



Editor Bob South visits a remote part of Hawke's Bay and finds a remarkable young couple rearing 20,000 pheasants in what amounts to their backyard.

COCK SURE

WINDING ALONG THE NARROW SINGLE lane that is Lower Flag Range Road near Sherenden in the Hawke's Bay, it's easy to feel the space and isolation.

The nearest sizeable town is Hastings, but that's 45 minutes away and already the sun-baked brown hillsides gently mixed against the greenery of rolling farmland and pine forests confirms that this location is near enough to the back of beyond. It feels good.

After opening the gate at No 12 on Lower Flag Range Road – which is off Flag Range Road, which is off the Napier-Taupo "Gentle Annie" Road – and

then carefully descending the long, steep-graded dusty gravel driveway, the first glorious sight that greets visitors is the picturesque Tutaekuri River shaping a giant oxbow on one boundary of a 50 acre natural amphitheatre of idyllic property owned by Jeff Niblett (34) and Bridgette Karetai (32). The next sight is more perplexing. Reaching the bottom of the drive, several acres of white netting enclosures erupt from the long grass atop flat terraces stepped up from the riverbank. Is it some sort of campground? An organic market garden perhaps? The netting being the same used to cover grapevines, could it be a vineyard, orchard, or even

a kiwi fruit plantation? Not a secluded commercial cannabis plot, surely?

On closer examination – which helps explain the abundant feed trail of grain down the entire length of the entrance – it more clearly transforms into a gamebird hatchery, home to some 20,000 pheasant poults aged from day-olds to six months. This is New Zealand Game Birds Ltd, one of the country's largest pheasant breeding facilities, owned and operated for the last two years by qualified veterinarians Niblett and Karetai.

In days gone by, when newly formed acclimatisation societies were trying to stock New Zealand

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Pheasant shooting began in the mid-1860s and early 1870s, but the once flourishing populations soon dwindled and “by about the 1880s there had been a rapid decline in pheasants, not just on one or two locations, but in districts where the bird had become well established”.

It wasn't long after these dramatic declines – caused mainly by introduced predators, inclement weather, ingestion of poisoned grain intended to kill rabbits and small birds, and deterioration of habitat through land development – that many societies opted to build game farms for rearing pheasants for stocking “and this became a consuming item of expenditure, year after year”.

McDowall says, as an example, that “from about the end of WWII the Auckland Society released thousands of pheasants every year, these costing it many thousands of dollars”.

The total number of releases by Auckland in 1950 and 1952 was more than 8000 birds, costing nearly \$20,000 and between 1962 and 1969 a total of 65,000 pheasants were raised and liberated at a cost of more than \$120,000.

Eventually pheasant rearing became too expensive even for the wealthy Auckland Society.

Today, however, pheasants are being reared again in several places around the country, almost exclusively by private, energetic entrepreneurs, such as Niblett and Karetai. At least four others dot the North Island – one near Taupo, one in Rotorua, another in Whirinaki, and one somewhere around Te Awamutu. And in the South Island Niblett says Bendigo Hunting Preserve near Lake Dunstan in central Otago “raises quite a few”, while another smaller breeder operates out of Blenheim.

These enterprising pheasant farms are again necessary, indeed thriving, because of

the number of gamebird preserves that have legally popped up around the country since the New Zealand Fish & Game Council adopted a national policy that accepts gamebird preserves as part of the lawful hunting process. The NZFGC resolved in 1999 and reconfirmed in 2000 that “...it considers game preserves could provide legitimate hunting opportunity, so long as the effects are controlled beyond the boundaries of the preserve, and do not adversely affect the sustainability of the wild resource or hunting opportunities for wild birds.”

Officially then, there are 19 gamebird preserves at the moment, with more certain to start up to meet increasing demand. Fifteen preserves are currently gazetted in the Minister of Conservation's Game Notice (see sidebar: Where They Are), but only one (Bendigo Hunting Preserve) is formally DoC authorised. Another four are not yet in the Gazette, or have not been DoC authorised.

