



Feeding Pheasants and Quail? Feed Your Next Habitat Project Instead.

Feeding is a poor substitute for good Habitat—the long term solution to winter survival.

Another Tough Winter-- Again in 2009/2010, harsh winter conditions have struck Iowa in the heart of the pheasant and quail range. Hunters and conservationists are naturally concerned about survival in this difficult winter and are asking "Should we be feeding game birds?" The answer is that we must think far past the crisis we face right now.

There is a lesson to be learned from a bad winter. It is that successfully carrying pheasants and quail through for spring breeding depends on quality thermal habitat and well designed food resources that also provide cover. Take a look at your best winter habitat and see if it is working out for the birds. If it is all blown in - then you need better cover. Funds invested this coming spring in establishing high quality winter habitat will yield far greater results and better winter survival in the future than will temporary feeding right now. Start planning food & cover projects for upland game birds for next spring.

Why Not Feed?--When heavy winter snows hit and temperatures go into the deep freeze, questions always arise about feeding. This well-intentioned practice is not without problems, however, and may actually harm pheasants and quail:

- Many artificial feeding locations end up exposing birds to predation, especially those located near avian predator perch trees.
- Poorly-placed feeders may draw game birds away from protective winter cover, and this may actually add to mortality. On the other hand, placing food in areas very close to quail may spook the birds, causing them to relocate elsewhere and expend precious energy.
- Pheasants and (particularly) quail are less mobile in winter, and are unlikely to find food that has been placed away from primary winter cover.

Habitat is the Key to Winter Survival — Late January thaws have brought us a short break in the weather, but a continued tough winter may be ahead. The best thing to do now is translate this winter's terrible situation into creating quality habitat for wildlife this coming spring. If increasing winter survival is your goal, establishing food, loafing areas, and heavy roosting cover within a short distance of each other should be your priority. Pheasants, and particularly quail, respond to harsh winter conditions by moving very little. So, since you can't predict the tough winters, you need to make well-designed grain food plots part of your habitat management every year. Since normal winter home ranges are relatively small, you must think critically about food plot size and location. Food plots that provide both food and cover are an essential part of a game bird winter habitat complex. If you lack winter cover altogether, large food plots (10+ acres, sorghum) can provide great food and cover.

PF and QF also recommend establishing plum thickets and other brushy cover for covey headquarters and loafing areas where birds can sun themselves during the day. Hinge-cut cedar trees make exceptionally good brush piles for quail - the important thing to remember is that brush piles or shrub plantings should have bare ground underneath. Native grass stands (such as switchgrass) also provide outstanding thermal cover for night-time roosting. Start planning now to establish these kinds of covers next spring.

Feeding do's and don'ts -- While we do not recommend it, if you feel you must feed upland game birds, please pay attention to the following:

- Do not place feeders near roads—it's dangerous to both pheasants and motorists.
- Do not place feeders where they will expose game birds to predation (near tall trees, etc).
- Place feeders next to good winter roosting and loafing cover (large cattail marshes, dense native grasses, shrub swamps, or heavy conifer shelterbelts) where birds stand a greater chance of surviving.
- Pheasants and quail become dependent on feeders. Once feeding is begun, don't stop until there are large, snow-free areas in fields.

Contact Pheasants Forever Field Staff To contact a Pheasants Forever representative in your area with your winter habitat or pheasant feeding questions go to www.iowapf.org