“Make the desert blossom like the rose”

Animal Acclimatization, Settler Colonialism, and the Construction of Oregon’s Nature

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IN 1893, the world’s fair opened in Chicago. Among its many extravaganzas, the fair featured displays by individual American states designed to highlight their attractions. Oregon’s exhibit extolled the state’s natural beauty, employing taxidermy to showcase the ring-necked pheasant — *Phasianus colchicus torquatus* — a chicken-sized bird of handsome plumage, which made for excellent sport-hunting. Local media was suitably impressed, deeming the bird both emblematic and alluring. The *Morning Oregonian* described the exhibit as a “beautiful example of the taxidermist’s art” and opined that if such an exhibit failed to “give Eastern sportsmen a conception of the beauties of Oregon nothing save a trip to the Willamette Valley will.”

On the surface, nothing seems odd about a young state boasting about its natural beauty and animal inhabitants. As the ring-necked pheasant’s contemporary colloquial name — the “Chinese pheasant” — reveals, however, it had not long been one of the “beauties of Oregon.” Introduced to the state from China in 1881 on the initiative of Oregon notable Owen Nickerson Denny, the bird thrived in its new surroundings under an initial hunting moratorium, lasting from 1882 to 1891. Denny intended the ring-necked pheasant to serve as a game bird for sport-hunting, an upper-class leisure pursuit that he practiced. When the moratorium lapsed in 1891, hunters indeed were extremely enthusiastic about the bird; it was suitably challenging to hunt as well as delightfully “toothsome” to consume. Those qualities quickly made it the game bird of choice in Oregon and beyond. Beginning in the 1890s and continuing throughout the first half of the twentieth century, all the other forty-seven continental American states attempted to introduce ring-necked pheasants, enjoying much success but also significant failure. Currently established in their millions in nineteen states, the ring-necked pheasant is now deeply enmeshed in American landscapes and culture alike. In 1943, it even became South Dakota’s state bird.

The pheasant’s inclusion in Oregon’s exhibit to the world’s fair is an early sign of the bird’s adoption into American culture as a beloved creature, symbolic of American environments and ideals. Yet how and why the bird came to exert such transcendent significance in Oregon and beyond — already so vividly apparent just twelve years after its transplantation from China — requires explanation. The importance of sport-hunting to American culture at the time is surely one factor, but deeper processes are at root. The pheasant’s importation to Oregon was a product of, and later a touchstone within, American settler-colonialism — the multi-faceted ideology that alleged Euro-American superiority, marginalized Indigenous
peoples, and glorified the renovation of landscapes in accordance with Euro-American norms and imperatives. The centrality of the ring-necked pheasant to Oregon’s world’s fair exhibit is a case in point. Putting forth a recently introduced species as a symbol of Oregon’s natural beauty exalted the settler state-building project that demanded the “improvement” and “civilizing” of newly settled environments, often at the expense of both Indigenous people and animals. The story of the ring-necked pheasant also highlights an overlooked effect of American settlement. Oregon settlers did not just impact nature by constructing cities, industries, roads, and farms — they also constructed nature itself.

While a few environmental historians have linked the nineteenth-century introduction of foreign species into recently settled spaces to settler-colonialist ideologies and opportunities, none have done so with regard to the ring-necked pheasant. Instead, the bird’s history has been left to a handful of informative yet uncritical general histories. Moreover, the connective tissues between intentional species introduction and colonialism have been described broadly, but never in specificity. By examining hundreds of previously unexplored primary sources derived from sport-hunting periodicals, Oregon newspapers, and government publications, this article offers a more complete and critical account of the establishment of the ring-necked pheasant in Oregon than found elsewhere. In recapturing the contemporary discourse surrounding the pheasant’s introduction, proliferation, and management, the pheasant’s Americanization emerges as a part of the larger settler-colonial project, rather than merely a parochial quest to bolster sport-hunting. Exultant settler-colonial ideology is omnipresent in Denny and his supporters’ public statements regarding the ring-necked pheasant’s acclimatization. Subsequent historiography, moreover, has continued in the same vein, lauding the ring-necked pheasant as symbol of American pioneer virtue.

Such triumphal renderings underscore both the deep ideological meaning of the bird and the need for a less celebratory treatment. Pheasant introduction and protection in Oregon was an elite project that came at the expense of lower-class hunters and farmers and met with their resistance, a fact heretofore overlooked. In the name of the pheasant, elite sport-hunters coaxed the state legislature into enacting far-reaching laws that altered Oregonians’ access to and relationship with wildlife. These policies limited hunting opportunities for market and subsistence hunters, while creating a state bureaucracy dedicated to game bird propagation. Sport-hunters also prevailed over frequent farmer complaints pertaining to pheasant depredations on their grain crops, turning back agitation in the 1880s and 1890s to remove official pheasant protection. I therefore situate the story of the ring-necked pheasant within a wider process of game management — and struggle to control nature — in fin-de-siècle America that was exclusionary, elitist, and served to erode common access to natural resources.

Finally, the history of the ring-necked pheasant in Oregon and the United States provides evidence for the protracted popularity and duration of acclimatization — the contemporary term for intentional species introductions to new ecosystems — in America. The introduction and spread of the ring-necked pheasant — and that of other, similar game birds from the 1890s through the middle of the twentieth century — were substantial acclimatization efforts that prove the concept retained popularity well beyond 1900. This conclusion contests the conventional scholarly wisdom, influentially articulated by environmental historians Harriet Ritvo and Thomas Dunlap, whichdownplays the extent and general enthusiasm for acclimatization in the United States.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACCLIMATIZATION

The movement, establishment, and demise of flora and fauna across the planet has gone on for hundreds of millions of years; however, the rise of human societies that traded and traveled considerably accelerated biological exchange. The beginning of worldwide European exploration and colonialism around 1500 CE dramatically intensified the movement of plants and animals between regions previously isolated by oceans, as elucidated in environmental historian Albert Crosby’s seminal work, Ecological Imperialism. During the first centuries of overseas colonization, Europeans transplanted to new areas their most reliable crops and, accidentally, their most persistent weeds. They also transported their most essential domesticated animals as well as their most despised ones, such as rats. They exported virulent diseases as well, such as smallpox. Likewise, the travelers introduced to Europe many species previously unknown to the continent. As European empires expanded during the nineteenth century, and millions of Euro-American settlers occupied lands new to them, the opportunities for biological exchange expanded still further.

