

The Status of Gray Partridge in Illinois: An Update

by Daniel Williams

On 23 December 2000, nine Gray Partridges (*Perdix perdix*) appeared at a feeder east of Durand, Winnebago County, Illinois. The flock came daily until 30 December 2000, when they were last seen. From 15 December until the end of the month, heavy snows had accumulated in the region, drifting along the hedgerows. Since my previous winter sighting of this species was along the fence line bordering the north side of the same property, I was pleased to learn the Gray Partridge was still to be found here. My last sighting was more than three years earlier, when I found a hen and four chicks in a mowed alfalfa field just east of Pecatonica in Winnebago County. No other sightings of this species were reported in Winnebago County in the intervening time.

Also known as Hungarian, European, or Bohemian Partridge in the United States, or simply, "the Partridge" in Europe, the Gray Partridge was introduced into the United States in the late 18th and early 19th century (Terres 1991). The first releases were made along the east coast, but were largely unsuccessful, despite the prevalence, at that time, of coastal savanna and prairie. Bent (1932) described these early introductions as having "many dismal failures in ... places less congenial to it." Phillips (1928) wrote that these eastern birds "eventually vanished between 1915 and 1920." An excellent discussion of the history of the introduction of the species is found in Phillips (1928).

Introductions into the prairies of the upper Great Plains, and particularly into central Canada, around Edmonton and Calgary, were successful beyond expectation. Similar successes occurred in eastern Montana and Wyoming, the Dakotas, and western Minnesota. These areas remain the stronghold of the species. There are several patches in the northeastern U.S., both on the northern border of New York and southern Quebec, and also the Canadian maritimes, particularly Nova Scotia. The northwestern Illinois flock is on the far eastern edge of the Midwest group of birds. See Carroll (1993).

Gray Partridges were introduced into Illinois from 1906 to 1927, and again in 1970, when as many as 12,000 were released (Farris 1970), with the highest concentrations in DeKalb and Lee counties (Bohlen 1989). The species prefers areas of dry grasslands. Farris suspected that the number of birds would remain low because of the high summer temperatures and volume of



Three of nine Gray Partridge seen at a feeder 28 December 2000 near Baker and Wheeler roads in Durand, Illinois, Winnebago County. Photo by Paulette Matthews.

rainfall. This prognosis is not surprising, given the history recorded by Phillips in 1928 and summarized by Bent four years later, as well as the actual experience with populations as observed in the intervening time.

In Europe, the Gray Partridge prefers cool, mid-latitude lowlands, with "continuous grass or herbage, not appreciably higher than its head, flanked or interspersed with some taller and denser cover such as hedgerows, woodland verges, or rough herbage and scrub affording concealment and nest-sites" (Cramp 1980). Cramp wrote: the Gray Partridge "tolerates with difficulty high humidity and high rainfall, especially in breeding season" Consequently, it is not surprising that the species has taken hold in those parts of North America most closely resembling the climatic and vegetative conditions of its old world habitat, and why the Illinois climate and habitat are marginal for this species, making its hold here tenuous at best.

Because the number of Ring-necked Pheasants has also shown a local decline as assessed on spring and Christmas count reports, and since Illinois is on the edge of the range, I became curious about how Gray Partridge might be faring in other parts of northwestern Illinois. Bohlen (1989) reported the high CBC report of Gray Partridge was 71 in Ogle County in 1983, although Johnson's (1997) summary of high CBC counts for each species places the honor on Freeport, Stephenson County, with 41 in 1984. Not surprisingly, given the large number of introduced birds in 1970, Bohlen also reported that small numbers were tallied on