Niblett and Karetai, like the other Kiwi pheasant breeders, are understandably unapologetic opportunists taking advantage of the market's new demands. But the young couple, who with their two and a bit year-old daughter Georgia and eight month-old son Angus literally live just a pheasant glide away from their immaculate bird farm, are absolutely passionate about this venture.

Niblett's vehemence can be traced back as far as his childhood in Blenheim where his father Robin, in conjunction with the local acclimatisation society, bred red-legged partridge for release in the late 1970s.

“Dad and them were trying to get up to 1000 red legs released in a year,” recalls Niblett. “By recollection, they eventually released up to maybe

2000 birds, but they didn't establish. There's good reasons for that.



with fish, gamebirds, and larger game, such as deer, gamebird hatcheries weren't such an uncommon sight. R.M McDowall reports in his book *Gamekeepers For The Nation* that “pheasants first came to New Zealand at a very early date, the initial importations having arrived by 1843 and many further importations through the 1850s”.

“When the societies began to form in the 1860s, the more energetic of them, like Auckland, Nelson, (North) Canterbury and Otago, soon began bringing in further stocks of pheasants.”



JEFF NIBLETT - HUNTER AS WELL



LOOKING BACK, WHAT THEY WERE DOING was probably all wrong. It was more to do with how birds were released. We virtually just let them go in one area without feeding them and looking after them. They probably weren't released in the right areas as well."

While those early days with his father certainly kindled his initial interest for gamebird rearing, it wasn't until Niblett and his partner Bridgette went to Britain in the late-1990s that he actually recognised it as having potential as a bonafide liveli-

hood. By then he was a veterinarian graduate from Massey, Bridgette had gained her vet degree from Queensland University, and the world was their oyster. While Bridgette found work in a horse practice in Britain, Niblett became a specialist gamebird vet out of Salisbury, where the practice he joined had most of southern England's gamebird preserves as clients.

"We had 300 or 400 clients on our books and I went around advising on all sorts of health issues," he says.


With Britain annually raising and releasing between 20-30 million pheasants, problems inevitably arise. In Niblett's area alone, more than four million birds were released each year, so he was rarely idle during his five years there.

"Viral problems..." says Niblett. "I did a bit of work on a turkey virus that transferred to pheasants while I was there.

"But as everywhere, most problems in gamebird rearing don't involve disease. Most of it is to do with management - related to light, heat, and feeding.

"I learned a lot in Britain and the advantage I was able to bring back to New Zealand was that I'd done many British shoots with beaters and keepers, and visited many game farms as a vet, which gave me a look at everyone else's problems. Now I know how to avoid them."

While in Britain, Niblett was blissfully unaware that the game preserve debate had raged in New Zealand and then rather tamely subsided, with preserves eventually gaining the thumbs up from most hunters and finally receiving the blessing of Fish & Game New Zealand, managers of both our fish and gamebird resources. In an earlier issue of this magazine, NZFG director Bryce Johnson explained this new official line by saying: "Fish & Game does not view upland game preserves, which are based on hatchery reared and released pheasants and partridges (but not waterfowl) in the same light as the wild populations to which the laws in question were always intended to apply. These artificial hunting operations cater for a small niche hunting market, which is subject to regulation by local Fish & Game Councils (comprised of elected anglers and hunters) and the Director General of Conservation. Experience to date has shown that they actually enhance hunting opportunities for ordinary hunters on surrounding lands, from birds regularly escaping over their perimeter fences, and pose no significant threat to either wild gamebird populations, or the hunting



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traditions they support.”

When Niblett returned home, he learned of the changes taking place here and, welled by the new, refreshing attitudes towards game preserves, he immediately opted to set up a breeding operation, knowing that on the basis of his British experiences, he was “really in the best position to set up something and do it properly”.

The first year back, Niblett and Karetai raised pheasants in Dannevirke and it proved a bit wet. Looking for a drier climate, the Sherenden 50 acres came up for tender, Niblett knew the area well from his own hunting experiences nearby, and he and his partner secured what Niblett still considers “the perfect property” for pheasant breeding. Now there was no holding back New Zealand Game Birds Ltd.