Despite the inherent unpredictability of species introductions, acclimatization enjoyed waxing popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century, receiving its first formal expression with the 1854 founding of the French Société Zoologique d’Acclimatation in Paris. With that society’s formation, the practice of acclimatization attained unprecedented state sup-

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port, scientific backing, and intellectual credibility. It was no longer merely the stuff of accident or quixotic private endeavor, although these modes of acclimatization continued. Primarily, the society sought to import useful flora and fauna from regions occupied by French imperial expansion for the agricultural, industrial, and military advancement of metropolitan France. The society also acclimatized numerous species in Algeria to facilitate French colonization there.9 Above all, the society was a deeply imperial institution that sought the improvement of nature in the service of French statecraft and colonization, and it soon spawned imitators.

English elites founded a British counterpart to the French society in 1860, and antipodean acclimatization societies sprung up in Australia and New Zealand beginning in the following year. These organizations also took as their primary goal the improvement of nature for state imperatives.8 They soon foundered, however, for financial reasons and because of numerous acclimatization failures and unwelcome “successes.” In the Southern Hemisphere, for instance, the pestilential proliferation of the European rabbit and starling, among others, significantly undermined acclimatization ideology by the 1870s.17 The rise and fall of acclimatization in Great Britain happened even more rapidly, losing popularity by the late 1860s. In France, challenges to the wisdom of acclimatization first arose in the 1870s, but its repudiation was not hegemonic until around the First World War. Afterward, acclimatization authorities in France and New Zealand morphed into conservation authorities dedicated to preserving native fauna.18 These examples have dominated historians’ attention, persuading them that acclimatization was a peculiarly nineteenth-century phenomenon that swiftly waned. The overlooked story of acclimatization in America, however, and in particular that of the ring-necked pheasant, clashes with this narrative.

THE RING-NECKED PHEASANT AND GAME BIRD ACCLIMATIZATION IN AMERICA

Acclimatization in America was always more diffuse than elsewhere. Although acclimatization societies existed during the second half of the nineteenth century in New York City, Cincinnati, Ohio, Portland, Oregon, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, they were small, impecunious, and unaffiliated with government. Instead, individuals, either singularly or via private societies, provided the primary impetus for American acclimatization, although state departments of wildlife played hefty roles in twentieth-century efforts.19 Nevertheless, it was individuals, such as Owen Denny, who took the acclimatization initiative in the nineteenth century. His purposes were similar to those animating European and antipodean acclimatizers. But they also were part of the broader “ecological revolution” — in the words of environmental historian Carolyn Merchant — that Euro-American settlers imposed on American environments through the escalating commodification of nature concomitant with industrial capitalism.20

“Judge” Denny — as contemporaries often called him — was definitely the most significant acclimatizer in the American West, and perhaps in the entire nation.21 Denny occupied various elite positions over the course of his life: lawyer, tax collector, foreign diplomat to China and Korea, Oregon state senator, and, of course, judge. But his most lasting impact was surely as an acclimatizer. Denny and his wife, Gertrude Hall Denny, became convinced of the ring-necked pheasant’s sport-hunting potential and culinary quality while Owen was a diplomat in Shanghai. From 1881 to 1884, he shipped a plethora of bird and tree species from China to Oregon. Ring-necked pheasants composed the bulk of Denny’s shipments, although they also included sand grouse, Chefoo partridges, Langshan chickens, bamboo trees, flat peach trees, and golden, green, copper, and silver pheasants, among others.22 Yet it was the ring-necked pheasant that would thrive above all others, enjoying cultural influence and popularity beyond any other species introduced to America, even if the now-reviled introductions of the English sparrow and starling are more widely known.23

Although Denny’s inaugural 1881 shipment of ring-necked pheasants failed to prosper, he shipped a second batch the following year. This time,
the pheasants proliferated astronomically in their new habitat. A third and final batch of birds arrived in 1884 and included even more ring-necked pheasants.24 Denny’s connections with Oregon’s elite aided the survival of his beloved bird; he coerced the Oregon Legislature into issuing a hunting moratorium on the species in 1882. Denny intended the bird to be fodder for sport-hunters, but he recognized the need to protect it until its population was high enough to sustain a yearly hunting season. As a testament to the moratorium’s success, by the mid 1890s, after a popular yearly pheasant hunting season had begun, contemporaries claimed that the ring-necked pheasant population in Oregon exceeded a million birds.25 Undaunted by farmer grumbling, pheasant proponents soon exported the bird throughout the United States, where it found many more enthusiastic sport-hunters and congenial landscapes.26

Overall, the pheasant’s “naturalization” is impressive. Many Americans today believe the bird, which numbers in the millions, is a native species.27 Yet the success of the pheasant has not previously induced a scholarly reconsideration of the importance of American acclimatization. Perhaps this is because of the relative lack of organized acclimatization societies, making sources difficult to find and the enterprise seem ephemeral. Indeed, Thomas Dunlap minimized the extent of American acclimatization in arguing that antipodean acclimatization was much more ambitious, organized, and large-scale.28 While he was right about the scale of acclimatization in Australia and New Zealand, he unfairly dismissed the vibrancy of the acclimatization project in America. The United States saw the intentional introduction of numerous species during the final decades of the nineteenth century and throughout much of the twentieth century — the ring-necked pheasant pre-eminent among them and an inspiration for many of the others.29 These species radically impacted American environments and culture alike, belying the notion that American acclimatization was insignificant or short-term.

On the whole, Dunlap’s discussion of the environmental ideologies of late nineteenth-century Euro-American settlers is insightful, but his brief reference to the ring-necked pheasant’s introduction overlooks its significance.30 The level of American popular support for acclimatization projects involving game birds was considerable and sustained, not, as he claims, “low-grade” and merely a “fad.”31 Dunlap’s contention that “imported game was not only not needed [in North America], it was at odds with the ethos of the sport [of hunting],” moreover, seems equally untenable in light of the nationwide sport-hunter enthusiasm for the pheasant and contemporary concerns over the viability of many species owing to severe hunting pressure.32

Dunlap cautioned historians not to overlook the worldwide significance of acclimatization, imploring that “the movement was too popular to be dismissed” as a whim.33 Likewise, American acclimatization of game birds was too popular and sustained to be dismissed as a “fad.” By the dawn of the twentieth century, the ring-necked pheasant had become America’s most sought-after quarry, its spread across the country zealously encouraged by wildlife officials and hunters alike. It is true that, as Ritvo asserts, the public mood about the importation of some species had changed by then; many Americans had come to loath the ever-multiplying English sparrow and starling, for instance.34 Nevertheless, most Americans seem to have understood species acclimatization as not inherently problematic, as holds the modern scientific consensus, but rather only as problematic as the species introduced. If sport-hunters or game authorities believed a species had merit as a game bird, there were few reservations about importing it, despite the increasingly sour outlook Americans had adopted toward certain avian additions. Indeed, while United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) zoologist T.S. Palmer notably warned about the “danger” of importing “noxious” animal and bird species in 1898 — sparrows and starlings chief among his concerns — less well-known is that he felt differently about introducing game birds.35

