

## 'A real Christmas gift': Volunteers help local pheasant farm rebound after storm

By Cheyenne Thomas

By the time the winter storm ended on Dec. 15, Robert and Helen Blaha were dealing with a real mess.

The storm that brought ice and heavy snow over the course of two days also brought with it loads of troubles for the Blahas' pheasant farms on Riplinger Road just north of Loyal and their second farm on Popple Road west of Unity. Acres of pens containing thousands of Chinese ring-necked pheasants were now buried under thick layers of ice and snow, with broken posts, bent fences and destroyed netting.

"We've never had a storm that bad before," said Helen. "Nothing like this. We got rain and ice, about 3/8 of an inch on everything. The snow then really stuck. We got about eight inches of snow on top overnight. That broke a lot of our poles and netting."

Because of the damage, a lot of the pheasants that lived in their pens managed to break loose, sending them to the nearby roadways and wooded areas. That proved to be dangerous and sometimes deadly for the escaping birds, with some being lost to road traffic and predators in the days following the storm.

"We always watch for eagles, but the real dangers are the hawks," said Helen. "A couple members of our crew have already seen some eagles take some that have gotten loose. But another big thing is them getting hit on the road. When the plows came and cleared the roads, the pheasants gathered there because that was where they could walk; they struggled in the snow. But then they would get hit by the cars that passed by. It makes you sick seeing that happen. We put so much effort into those birds by the time they are in those pens."

Since the storm, Helen said they have been able to lure many of the pheasants out of the dangerous environment and back into their pens with food, but the problem of the damaged and snow-laden cages remained.

"Winter storms don't normally have snow on the trees for this long," she said. "On the pens, it doesn't fall off quickly normally and there have been years when we would spend hours in there getting ac-



(Above) Thousands of Chinese ring-necked pheasants were left trapped underneath a heavy blanket of hardened snow for several days at Blaha Pheasant Farm north of Loyal before being dug out by volunteers during the past week. The netting above the pens was covered in ice and snow during the storm on Dec. 15. The weight of the snow caused damage to both netting and supporting poles on the pens (right), while also making it difficult for the birds to move around their enclosures to get food and shelter in the cold days that followed. The volunteers were able to help clear the snow away to allow the birds to have more freedom of movement and for work on fixing the damage to the pens to begin.

CHEYENNE THOMAS/STAFF PHOTOS



cess to the pheasants and getting them out of spaces where they were trapped so they had access to food. But with this, without a crew of people, we're not going to be able to lift that up. The storm broke a lot of side poles and middle props were ripped off."

Thankfully for the Blahas, they didn't have to face their problems alone. This past week, a group of volunteers from Rapid Response Services -- an Ohio-based organization that helps individuals and communities with clean-up after disaster strikes -- and local Mennonites, came out to their farms to assist them in clearing the snow and ice from their pheasant pens. The crew of about 50 volunteers were at the farms

for nearly two-and-a-half days, helping to make the pens safe and habitable for the pheasants to live in again.

"This is the first time we've ever done a pheasant farm," said Allen Brubaker, one of the volunteers and an organizer for Rapid Response Services. "But we believe in following the words of Christ to help others, treat them the way you would want to be treated and to help out when others are in need."

Just a short time before coming out to the Blaha Pheasant Farm, Brubaker said the group finished helping out another game farm in Perkinstown deal with the impacts of the storm. The people at that farm were the ones who recommended that Rapid Response Services should go down to help out the Blahas, so away they went.

"We try to cover every state in the Union," said Brubaker. "We stay at a location until they feel they can continue to fix things on their own. So what we are doing here (at the Blaha Pheasant Farm) is going around and getting the netting off the ground."

Once the netting and fencing is free of snow, the Blahas' own crew can begin the work of repairing the pens before spring comes. Most of the pheasants currently on the farm are breeding stock for the coming year, said Helen, making it important for them to be able to repair the damage as quickly as they can.

"There is definitely work that we will have to do in the spring for this to prepare for the next season's birds," she said. "But there was a lot of pen that went down. It would have taken us years with the size of the crew that we have to get this cleared. We just have three guys. How do you go about fixing that? We could not have gotten through any of this without the volunteers who helped us clear the snow and gather up the lost pheasants."

For the Blahas, the help the volunteers brought to them in their hour of need was a true message on their devotion to the testaments in which they believe. Following Christ's example and helping others is the number one reason Rapid Response Services reaches out when disaster strikes, and Helen said she and her husband couldn't be more grateful for that.

"It was a real Christmas gift," she said. "What better way to show your Christianity than to help your fellow man and community? There is no better measure of your real devotion to doing what is right. They have been here two full days and half a day to make sure we got the help we needed. We appreciate those guys and those that fed them over the past few days."



The damage to the pens at the Blaha Pheasant Farm not only trapped many birds, but also caused enough damage to netting and fencing to allow many birds to escape their enclosures. This pair hanging out on top of the fencing at the farm were just a couple of the birds that still remained free when the volunteers from Rapid Response Services came by to help Dec. 27-29.