To approach perfection for a gamebird farm, conditions must be dry, but not too hot. Controlling temperature while rearing pheasants is paramount and if it starts getting too hot, things can spin out of control quickly. Between 25-30C is ideal. Over 30C and keeping birds cool becomes an issue.

New Zealand Game Birds Ltd consists of an incubator shed, housing four state of the art incubators, and the vast open-air complex that caters for 20,000 birds at any one time. This facility, modelled on the very same British game farms Niblett provided veterinary services for while overseas, is basically a series of 50 approximately 9m x 12m completely enclosed white-netted pens, at the end of which are carefully situated a similar number of small huts. His farm is moderately sized by British standards, but large by New Zealand's. The average British farm rears between 20,000 and 30,000 pheasants.

Pheasant rearing is pretty full on, especially with a young family and while trying to practice as a small animal vet at the same time. Niblett has worked as a vet in Dannevirke, Matamata, and now at Taradale and Hastings and hopes to move out of

small animal care to larger animals soon. He and Bridgette shared the vet workload when setting up the bird farm and Niblett had summers off from vetting to get well established.

“We started with about 80 hens,” recalls Niblett, “and reared about 2500 our first year two seasons ago. “Now we are up to 20,000. This a good level at the moment for us.”

Coincidentally, Niblett also rears a much smaller number of red-legged partridge for a client who is hoping to establish them on his own property. Red legs are less labour intensive and lay fewer

eggs per hen than pheasants.

Gamebird farming is an all day, every day routine, with early morning starts, and the arduous evening ritual of rounding up birds from every netted pen and ‘driving’ them into the overnight shelter of gas-warmed, weather-proof, dark huts.

“The worst time,” says Niblett, “is over summer when we are flat out, starting at 6am and finishing at 8-9pm.”

The breeding season starts in September and hens will keep laying through to Christmas or New Year's.

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“ Niblett insists hatchery birds quickly can and do exhibit wild behaviour and instincts. ”

TODAY NEW ZEALAND GAME BIRDS LTD keeps 700 hens separated into pens, 25 to 30 per enclosure. Three to four cock birds are put in each pen for mating.

“Sometimes we kick the odd cock out because he’s getting a bit dominant, or a bit submissive, but generally we end up with two to three cocks with 25 hens,” says Niblett.

Following the mating ritual, Niblett lets many of the cock birds go on his property – hence the regular grain trails down his driveway entrance to keep them fat, happy, and near to home. But these cock releases are also made so the hens can be left in peace during laying.

“We collect eggs two to three times a day,” he says. “When I was vetting on farms in UK, they worked on about 40 eggs per hen, but here we are getting 60 per hen, with a 70% success rate. That might not sound great, but it’s about average and about what they achieve in Britain as well.

A lot of the losses are due to conditions. Our hens lay on the ground, for instance, unlike battery hens, so eggs are contaminated pretty easily.”

Surprisingly, few birds are lost to predators, such as wild cats, mice, rats, stoats and ferrets, which seem deterred so far by the rather durable, nearly impenetrable netting, and hawks haven’t been a menace either.

Where They Are

Information provided by Fish & Game New Zealand shows that a total of 19 game preserves are operating in the country. Fifteen are currently gazetted in the Minister of Conservation’s Game Notice, but only one (Bendigo Hunting Preserve) is formally DoC authorised. The other 14 in the Gazette include:- Bay of Plenty: Titoki Hereford Stud, Benner’s Brothers Farm, Equine Farm, Treetops, Otama Partnership, Habitat Game Birds, Ngapuke Farm. Hawke’s Bay: Tim and Maree Kittows, Poronui Station, Whanawhana Trust Property, Glencoe Station. Canterbury: Dorset Downs Game Preserve, Ngahere Game Ranch. Otago: Bendigo Hunting Preserve, Craigneuk Hunting Preserve.