Although it was illegal to export the pheasant from Oregon until 1896, many covert shipments occurred. After 1896, the floodgates truly opened, with every continental state carrying out expensive projects to introduce the ring-necked pheasant well into the mid twentieth century.36 California’s long history of pheasant propagation began in 1889, when state officials traveled to Oregon to purchase the birds “because of the success which Oregon experienced,” according to a later state wildlife official.37 Although this and subsequent efforts failed, California established two state-run game farms in 1909 and 1926 in order to spawn pheasants. The first game farm was discontinued in 1918 after releasing only a few thousand birds, but the second churned out some 300,000 in its first twenty years. By the 1960s, California’s ring-necked pheasant population sustained an annual pheasant kill of 500,000.38

Private individuals also introduced ring-necked pheasants, secreted out of Oregon, to South Dakota beginning in the early 1890s; however, populations accreted only when the state began purchasing and releasing pheasants between 1911 and 1917. As in Oregon, ring-necked pheasants thrived in South Dakota’s climate. Soon, state officials boasted of some 50 million resident pheasants and a lucrative hunting industry.39 While few states could match South Dakota or California’s success, their many attempts indicate

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ON APRIL 5, 1908, the Oregon Daily Journal profiled the zoologist William Shaw’s new book, *The China or Denny Pheasant in Oregon* — a sign of the contemporary enthusiasm for the ring-necked pheasant. In the book, Shaw lauds the introduction of the ring-necked pheasant and asserts that its popularity was inspiring other game bird introductions around the country.

The persistent popularity of pheasant acclimatization. Popular nature writer George Laycock, for example, claims that “hundreds of thousands of dollars” were spent by Southern states eager to establish ring-necks, before Southerners realized that the region’s soil and climate were simply inhospitable. In perhaps the most notable Southern effort, Laycock reported that Kentucky was still trying to import and establish the ring-necked pheasant at great expense in the 1950s, turning out 20,000 pheasants during an eight-year initiative. Meanwhile, such was Massachusetts hunters’ enthusiasm for the ring-necked pheasant that they eagerly awaited — and may have hastened through poaching — the extinction of the heath hen around 1930. Chafing at efforts to conserve a bird they found unfit for sport, they successfully demanded that its last refuge, Martha’s Vineyard, be stocked with ring-necked pheasants on the hen’s demise.

Not only was great effort expended on the ring-necked pheasant, its monetary value — eventually derived from sales of state hunting licenses — also inspired introductions of similar game birds from abroad. Zoologist William Shaw asserted in his historically minded 1908 tract that the pheasant’s introduction produced “far-reaching results” that caused “fresh and vigorous impetus” to game bird acquisition in other states. Conservationist John C. Phillips alleged that the “country went wild over pheasants” after the ring-necked pheasant’s introduction, a preoccupation that resulted in the importation of other members of the pheasant family, as well as similar birds, such as the Hungarian and Chukar partridges. The first major flurry of Hungarian partridge importations occurred around 1900, and it would eventually be introduced in forty-two states. Chukar partridges may have been originally introduced to the United States in Illinois in 1893, but it was not until the 1930s that many states began importing this Asian bird in earnest. As with the Hungarian partridge, the Chukar failed to thrive in many states despite enormous effort. Minnesota, for example, could not engender permanent populations despite importing an estimated 85,000 birds in total. Many western states were successful, however, and Chukar partridge introductions actually intensified in the 1950s and 1960s, with states releasing nearly 500,000 partridges during this period. Both birds currently populate parts of the Midwest and northwestern United States.

Whether individual states experienced success or failure, the fact that they made sizable long-term commitments to pheasant and other game-bird acclimatization indicates that American acclimatization was formidable and enduring, not faddish or fleeting. That said, Ritvo is correct to view the 1900 creation of the first American organization for the protection of native species as a turning point. As she put it, “the commitment to preserve native flora and fauna from the encroachment of aliens marked a turn, conscious
or otherwise, from offense to defense.” Americans were indeed warier than before. Yet many, including Denny, advocated the somewhat contradictory view that while native flora and fauna should be conserved, they also should be augmented with foreign species. As he put it, “with concerted action we can not only protect the natural game in our forests and on our hills and prairies, but we can add valuable accessions from time to time.” Denny’s views demonstrate an overlooked subtlety — concern for native fauna often coexisted with enthusiasm for acclimatization. In the case of game birds, moreover, Americans clearly stayed on “offense” and continued introductions in prodigious quantities deep into the twentieth century.45

Heretofore, I have stressed the extent and degree of American game bird introductions and posited hoped-for financial gain as the driving factor in the pheasant’s stateside spread. But profit did not motivate Denny to ship pheasants to Oregon, nor did he ever derive any.46 Instead, he was driven by settler-colonial ideology, which lauded the alteration of supposedly lacking indigenous landscapes. He, and many others, would see his avian adventures as a triumph of Euro-American settler virtue; some would even cast the pheasant itself as an embodiment of that virtue. A handful of historians have rightly noted the connections among acclimatization, imperialism, and settler-colonialism at a high level of abstraction. In turning to the contemporary rhetoric about the ring-necked pheasant, we see how these connections worked in a specific case as well as the long intellectual shadow they cast.

SETTLER-COLONIALISM AND THE MEANING OF THE RING-NECKED PHEASANT

Aldo Leopold became one of the most famous American scientists of the twentieth century on account of his wide-ranging and accessible work on American ecology. Interestingly, the significance of the ring-necked pheasant caught his attention. Leopold brought up the ring-necked pheasant in an otherwise unrelated 1935 essay in which he pondered the meaning of introduced species. Puzzled by the preference of American farmers he observed in Coon Valley, Wisconsin, for an introduced tree species over an introduced species. Leopold intimated that the attraction transcended their physical characteristics. Thus, Leopold pondered a truly fundamental question, albeit only tangentially: what psychological, ideological, or intellectual predispositions incline groups of people to prefer and seek out certain “exotic” species? Even larger questions are implied: how do species become important, or expendable, to cultures? What reverberations do changes in a landscape have for a culture?

