

A VISIT TO A PHEASANT FARM

When I am touring around, I like to keep a weather eye open for places to visit which may hold special interest for me as an aviculturist and (very amateur) bird watcher. Most of the places I visit are probably not as interesting as many of the aviaries of fellow club members. However, every so often there is an exception to that observation, and one such place is Olson's Game Bird Farm about 30km out of Swan Hill. My attention was captured by the brochure which boasted '... thousands of pheasants, guinea fowl and partridge ... reared for restaurants and garden aviaries, ornamental pheasants and pea fowl....'

On arrival at the farm we were greeted by a rather boisterous but friendly dog but there didn't seem to be anyone around. A sign invited us to ring the door bell at the house, which we did, and found a pleasant young lady who took us to see her dad who was 'somewhere in the yards'.

Her dad was Kevin O'Bryan (they had purchased the farm from the Olson's and retained the business name) and he was the difference between just another look at birds and picking up some real knowledge about the farm.

Kevin and his wife, Ros, have been running the farm of about 35 acres for about 9 or 10 years. The commercial side of the property takes up about 10 acres (I think), and has three quite distinct areas where the birds are held. But let's follow the production line through from the egg to the time the birds are sold.

According to Kevin, the best pheasants for meat are ringneck pheasants, which are the species he keeps, and these birds have a distinct breeding season. Over the course of the season, his stock produce 30,000 eggs, which by the time account is taken of infertile eggs, birds which die along the way and stock kept back for breeding, translates into about 20,000 birds for sale. The availability of breeding stock is of minor concern for Kevin as he has supplied breeding birds to other pheasant farmers around Australia. Because of the limitations on importing stock and/or eggs if an inbreeding problem occurs down the track, he does not know what he will do. Getting new blood from New Zealand is a possibility which has not as yet been fully explored. For this reason, he purposely does not follow 'blood lines' in selecting breeding stock.

The breeding stock are kept in a shed divided into 12 large pens, six down each side with a walkway down the middle. Each pen contains about 50 hens which run with 10 cock birds. The floor is covered with red sand. Even so, Kevin claims that only the strongest 4 or 5 cock birds actually mate with the hens.

Pheasants, apparently, are not dirty birds, and there was no evidence of droppings in the pens despite the intensity of the operation. Every couple of years, the divisions between the pens are dismantled, the end of the shed taken off and the building cleaned out with a front end loader and new soil placed in. The birds have 'eye blinkers' fitted; a small plastic fitting which fits into the air holes in the beak. This prevents the birds seeing and picking at each other. Breeding birds are kept for two years – one year olds down one side, two year olds down the other. Meat from the breeding birds is made into sausages for sale at the farm and a few other outlets. As the eggs are laid they are moved into an incubator, the only part of the operation we did not see since the last batch of hatchlings was in the brooding shed.

Once hatched the young pheasants are moved into the brooding shed. This is quite a large 'Nissan' hut type building divided into several pens. Each group of hatchlings is placed in one of the pens with accompanying heaters, feeders and water. While the pens are rectangular in shape, when first placed in the pen, the chicks are confined to a round section within the pen formed by a movable partition. The round section ensures that the young birds cannot stray too far from the heat source. As the birds grow, the round section is made bigger and the temperature also gradually reduced, since any sudden change of temperature is disastrous for the young birds. The food given is game bird crumbles, crushed even finer for the youngest chicks. Food and water containers are suspended to prevent fouling. The floor of each pen is covered with rice husks which, again, are removed by the front end loader each year and replaced with new.

Every hatchling pen has a door leading to the outside free range pens. At the appropriate time, the doors are opened up and the birds ushered into their outside pens where they spend the rest of their time prior to sale. At about the age of 16 weeks the birds are driven into a restricted race where they are caught up in a net and taken to a processing plant about one and a half hours drive from the farm. All operations of the farm are designed to be carried out by one person. The pheasants run with guinea fowl and partridge which seem to live quite happily together.

Obviously, there is a niche market for pheasant meat. Kevin is convinced that to sell your product to such a market, you need to do your own marketing. The only part of the production in which Kevin and Ros are not directly involved is the processing because of the health requirements. As the birds are due to come on to the market, Ros starts working the phones to contact those chefs who have used their product in previous years. As we all know, chefs move from restaurant to restaurant, so contacting a restaurant is not a viable option. It seems that the pheasant recipes follow the chefs and are not attached to any particular restaurant.

We did not learn much about the guinea fowl which are also kept for meat, but I assume they are treated much like the pheasant. According to Kevin, there is a small, but growing, market for partridge which are sold to gun clubs. Hunting and shooting of birds is becoming more and more difficult as the environmental lobby gains influence over the hunting of native birds. The gun clubs are therefore turning to farmers, like the O'Brien's, to supply birds for shooting by the sporting club members.

After looking at the commercial side of the operation, Kevin gave us a guided tour around his hobby aviaries. Two of these aviaries were consisted of two concentric circles. The inner circle was about 2 metres in diameter and the outer one 6-7 metres. Wedge shaped aviaries radiated from the inner to the outer circle. One of these wedges had a door fitted into the outer circle which allowed access to the inner circle. Doors in the inner circle wall gave access to each individual aviary. The centre section of the aviary complex was sheltered.

These aviaries held species of ornamental pheasant – Golden, Lady Amherst, Reeves and Silver - with the others housing some parrot species. All eggs are removed from the pheasants as they are laid and incubated. A third aviary, of more conventional design, had several divisions in which were kept King Parrots, Indian Ringnecks, Diamond and Barbary Doves. Also included in the collection were Jap, Californian and Bob White Quail while free ranging peacocks seemed to be doing quite well.

By his own admission, his farm work prevented Kevin from giving as much attention to his hobby birds as he would like but they did provide an interesting adjunct to the whole property.

With an entrance fee of \$7 I found the visit to the Olson Pheasant Farm good value and can recommend a visit should you ever be in the Swan Hill area. Information on the farm was contained in a brochure which we found at the local tourist bureau.