Another four are not yet in the Gazette, or have not been DoC authorised. These include Habitat Game Birds in Te Puke, Ngapuke Farm in Paengaroa, and Lindsay Hill and Kauri Cliffs of Northland.

After a short incubation period and once hatched (newborns are 50% male, 50% female), they are taken to six weeks-old before most are sold to game preserves, which in turn provide feed and water at special release sites, where birds congregate and get used to the wild, before dispersing naturally. Most New Zealand game farms, and certainly those in Britain, operate similarly. However in the United States, as a contrast, birds aren’t released as poults (a poult is six weeks and about 400

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grams). Instead, they are let go as fully coloured adult birds.

Considerable effort and not a little cost go into rearing poults to six weeks. Young chicks are fed on very high protein diets, much higher than chickens for instance. Special pheasant feed is purchased from a Carterton mill. Birds are fed in their huts on 'crumbles' from feeder hoppers for the first four weeks. This feed contains protein levels of 26-28%. They also drink from special nipple drippers that ensure clean water. After four to four and a half weeks, they're fed on pellets of slightly lower protein value. "From six to 12 weeks, when many birds have been bought and located at special release sites on game preserves, a bird eats about 2.5kg of feed," says Niblett. "After 12 weeks, birds move on to maize. A lot of birds aren't shot until six months, so the feed bill soon adds up. A thousand birds will eat 400kg of maize a week."

After visiting a release site at Tuna Nui, a 2500 acre farm just 7km from Niblett's, it's easy to see where all that maize goes. The site – a crudely constructed chicken wire fenced compound set among tree stands, assorted scrub, long grass, blackberry, and you name it – featured several nipper drippers and feed stations that released birds flocked to like vermin. Every single direction one looked for more than 100 yards, the rolling hills and overgrowth fair moved with pheasants.

It is from release sites like this that birds hone their wild instincts, if given sufficient time before organised shoots. Niblett insists hatchery birds quickly can and do exhibit wild behaviour and instincts.

"Once reared birds learn that they are being hunted, they fast become as wild as wild birds," he says. "Initially they are not. The first time they are driven for shooting, they're a bit stupid. Young wild poults would be too, though. But the second time they are hunted, you can see birds darting for cover and into hiding spots like any wild pheasant. The one thing hatchery-reared birds don't do is breed as well in the wild. They still breed, but percentage-wise it is poor. The instinct of mothering chicks is not there, although the second year

around they are meant to be better."

Game preserves, which by law must release more than 400 birds for their shoots (incidentally, six week-old poults are sold for \$10-12), are the best, most obvious market, although other options exist. One is the restaurant trade, where currently supply does not meet demand, but where the only killing house in the North Island, in south Auckland, tends to monopolise business. Another option is niche market buying – lifestyle blockers, for instance, who wish to have a few birds on their land for environmental and aesthetic reasons.

"Quite a few people, who don't have preserves but who want to release 30 or 40 birds, come along and buy them," says Niblett. "And this includes hunters, who are not going to ever hunt them, but just like seeing them around. This market could grow a bit over the coming years."

A third market is sure to flourish too. Together with Tuna Nui owner Andrew Russell, Niblett has set up a company called Tuna Nui Gamebirds. And soon enough they will be having organised shoots for New Zealand Game Birds Ltd-raised pheasants, which have been released at two sites on the substantial Tuna Nui block.

It might appear an anomaly to some that a vet and gamebird breeder, such as Niblett, should also be an enthusiastic hunter. The vigilant man in the pen, softly caressing and gently nurturing a weak, or over-heated chick, is hardly analogous to the shotgun-toting hunter-gatherer blasting a two year-old ringneck rooster from the sky to put on his family dinner table.

But the combination of caring breeder and staunch hunter certainly works. And although it may seem odd, even incongruous, arguably the greater and more genuine motive for Niblett's drive to be successful with his business isn't solely to crank up the profit, but to him it's genuinely just as much about helping ensure greater potential for better hunting opportunity for licenceholders.

"I do think of New Zealand shooters when I raise my pheasants," says Niblett. "It's all about the more people you can get out shooting and having fun, the better."

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