Too philosophical to dismiss the allure of non-indigenous species as merely a matter of individual aesthetic tastes, Leopold intimated that the attraction transcended their physical characteristics. Thus, Leopold pondered a truly fundamental question, albeit only tangentially: what psychological, ideological, or intellectual predispositions incline groups of people to prefer and seek out certain “exotic” species? Even larger questions are implied: how do species become important, or expendable, to cultures? What reverberations do changes in a landscape have for a culture?

These foundational questions cannot be resolved here, but Leopold’s fleeting observation points toward something fundamental about the intellectual underpinnings driving ring-necked pheasant acclimatization. While I am unsure if there is a “universal urge to capture and domesticate the exotic,” Leopold tellingly likened the pheasant’s naturalization to the tale of Pocahontas. In doing so, he was speaking within, and about, a discourse of colonization by equating the acclimatization of a foreign animal species with the famous capture and forced assimilation of an Indigenous notable. He was also indulging in a commonplace and dehumanizing comparison by likening Indigenous people with animals. In all this, Leopold placed the ring-necked pheasant’s introduction within the larger American settler-colonial project, a framing surely more accurate than he realized given the offhanded character of his remark. Indeed, the ring-necked pheasant’s acclimatization was profoundly linked with settler-colonialism, right from the start.

Settler-colonial triumphalism — with its attendant notions of improving, civilizing, and building Oregon and, thereby, America — pervades Denny’s public statements about the ring-necked pheasant. An 1892 speech to an appreciative Willamette Rod and Gun Club is Denny’s most extended elaboration of his outlook. After being feted by the club with admiring speeches as well as an objet d’art featuring taxidermied ring-necked pheasants, Denny addressed the assembled:

When Columbus discovered this great country of ours . . . it did not present or possess very many of the beauties and attractive features which today are the boast and pride of all Americans, as well as the admiration of the people of other lands.

Instead, Denny asserted, those attractive features had been “added since, either through the genius of our institutions or through public and private enterprise.” His goal with the pheasant, therefore, was to “contribute at least something in the same direction” to Oregon.48

[The farmers’] solicitude for the little evergreens is sometimes almost touching. It is interesting to note, however, that no such pride or tenderness is evoked by their new plantings of native hardwoods. What explains this difference in attitude? Does it arise from a latent sentiment for the confers of the Scandinavian homeland? Or does it merely reflect that universal urge to capture and domesticate the exotic which found its first American expression in the romance of Pocahontas, and its last in the Americanization of the ringnecked [sic] pheasant?47

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By invoking Columbus on the quadricentennial of his “discovery” of America, Denny overtly placed his acclimatization efforts within the greater American settler-colonial continuum. By invoking Columbus on the quadricentennial of his “discovery” of America, Denny overtly placed his acclimatization efforts within the greater American settler-colonial continuum.49 Denny’s discussion of Columbus and his celebration of American and Oregonian civilizational virtue also function as an endorsement of American settler-colonialism and a quintessential articulation of its primary themes. Denny alluded to the common trope that, before Euro-American settlement, American landscapes were deficient and required intervention. Denny thus denies the rich and impactful relationships between Indigenous peoples and American landscapes, while implicitly constructing them as the opposite of his “progressive civilization,” which has added so many “beauties and attractive features” to the country.50

Indeed, for Denny, acclimatization was public service no less than his diplomatic work in China. In his speech, he claimed that even while in China, “neither Mrs. Denny nor myself ever forgot for a moment that we were Americans and citizens of the great state of Oregon,” and that such patriotism had prompted him to add to the fauna of the state. Denny’s subsequent, soaring description of Oregon’s majesty, moreover, borrows richly from the typical bromides of the American yeoman ideal. Oregon is a place of industrious, independent men, “a land of the broadest possibilities for future manufactures and great enterprises,” with abundant natural resources. His one rhetorical twist is that this “land of fruit and flowers” is now “liberally interspersed with choice game.” For Denny, then, acclimatization was a contribution to the glory of Oregon and a piece of the broader American nation-building effort.51

Elsewhere, Denny characterized his acquisition of the ring-necked pheasant in similar language. In 1888, he wrote to the Oregonian on the need to protect the pheasant from pot-hunting, a contemporary term for heedless, market-oriented hunting done for profit instead of pleasure. He opined that “it is largely due to importations of various birds that enables [sic] us to ‘make the desert blossom like the rose,’ and which add so much to the grandeur and enjoyableness of our young but great country.”52 Denny’s view of the pre-colonized landscape as deficient and requiring improvement is vividly apparent. Meanwhile, his intention to bolster the “grandeur” of Oregon and America through pheasant acclimatization underscores the civilizational significance he invested in the project. That Denny would expound publicly in this way, moreover, suggests that he felt much of the Euro-American settler population would concur with such sentiments.

In that, he was quite right. Similar themes of improvement and civilizing, and acknowledgment of the “public-spirited” nature of the project, suffuse the rhetoric of others who supported Denny’s endeavor. His admirers at the Willamette Rod and Gun Club, for example, gushed about the “praise and gratitude” owed to Denny, “who causes fruitfulness to dwell where barrenness previously existed.” They lauded Denny’s beneficence and feted him as a “public-spirited” man. They looked forward to the day when the pheasant would be “king of game birds throughout the entire country,” signaling their support for both the original introduction of the bird and the continued improvement of American landscapes elsewhere.53

Language extolling Denny’s altruism, civic-mindedness, and nation-building was commonplace in other sport-hunter discourse, too, showing that
the idea of the pheasant as an enhancement on the pre-existing landscape resonated with many. An 1885 letter to the pro-sport-hunting periodical Forest and Stream celebrated the “free gift to the people from Denny” and highly approved of the idea of “stocking our woods with the most beautiful of game birds.” An 1894 Oregonian article also waxed poetic about Denny and his contributions to sport-hunting and America. The author, a sport-hunter, wished “all honour” to Denny, and hoped that sportsmen would “mention the name of Denny in their orisons [prayers] and hope that his days may be long in the land upon which he has conferred such a blessing.” An 1893 Dalles Daily Chronicle column was like-minded; it opined that Denny had “conferred an inestimable blessing upon his countrymen by introducing [the pheasant].”54

Other observers made revealing comparisons between the pheasant and indigenous birds. In the late 1890s, Oregon State Fish and Game Protector Hollister D. McGuire hailed the ring-necked pheasant as “the king of game birds,” which is “superior and of more value as such than all of our native birds combined.”55 Another contemporary commentator, one Ed W. Bingham, brought the comparison of “the Denny pheasant” with indigenous birds back to colonial themes. For him, “it is universally true, and probably the result of some natural law, that as a country becomes civilized and settled many animals disappear.” For Bingham, since “the Denny pheasant has . . . adapted itself to live in a cultivated country,” its importation was necessary to replace native birds that could not withstand Euro-American settlement.56 Thus, not only did settler ethos sanction the transformation of indigenous landscapes, such transformations were their own justification for more of the same — the pernicious ecological impact of Euro-American settlement, which Bingham accepts as inevitable, made acclimatization both necessary and laudable.

