

Outdoors

Pheasant being re-introduced

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If there is one thing upon which farmers, hunters, rural residents and bird watchers unanimously agree, it is that the ring-necked pheasant has all but disappeared from its former haunts in southern Ontario.

First introduced into this province in 1890, the gaudy birds with the raucous calls were such desirable additions to the wildlife scene they were subsequently released as far north as Thunder Bay.

But while the more northern transplants dwindled and failed, those in the counties south of Lake Simcoe gradually stabilized.

By 1935, ring-necked pheasants were not only firmly established to Lake Erie's tobacco country and Niagara's fruit belt, they flourished all along the north shore of Lake Ontario as well.

Many people living north and east of Kingston remember sizable pheasant populations as far north as the villages of Crosby and Newboro near the Rideau Lakes.

The cause for the general disappearance of this magnificent game bird in Ontario is open to question. It may well have had its roots in the early introductions from the Orient.

Often game breeders and pheasant fanciers intermixed their stock, with more emphasis and priority put on appearance rather than adaptability.

In fact, the wildest birds often made the least productive breeders and were either culled out or killed themselves flying against the wire when startled.

In the northern U.S. wildlife biologists found the survival rate of the released ring-necked pheasants dropped dramatically when the hatching and rearing of pheasants under broody domestic hens was replaced with modern incubators.

The subsequent release of large numbers of these semi-domestic pheasants served only to water down the untamed traits of the existing wild birds.

Though hunting pressure has been fingered as one of the main reasons for the pheasants' decline, the birds also disappeared in many areas where not shooting was permitted.

There's no doubt that the loss of good pheasant habitat in some areas and the changing agricultural practices in most

places have not been conducive to ring-necked pheasant survival.

It is interesting to note that the 1910-1911 Ontario Game And Fisheries Commission were congratulatory in their review of the successful introduction of these popular birds to this province.

Today however, the Ministry of Natural Resources do not feel there is any future in pheasant inventories; has never had a pheasant management plan with defined objectives, and no formal studies have been undertaken to determine real reasons for this splendid game bird's demise.

Blair Dawson, a former MNR Central Region biologist from Richmond Hill, makes no bones about the fact little was done to slow the pheasants' decline in this province.

One bright side to this otherwise sad tale occurred in the early 1980s.

At that time, hybrid European black-necked pheasants were released near Cambridge, Ont. A much darker bird without the familiar white ring, they frequent the woodlands more than their upland counterparts.

To date a small but persistent population of these so-called black-necks is thriving near the initial release point and also in some of the more wooded ravines of Toronto.

In a further bid to return the pheasant to some of its former status, the Westport Area Outdoor Association is involved in a long-range reintroduction program.

Going back to basics by using domestic chickens as brood mothers, some two dozen club members hatch and release a brood or two of pheasants every year on their individual rural properties.

Reared under the guidance of a mother hen, these young poults are familiar with their immediate surroundings and at eight to nine weeks of age are allowed to wander off one day in a gentle release that is far superior to the conventional drop planting method.

Now into its third year, this unique reintroduction program is already showing some positive results. In the area between Crowe Lake and Portland, pheasants are being reported where they haven't been seen in several decades.

Better than that, many previous years' birds are raising natural broods in the wild. With the continued co-operation of local residents and those visiting the area, the future of this magnificent game bird is becoming brighter with each passing season.

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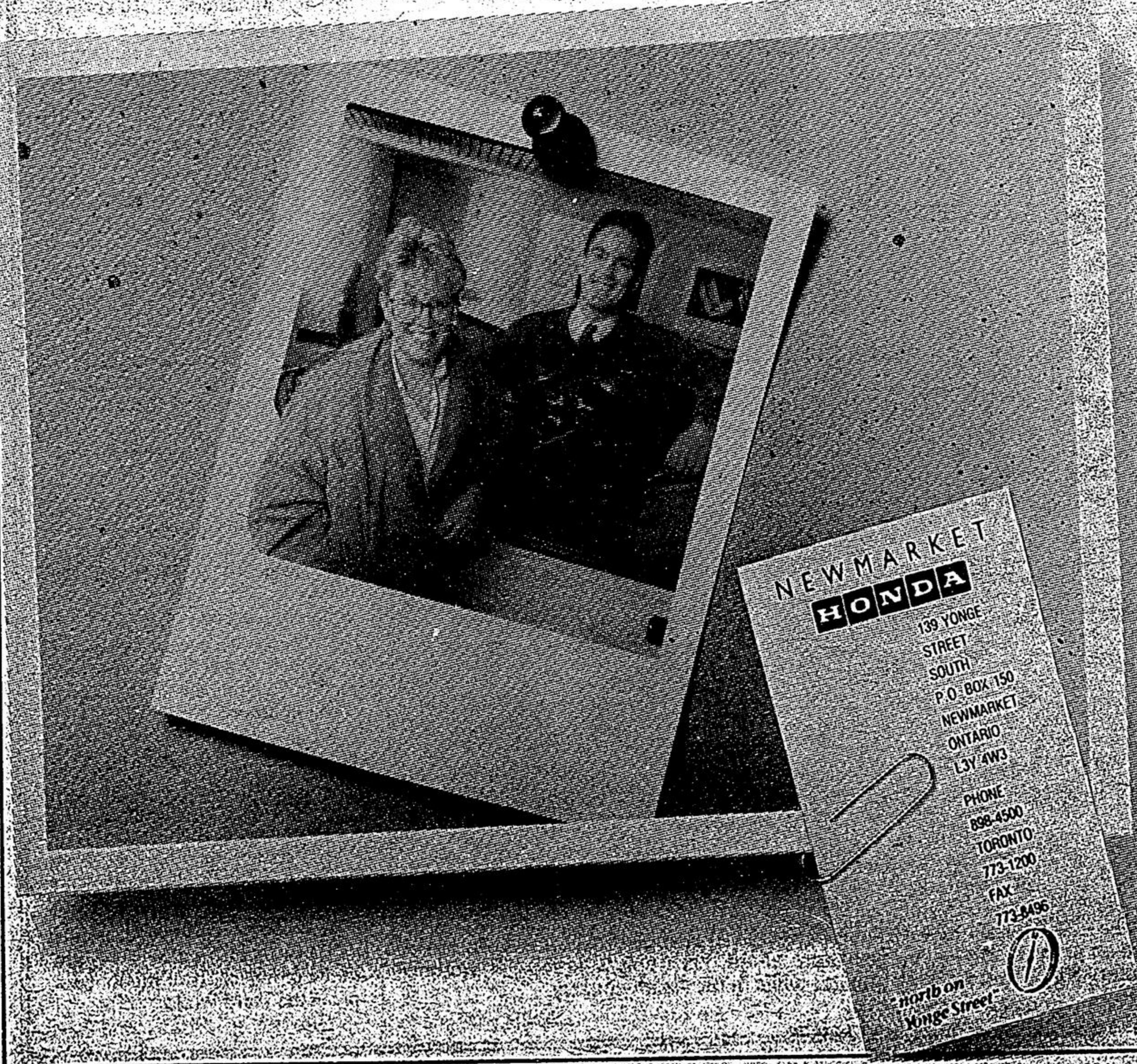
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