The Elliot, an endangered pheasant from Eastern China, start breeding in early spring, said Madeleine. They're the first birds that lay, usually around the end of February, or the first week of March.

"Well, you know what the weather in Northern Michigan is like at that time, if

you're not Johnny-on-the-spot the egg can freeze in one hour," she said.

Considering that the birds lay just one clutch of eggs a year, losing those eggs means it's all over until the next year.

The Cherrys do not chance their results by leaving the birds to hatch the eggs. Everything goes into incubators, with expected dates for hatching penciled to each bird's eggs. If the eggs don't hatch by that date, they're discarded. A generator is at hand in case of a power outage during this crucial time.

An exciting part of a visit to the farm during hatching time is being able to hold an egg and feel the chick inside "pipping," or trying to peek its way out. Madeleine remembers how thrilled one of her granddaughters was when given an egg to take up to the incubator and found it hatching right in her hand.

Predators are always a concern, and both Ed and Madeleine agree that cats arouse their worst fears where the birds are concerned. They even keep an intercom on during the night so they will be alerted if trouble is lurking.

Ed notes that while the birds are not afraid of anything on their own level, a cat running on top of the pen will get the bird worried and then the bird just goes crazy, flying all around until it gets its head by a hole in the pen.

"A cat can behead it in an instant," he said.

Not all danger is directed at the birds, however. The Cherrys' hobby has sent both of them to the hospital in the past.

Madeleine tells of the time she became too trusting of one of the Reeve pheasants. She merely tipped its water bowl to empty it inside the cage and the motion apparently upset the bird — it attacked, sinking its spur through her finger and out the other side.

Ed recalls being slapped by the wings of a male Canadian goose so hard across his eyes that it broke all the blood vessels.

"In order to sell a migratory bird, the wings must be pinioned and the toe clipped. It has to be done when they're four days old," he explained.

"The fun begins when you try to take a four-day-old bird away with its parents coming at you."

Nevertheless, their commitment and sense of humor prevail.

"What it boils down to is this," says Madeleine, "When you're hooked, you're hooked."

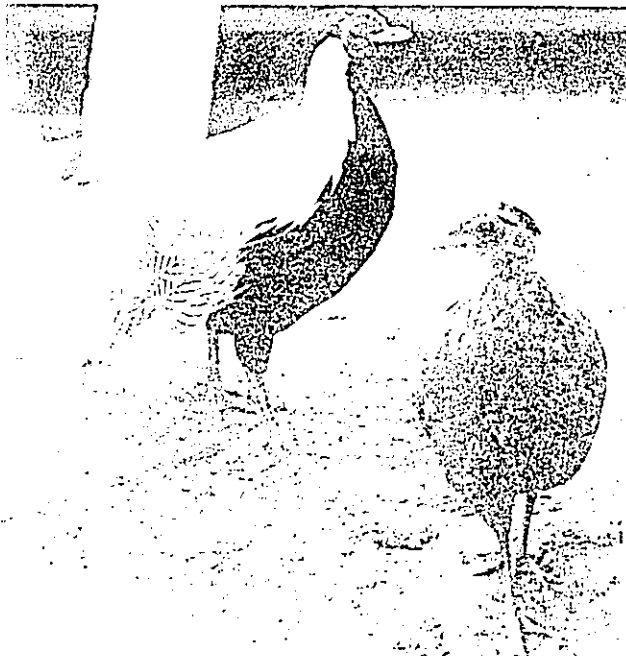
The Cherrys have hosted innumerable tours for the area's school children and senior citizen groups, and delight in sharing their interest in their hobby.

"Our guest book has signatures from all around the world," said Madeleine, adding that the only condition for a visit is that the interested parties call first for an appointment.

Fall is a perfect time to visit. The birds' colors become brighter and more and more brilliant in expectation of the mating season that begins in January.

The Cherrys are gracious hosts, leaving the visitor with a sense of amazement and respect for the complexity their hobby entails.

Hillview Pheasant Farm is on Newman Road, the phone number is 616-228-6112.



This pair of silver pheasants (the male has the more distinctive plumage) is in residence at the Hillview Pheasant Farm. The silver pheasant is native to China.

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