The zoologist William Shaw did more than accept the replacement of indigenous fauna with the pheasant — in his 1908 treatise on the bird, he actively cheered it. Shaw gushed about the “heroic” pheasant in marked contrast to the native sooty grouse, which he deemed a “fool hen” not wise enough to fear humankind. For Shaw, the pheasant had “stealth, cunning, and endurance” and was “determined,” whereas the grouse was “not meant to withstand civilized progression.” Shaw opined that the increasing scarcity of the native grouse owed to its failure to adapt to “the settlement of the country.”57 Such language closely replicates well-worn tropes about Indigenous peoples’ inability to cope with Euro-American civilization and clichés of pioneer virtue, to the point that one must wonder if the real subject is avian or human affairs.58

Similar subtext abounds in the only in-depth history of the pheasant’s arrival in Oregon, Virginia Holmgren’s 1964 Oregon Historical Quarterly article “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers.” For Holmgren, the birds were “a monument in feathers, a living marker on Oregon’s pioneer trail.” She described the pheasant as “freedom-loving” and noted for its “independence,” obvious references to platitudes about Euro-American character.59 Denny had also lost a shipment of ring-necks shortly after the successful 1882 introduction, causing Holmgren to liken these birds to the “Lost Colony of Roanoke,” lamenting that “these particular pheasant pioneers would offer more to legend than to history.”60

Of course, Holmgren’s narrative itself owed much to legend: the mythos of the virtuous settler taming savage peoples and undeveloped lands. Her other prose accentuates this point. She lionized the gumption of Owen and his wife Gertrude in deciding to import the pheasant despite naysayers, locating the act’s genesis in the Oregonian settler spirit: “Can’t [emphasis original] was a word for which [Gertrude’s] practical, common sense nature
had small patience. She had learned about doing the impossible the hard way. Like Owen, she had come to Oregon as [a] pioneer child.\textsuperscript{61} In assessing the challenges of pheasant acclimatization in Oregon — that “strange domain filled with unknown dangers” — Holmgren wrote that, “like Oregon pioneers, the pheasants had enemies to outwit.”\textsuperscript{62} This reference to the pheasant’s contests with animal predators also invokes clashes between settlers and Indigenous people, something underlined by Holmgren’s earlier references to the 1847 Cayuse attack on the Whitman mission, which Gertrude had experienced.\textsuperscript{63} Ultimately, Holmgren’s “pioneer” tale of the pheasants was actually an allegory to celebrate the Oregon settler. Thus, the intense links among the pheasant’s introduction, the “civilizing” of Oregon landscapes, and the supposed perspicacity and virtue of Euro-American settlers began with Denny, but long outlived him.

Beyond such rhetoric, there was also a colonialist subtext to the murkiness that developed around the preferred name for the bird, which was commonly referred to by four different names during its early years in Oregon: ring-necked pheasant, Mongolian pheasant, Chinese or China pheasant, or Denny pheasant. These variations originated in part, according to Holmgren, from an initial mistake by Denny in an 1881 letter. There he called the birds “Mongolian pheasants,” although the birds being imported were Chinese ring-necked pheasants.\textsuperscript{64} His error long endured. The press frequently referred to the ring-necked pheasant as the “Mongolian pheasant” for decades, including in an article noting Denny’s death in 1900. Even at the time of Holmgren’s piece, the name persisted in some circles.\textsuperscript{65} The media’s habit of using the terms “Mongolian” and “Chinese” interchangeably in reference to the pheasant might have been more than mere ignorance, though.\textsuperscript{66} Reflecting the anti-Chinese racism pervasive in late-nineteenth-century Oregon, the Oregonian frequently used the two terms synonymously in its profoundly racist coverage of Chinese-Oregonians during the 1880s. This practice tapped into racist rhetoric that branded Asian peoples as inferior by classifying them under the derogatory umbrella term “Mongolian.”\textsuperscript{67} Many Oregonians, moreover, found amusement in using racist slurs about Chinese people in referring to the birds, whether or not they felt hostility toward the pheasant.\textsuperscript{68} Invocations of racist tropes also abounded in the popular press: the Oregonian sometimes referred to the pheasant as “the wily old Chinaman” or “the wily Celestial,” for example, reflecting prejudices about Chinese people’s supposed sneakiness.\textsuperscript{69}

The use of both “Mongolian pheasant” and “Chinese pheasant” irked some Oregonians, although for reasons other than the terms’ inaccuracy or interplay with racist discourse. Many Oregonians maintained that the bird should be named after its acclimatizer, resulting in intermittent campaigns to promote the moniker “Denny pheasant.” The Oregon Press Association adopted two resolutions, in 1892 and in 1906, urging use of the term “Denny pheasant.” An 1893 article in the Dalles Daily Chronicle, which acclaimed Denny as “a man who benefitted the world for living in it,” asserted that because “Englishmen” had named other Asian pheasants, the ring-necked pheasant should take the name “Denny pheasant” after its “discoverer.” Later chroniclers endorsed this logic. Shaw preferred “Denny pheasant” and exhorted his readers to follow suit, while Holmgren went further, calling for Denny’s name to be included in the pheasant’s formal scientific name “in commemoration of [his] pioneer sponsoring.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, Denny also occasionally used the term “Denny pheasant.”\textsuperscript{71} Advocating the name “Denny pheasant” was, of course, an attempt to erase the pheasant’s origins while lauding its Anglophone “discoverer.” These periodic quests to push a preferred nomenclature were only ever partially successful, and people today rarely use the term. Nevertheless, the settler-colonial undertones here are evident, as renaming was a common and powerful facet of colonialism. Although closely linked with place (re)naming, Western biological expeditions often subsumed the flora and fauna of colonized spaces into Western categories of knowledge and naming conventions, in effect a form of erasure of the knowledge of other peoples.\textsuperscript{72} The attempted renaming of the pheasant is typical of such practices: forgetting a foreign past among a — supposedly — inferior race in order to emphasize the white settler adoption of the bird. As the Oregonian pronounced in 1919, the “Denny pheasant” was “forever Oregon’s” despite its Asian provenance.\textsuperscript{73}
POT-HUNTING, FARMER-FIGHTING, AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE FOR OREGON NATURE

