

“A Bird Can’t Live on Stubble”

By Brian Brake

In 1992, a few of us gathered around a folding table with coffee, maps, and a shared memory: the sound of a rooster pheasant bursting from the hedgerow, tail streaming, heart pounding. That memory is harder to come by now.

Back in the 1970s and '80s, pheasants were still a common sight in South-Central Pennsylvania. But the landscape was changing. Fencerows disappeared. Alfalfa got cut earlier and crop fields became cleaner. The Farm Bill shifted incentives. And the birds—wild, resilient, but not invincible—began to vanish.

Fast forward to today: a Facebook post shows two pen-raised birds, breasted and dumped in a trash can. The comments were swift and angry. But here’s the deeper truth: this isn’t just about poor disposal. It’s about a broken connection between people and the land.

Pheasants can’t survive on a stubble field. They need winter cover, nesting habitat, insect-rich brood areas. They need stewardship. And we—hunters, farmers, teachers, neighbors—need to understand that wildlife isn’t a given. It’s a gift, and it’s slipping away.

This is the first in a series of short reflections I’ll be sharing throughout the year. We’ll talk biology, habitat, ethics, and hope. We’ll remember what was, reckon with what is, and imagine what could be again.

Because conservation isn’t just science. It’s story. And it’s time we told ours.