

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

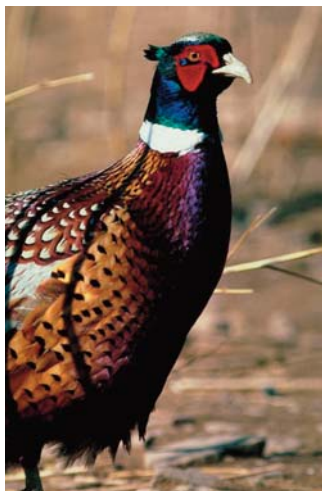
Oak Ridge Pheasant Ranch

A three-generation commitment to excellence

By Dick Ellis

When Tim Zindl took over the owner's reins of the Oak Ridge Pheasant Ranch in 2001, he reaped the benefits as a third generation entrepreneur of the trials and tribulations that had faced his grandfather and father before him across the decades. Challenges technical and natural, from hatching and rearing, to protecting as much as humanly possible thousands of pheasants from predation or weather ultimately for delivery to clients across the Midwest, had all been seen and met before since the Zindl family operation modestly began in southeast Wisconsin in the early 1940s.

But Grandparents Steve and Stella Zindl had also passed



on a secret to business success to Tim's father, Jim. And Jim had stressed the same message to Tim as they worked together year after year to ensure that game farms from Jefferson County, Wisconsin to Detroit, Michigan would receive the wary, healthy birds that they expected when they ordered from Oak Ridge.

"Oak Ridge has always stressed quality and service," Tim Zindl said October 19 while offering a reporter a tour of the family operation on 157 rolling acres near Watertown. "You can't compromise on what you sell and deliver. People can read between the lines. My grandfather and father have pounded the importance of quality and service into me. If you treat people right they will be with you forever. We deal on a handshake. And we've had customers for 50 years. But if those customers call you...you've gotta go now"

The Zindl roots of success were planted when Steve and Stella raised just nine ornamental pheasants and ringnecked pheasants as a hobby in Brown Deer in the 1940s. By the early 1950s, despite a low commercial demand due to a natural supply of wild birds, the business had moved to Menomonee Falls and evolved



Large and isolated exterior pens with standing corn for cover help develop the wary characteristics that have become a trademark for birds raised at Oak Ridge Pheasant Ranch on 157 acres of Watertown property and sold to private hunt clubs throughout the Midwest.

to raise 9000 birds annually.

"I don't think they received a lot of orders for birds in the early days," Zindl said. "There was a lot of wild bird hunting and people only had to walk out of their backyards to do it. There wasn't any hunting clubs. My grandparents moved to Sussex in 1957. By the time he sold the business to my Dad in 1980, they were raising 38,000 birds annually."

The Oak Ridge Pheasant Ranch remained in Sussex until the business outgrew the property and in the fall of 1994 the

father-son team of Jim and Tim Zindl purchased the 157 acre Watertown property together. The Sussex land was sold and the business began to produce its current numbers of 150,000 pheasants annually consisting of Chinese Bluebacks (90 percent); a sporty bird known to take flight faster, Mongolian Ring-necks; a larger bird with more majestic tails, and black mutants. Recently, the ranch also began to introduce some white pheasants on an experimental basis.

"We serve all private hunt clubs throughout the Midwest,"



The isolated 157 acre property in Watertown holding the Oak Ridge Pheasant Ranch allows 3rd generation owner Tim Zindl to raise 150,000 birds with a wary disposition to hunt clubs across the Midwest. When it's time to deliver, Zindl and employees recruit the expert assistance of border collies Cash and Zeus to corral the pheasants for capture and loading on company trucks.

Zindl said. "We supply Milford Hills right here but you may be surprised to know that most of our birds are delivered to the Detroit area. We deliver to a multiple clubs in Michigan including three big clubs near Detroit that together take 55,000 birds a year. We do it all, including delivery. They call and we come. We're like the mailman without the holidays. Holidays are a big deal in this business and Christmas is huge. Hunters are off of work and the hunt clubs are open."