Beyond the grandiloquent rhetoric of Denny and others and the racist undertones of much contemporary commentary, there were noticeable classist dimensions to the pheasant’s story during its early years in Oregon. To this end, sport-hunters who championed the pheasant project repeatedly attacked pot-hunting, which they considered profligate and vulgarly commercial, although whether sport-hunters were really less murderous is uncertain. For sport-hunters, hunting was about leisure and performing rites of masculinity, not pecuniary interests. Conversely, pot-hunters preferred ambushing game or luring game into areas that afforded easy “pot-shots,” the antithesis of sport-hunting sensibilities, which demanded some veneer of challenge. Sport-hunter opposition to pot-hunting was also intrinsically enmeshed in anti-Indigenous and anti-immigrant sentiments. Pot-hunting’s association with subsistence hunting — embodied in the “unsporting” methods designed to maximize killing and the goal of personal provision or profit, not manly leisure — was distastefully close to traditional Indigenous practice for elite sport-hunters. Anglo-Americans also strongly associated pot-hunting with then-despised immigrant groups, such as Italians. On the whole, pot-hunting roiled Americans also strongly associated pot-hunting with then-despised elite sport-hunters. Anglo-Americans also strongly associated pot-hunting with then-despised immigrant groups, such as Italians. On the whole, pot-hunting roiled contemporary sport-hunters nationwide, but in Oregon, the issue crystallized over the ring-necked pheasant. To protect this prized acquisition, Oregon’s sport-hunters organized as a significant political pressure group, successfully pushing for wholesale changes in game management over the objections and claims of others. Elites like Denny had not gone to the trouble of improving nature for the sake of just anyone. Oregon’s hunting laws changed dramatically during the late nineteenth century, mainly in response to sport-hunter desires to protect and manage access to the ring-necked pheasant. These policy changes paralleled developments elsewhere, as many American states created or tightened game laws, mostly in accordance with sport-hunting desires, at around the same time. Yet the ring-necked pheasant was singularly important to this process in Oregon, even leading to the development of a highly innovative contemporary conservation regime. Although restricting untrammeled hunting was sensible, such regulation represented the triumph of certain interests, and certain uses of nature, over others — as had the introduction of the pheasant itself. These far-reaching reforms were the culmination of much class conflict between sport-hunters and pot-hunters, and also between sportsmen and farmers. Far from the rosy narrative of Holmgren and others, the ring-necked pheasant did not “assimilate” without “dispute” — instead, strife along class lines or between interest groups often disturbed the early years of the pheasant’s tenure in Oregon.

Class friction was palpable, for instance, in sport-hunters’ response to the failure of the Oregon Legislature in early 1885 to enact a law to supply and protect Denny’s third and final shipment of pheasants from China. This batch included not only more ring-necks but also an assortment of golden, silver, and bronze pheasants. On arrival in Oregon in late 1884, the birds were temporarily housed in Portland under the auspices of the Multnomah Rod and Gun Club, which intended to care for the birds until their populations became self-sustaining. The matter reached the legislature because the cash-strapped club, which would fold in the fall, had difficulty paying for the upkeep of the pheasants. But the pheasants initially found no succor. In spring 1885, lawmakers refused to earmark funds to maintain this new batch of pheasants or to extend any other form of legal protection to the novel pheasants included in it. The legislature, however, extended the moratorium on hunting the ring-necked pheasant, on November 21, 1885, for another six years, and included its newly arrived pheasant cousins. Nevertheless, lawmakers’ initial recalcitrance incensed sport-hunters, whose polemics on the subject are rife with classist contempt.

An 1885 letter published by Forest and Stream, signed only by “Barron,” condemned the legislature’s “characteristic stupidity” in thinking it absurd to use public money for pheasant protection. “Bemoaning lawmakers’ impression that the pheasant introduction project was the quixotic vanity project of wealthy elites — thus indicating that opponents, too, saw the issue in class terms — Barron wrote:

Individual members [of the legislature] insolently asked if [the Multnomah Rod and Gun Club] would not like to have the State build hunting cottages for their entertainment and provide hammerless shotguns for their use while engaged in the exclusive sport of killing these “tenderfoot” birds.

Barron, in turn, ridiculed that objection, stating contemptuously that the above “is considered a rather good joke in Oregon, the scrubby part of whose population have no sympathy with such refinements as game preserving, the introduction of new species, etc.” Notably, Barron did not object to the portrayal of game bird acclimatization as an elite endeavor; instead, he embraced the elitist label by insulting his opponents as “scrubby,” lower-class people who could not grasp a “refinement” like game bird acclimatization. Barron ended his letter in high dudgeon: “Hang the Legislature, says everybody . . . the hunting club can exist without their aid and the pheasants may live to scratch the dirt over the graves of [the] senators and representatives.”
IN THIS OCTOBER 1902 PORTRAIT, taken by photographer Thomas J. Cronise, two men pose for a photograph that recreates a hunting scene. Information included with the image reads: "Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Ryan of Salem with their hunting dogs and dead birds."

Barron’s letter was not an isolated example of class friction over the pheasant, nor the only proof of the controversy over the lack of legislation in spring 1885. Just two weeks after Barron’s letter appeared in Forest and Stream, another missive to the same publication expounded on identical themes. Written by “Sagamore,” the author opined that “all lovers of noble game will sympathize with [Barron],” although “none need be surprised [about the Oregonian Legislature’s decision], for the average legislature of our country pass [sic] more stupid and uncalled for acts, and create fewer meritorious ones than any other bodies of lawmakers . . . in the world.” Dismissively, Sagamore wrote, “it could hardly be expected [that] the Legislature of ‘Barron’s’ State would appreciate the value of any of the birds mentioned by him as additions to the avifauna of the land.” Dismissively, Sagamore thus echoed Barron’s tone of exasperated condescension and his sense that game bird acclimatization was a battle of the enlightened versus the benighted. For Sagamore, those who did not support measures to facilitate game bird acclimatization were ignoramuses who lacked the sophistication to appreciate such elevated endeavors. In concluding, Sagamore again alluded to classist themes by exhorting lawmakers to “be converted to the necessity of providing means for [the] protection [of imported game birds], for the poacher and the pot-hunter, the game exterminators of civilized lands, would soon bring to nought all [acclimatization] efforts.”

Another letter to Forest and Stream stated even more starkly the upper-class mentality inherent in many supporters of the ring-necked pheasant enterprise. Written in 1891 by S.H. Greene of Portland, a prominent member of the Willamette Rod and Gun Club and Denny admirer, the letter looked back on the hunting moratorium law that the legislature had eventually passed in November 1885. The author informed readers that the “best citizens and various clubs put forth great exertions to enforce this law” but that there was “a class of people” who subverted the law by the use of “mean and despicable methods” to the detriment of “other and better people.” These people, Greene wrote, clearly meaning pot-hunters, engaged in “unmanly efforts to destroy [ring-necked pheasants]” and were the equivalent of “petit-larceny thieves” who did not understand “sportsman’s honor.”

The impression that the introduction of the pheasant exacerbated class divides in Oregon is only reinforced when one considers the many objections it elicited from farmers. In nineteenth-century America in general, rural people tended to lose out when their interests collided with sport-hunters, who were usually urban elites. Oregon was no exception. By the late 1880s, the moratorium on hunting the ring-necked pheasant had allowed the birds to gain critical mass. Now present in large numbers, the pheasants beleaguered farmers who claimed that the birds damaged their crops and harassed their chickens. In previous histories of the pheasant in Oregon, however, farmer opposition has been downplayed or forgotten entirely. Holmgren quickly skimmed over farmer discord, for example, and blithely dismissed pheasant opponents as “screamers.” Similarly, the acclimatization cynic George Laycock reported that the ring-necked pheasant was widely considered an example of acclimatization’s merit, overlooking opposition to the pheasant within Oregon even as he pointedly enumerated the many failed attempts to introduce it elsewhere.

Perhaps the ecological consequences caused by the ring-necked pheasant’s arrival in America are minuscule compared to the decades of economic benefit states have accrued from hunting tourism and licensing. Also, there is no doubt that the ring-necked pheasant never has been the pestilential introduction that the starling or sparrow became. Before the pheasant-hunting industry had proven itself lucrative and enduring, however, many agrarian Oregonians in the second half of the 1880s, and sometimes
earlier rural dissent had been widespread and considerable. Matteson concluded by remarking that whatever the interests of the native quail in his area to the pheasant because it “robs the nests of other birds.” Matteson warned that “the State that protects him will make a deleterious impact on other wild fowl; he attributed the decline of the native quail in his area to the pheasant because it “robs the nests of other birds.” Matteson concluded by remarking that whatever the interests of the farmers to see the bird as “a curse on account of the damage which they cause to the crops.”

By late 1888, the situation was serious enough to prompt the USDA to send prominent ornithologist C. Hart Merriam to investigate. Merriam’s report did not offer policy recommendations, but it detailed farmer frustration by publishing letters about the bird’s agrarian impact. A Doctor F.S. Matteson believed the pheasant “destructive to gardens” and harmful to domestic fowl. Therefore, Matteson tells us, the pheasant was “voted a nuisance by farmers” generally. Matteson also alleged that the ring-necked pheasant had a deleterious impact on other wild fowl; he attributed the decline of the native quail in his area to the pheasant because it “robs the nests of other birds.” Matteson warned that “the State that protects him will make a grave error [because the pheasant] will crowd out many other useful kinds [of birds].” Matteson concluded by remarking that whatever the interests of sportsmen, he feared the pheasant’s introduction would “prove a calamity to the country.” He claimed to have “no doubt” that the bird “will overrun the United States.”

Other letters from the USDA report drew similar, albeit milder, conclusions. An R.S. Barr proclaimed that the pheasant was destructive to crops and related that it was “generally believed that [the pheasant] destroys the eggs and young of useful native birds,” although he admitted “we have no proof of this.” A Mr. Asher Tyler of Forest Grove, Oregon, continued in the same vein. He believed the pheasant was “destructive to gardens” and grain fields, reporting that “whole fields of wheat have been destroyed by them,” and thus, “great complaints are made against them.” Tyler concluded by mentioning that, given the problems produced by the pheasant, the state legislature “has been petitioned to repeal the law protecting them.”

By this time, the question of continued protection of the ever-multiplying ring-necked pheasant had roused state politicians. Future Governor of Oregon Theodore T. Geer became the most prominent politician against the moratorium on ring-necked pheasant hunting. In January 1889, he advanced a bill in Oregon’s legislature to repeal protection. Although unsuccessful, Geer’s efforts highlighted the momentum of anti-pheasant sentiment. His language in a January 1889 letter to the Oregonian also showed that farmers’ objections and interests motivated the repeal bill. Geer proclaimed himself “a friend to the Mongolian pheasant” but argued that “where they are numerous enough to destroy grain fields it certainly ought to be lawful to kill them.” He also denounced as a “curious argument” a prior Oregonian editorial that had acknowledged that pheasants harm grain fields but nevertheless advocated for continued protection, opining that “[the harm] does not amount to much in the aggregate.” For Geer, there was no point in allowing the situation to grow from “a nuisance” that “injures a few of our farmers” to one that “becomes strong enough to reach all our farmers.”

The bill to repeal ring-necked pheasant protection failed in 1889, yet its demise did not silence the pheasant’s critics. An 1890 letter to Forest and Stream, signed only by J.F.L., reiterated charges that the pheasant destroyed “grain and fruit” by using its wings to “beat out more [wheat] than they can eat.” An Oregonian article of the same year effused that the pheasant was “the handsomest among the game birds of this state,” but nonetheless noted the “outcry” of farmers against the bird on account of its crop destruction and “terrorizing” of domestic fowl. A December 1890 blurb in the Oregonian asserted the pheasant was “a great pest” to farmers in the Willamette Valley, advising farmers to circumvent the protection
A man feeds pheasants at the Oregon State Game Farm in 1911. The state purchased the farm that year to ensure it could continually replenish its stock of ring-necked pheasants.

Such pressure prompted lawmakers to enhance and even innovate game-law restrictions. After the legislature lifted the hunting moratorium as scheduled in 1891, sport-hunters successfully campaigned for new laws curbing market hunters, primarily in order to maintain the ring-necked pheasant. They obtained the establishment of the first state Fish and Game Protector in 1893, in a demonstration of the rising clout of the sport-hunting lobby. Indeed, unlike in 1885, contemporary media even commented on the coziness of the legislature with the sport-hunting interest. An 1893 Oregonian column claimed the legislature “dished up so bountifully” many laws at the “request of sportsmen” that restricted the scope of market hunting and the sale of game. It proceeded to note that newly appointed Fish and Game Protector Hollister McGuire invited sport-hunters to meet with him to devise ways for “making the laws more forcible, and to frustrate the plans of those who encourage the slaughter of game, in season and out.”

In all this, it is plain that many of Oregon’s farmers continued to resent “the general devilry of the Mongolian pheasant” — as one state legislator memorably put it in early 1891 — as long as the moratorium persisted.