Safely delivering the birds at 24 to 26 weeks of age to those clients might be considered the end-game but Oak Ridge is a business of repetition requiring planning and preparation until the entire process begins again. Competitive businesses come and most often go over the years as challenges including severe weather or heavy predation losses also must be dealt with in addition to the technical aspects of raising pheasants. Or the economy weakens and recreational dollars take less precedent in sportsmen's budgets.

According to Zindl, a 1983 graduate of Hartland Arrowhead High School, birds are delivered to customers from the middle of August through April with company-owned trucks. Hens and

breeder cocks have been selected to produce the broods necessary to fulfill future customer orders, with eggs picked up three times daily beginning in March through July. Tim and his wife, Kim, co-owner of Oak Ridge whom Zindl credited often during this interview for much of the family business success, often gather eggs with daughters, Kaycee; a UW-Green Bay student focusing on a career as a Pharmacist, and Nikki, a sophomore at Watertown High School.

"Gathering eggs is part of our family bonding time," Zindl said. "We do that on Sundays."

Seven buildings that include an incubator building utilized to hatch eggs and brooder buildings used to raise chicks are also on site. Birds are hatched in the incubator building and raised on the "A-side" of the brooder buildings, he said, until four weeks of age when they are moved to the "B-side" and blinders are fitted to prevent cannibalism due to the high consolidation of young birds. At seven weeks of age the birds have access to exterior runways that help them become accustomed to the outdoors and nighttime. At eight weeks the pheasants are transferred to the huge flyways or outdoor pens

prior to being sold at approximately six months of age.

Hatching, raising, and delivering 150,000 chicks requires the work of five full-time employees besides Zindl. Through all processes necessary to rear the chicks to adulthood, he said, government regulations prevent a variety of diseases. "Bio-security is a very big issue for poultry," Zindl said. "We don't even do tours."

New challenges greet the employees when the birds are moved to outdoor pens. The feathered tenants will eat 1900 tons of prepared, pelletized food annually and must be watered automatically until freezing temperatures initiate manual watering from dishes. The first snows bring that problem to an end because the birds like wild pheasants prefer to consume snow over water. Too much rain can mean significant losses of chicks. Fur bearing and avian predation is a problem 24-7 and despite a perimeter fence, traplines around each pen is imperative.

"Everything is trying to get in and the pheasants are trying to get out," Zindl said. "Coons, skunks, possum, mink, cats, coyotes, fox, hawks, owls, you name it. Because of it we have had to become professional trappers. It is not the fun part of this business. We've had mink get in and kill a thousand birds. Forty birds here and 40 birds there, just killing and moving on to others. Mink are terrible. You can have acceptable losses in business but you cannot survive with too many losses like that."

Acres of standing corn planted for cover roll over the property in the pens, and thousands of birds of varying ages and sizes disappear into the stalks as Zindl's truck rolls slowly by on this one-time tour. Occasionally, another cock crows and jittery birds continually show their discomfort with the intrusion. When it is time to herd the birds for capture and delivery, Zindl relies on Border

Collies Cash and Zeus to corral the birds whose natural instinct is to get away. Use of dogs to handle the birds is a family tradition as old as the business itself.

"Our birds are isolated and known for their wariness in the field," Zindl said. "We plant the standing crop of corn for cover and later the birds eat the cobs. There's a lot of misconception about hunting gamefarm pheasants. These birds will challenge the hunter in the field. My Dad and I go to events like Ducks Unlimited banquets and purchase the auction hunts on gamefarms that we don't deliver to. We want to know how our pheasants compare to birds that our competitors raise. It helps us to make sure that we are delivering a better bird to our customers."

The challenges of raising 150,000 pheasants will sometimes try the owner of the Oak Ridge Pheasant Ranch, even one reaping the experience and expertise of two generations before him who sometimes had to walk the same uncertain paths but who negotiated the journey with a commitment to quality and service. When things get complicated, Tim Zindl goes back to the same simple basics and finds his answers.

"Things don't always go like you hope. It sure isn't a boring profession," he said. "But we have great neighbors here. And the business is all family run. Whether it's me or Kim, any customer who calls is always talking to the boss. We're very easily contacted. Our satisfaction always comes later. We reap the benefits when people make a comment about what a beautiful bird we deliver. We're picky. We want it done right."

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