After the hunting moratorium ended in the fall of 1891, however, farmer complaints about pheasant depredations on their crops became scarce, most likely because hunting pressure suitably controlled pheasant numbers. More than that, the opening of the pheasant to a yearly hunting season proved enormously popular and financially successful, thus beginning the pheasant’s ascent to cultural icon and no doubt further dampening lingering opposition. Nevertheless, farmer fears from the pre-hunting era should not be forgotten or minimized. Agrarian opposition to the pheasant was real and large-scale. In some ways, the dream of Oregon as a “sportsman’s paradise,” in the words of Game Protector McGuire, conflicted with the rural colonists’ vision of Oregon as an agricultural garden.

While farmer complaints subsided after 1891, at that moment sport-hunters redoubled their efforts against the pot-hunting menace. Fearing that rapacious market hunting would doom their prized bird in its new homeland, sport-hunters pushed to radically reform Oregonians’ access to wilderness, pressuring legislators via concerted and consistent media appeals. An 1890 Oregonian column, for example, tellingly titled “Slaughter of the Innocents,” bemoaned the “wanton slaughter” of pheasants by pot-hunters. Similarly, an 1892 Dalles Daily Chronicle article called for the protection of young pheasants and grouse, railing against pot-hunters who killed birds that had “little more than feathered out.” Likewise, an Oregonian letter to the editor from the following year bemoaned the “disgraceful destruction” of the pheasant by “sneak-thief” pot-hunters and called for the establishment of game wardens in the state. Its author asked rhetorically: “At this rate of destruction, how long will it take to exterminate these grand birds in Oregon? What language can do justice to such an iniquity?”

Game laws are passed for the benefit of rod and gun clubs, and at their request, and the farmer to whom the birds really belong, (because he has them to feed), must stand around and watch them increase on his farm until his grain is ripe, then he must be at work while the city gentleman salutes forth to the rescue and boldly marches into the tallest wheat and nobly defends the farmer’s grain while he is reaping what the grouse and hunter leaves standing. And so with the China pheasant law.

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occurrences indicate the waxing power sportsmen wielded, as well as the importance of the ring-necked pheasant to their agenda.

With their poignant rhetoric and their proximity to power, sport-hunters continued to inveigle the legislature to further constrain market hunting after 1893. As before, their primary motivation was the ring-necked pheasant’s viability in the face of the continued threat of pot-hunting. An 1894 Oregonian article deplored the depredations of pot-hunters upon the “Denny Pheasant,” decrying their activities as “not sport. It is butchering as a business.”

Given that, the article called for a shorter hunting season and the prohibition of all market sales of the bird. Denny himself often railed against the “game vandal and the exterminator,” appealing on multiple occasions for the bird’s legal protection from these villains. After sport-hunters had organized a “game committee” to advise McGuire on further regulation in 1894, Denny addressed both the committee and McGuire on preservation, with the pheasant chief among his concerns. He declaimed:

I am also opposed to killing [the pheasant] for the markets. There is a class of so-called sportsmen who are mere pot-hunters . . . such hunters are game vandals, and have not the first principles of a sportsman.

The agitation by Denny and his conferees produced a steady stream of results. By 1903, lawmakers had repeatedly reduced the bag limit — that is, the number of pheasants any one person was allowed to take per season — from no limit in 1891 to twenty, fifteen, and finally ten per hunter by 1903. Reports of pheasant scarcity during the early 1900s later induced the state government to take further action to protect the bird by enacting Denny’s proposed remedy: outlawing market sales entirely.

The pheasant’s importance to sport-hunting, and thus to state profit from hunting licenses, even impelled Oregon to purchase a ring-necked pheasant breeding farm in 1911. The farm had been privately run by one Gene M. Simpson for the prior eleven years and was the first private game farm in the country before the government’s intervention. The game farm proved a massive success for the state, reliably supplying tens of thousands of ring-necked pheasants per year by the 1930s. Such creative and interventionist initiatives for preserving and propagating ring-necked pheasants showcased both the power of the sport-hunting interest to compel political action and the particular power of this species to drive institutional, political, and environmental change.

Ultimately, it was true that pot-hunters often broke the law by hunting the pheasant off-season or by hunting over the bag limit, and this was a threat to the species’ viability. Yet, as Louis Warren concluded about the broader American experience, hunting restrictions existed for the purposes of sport-hunting.

Sport-hunting was an elite pastime, allowing its practitioners much greater access to power than lowly pot-hunters had; in consequence, legislatures essentially codified into law sport-hunter sensibilities — to the detriment of subsistence hunters. Contemporaries concurred with Warren’s assessment. In 1900, biologist T.S. Palmer implicitly lamented the power of sportsmen as a lobby group by noting that “90 per cent of all the legislation for the protection of birds has been enacted for the benefit of game birds,” whereas “insectivorous and other useful birds” were often unprotected despite constituting four-fifths of North American avifauna. It helped to have friends in high places.

CONCLUSION

In 1928, the USDA commissioned the aforementioned John C. Phillips to compose a treatise on introduced avifauna in America. His opening statement neatly synopsized the challenges inherent to researching American acclimatization. Writing that “the early history of the introduction of foreign birds into this country is mostly clothed in darkness,” Phillips lamented that the records of early introductions are “buried in the back numbers of local newspapers.” Thus, “trying to get an accurate idea of what happened” was a “hopeless quest” because the painstaking investigation of old newspapers would only produce modest knowledge gains “wholly disproportionate to the labor involved.” Dismissing that torturous undertaking, Phillips merely hoped he would “attract attention to a somewhat neglected field” through his terse compendium of introduced avifauna.

Discovering Phillips’s work only at the end of this project, I realized I had unwittingly taken up his “hopeless quest” and luckily found it more productive than he assumed. Yet I echo his sense that American avifauna introductions remain understudied, even nearly a century later. This article hardly fills that immense void. The list of introduced species — avian and otherwise — is long, and each one comes with a story, very few of which have been comprehensively told.

While there remain many unexplored directions in the field at large, I hope I have shown here that the existing historiography on the ring-necked pheasant, and American acclimatization, was unsatisfying. A less triumphal, more meticulous analysis was necessary to illuminate the undercurrents of settler-colonialist ideology that animated the pheasant introduction project, to dig deeply into novel sources in search of the fullest account of events, and to be attuned to the broader importance of the pheasant’s introduction and iconic popularity. The ring-necked pheasant, and American acclimatization writ large, should be far more than a mere footnote in the story of nineteenth-century acclimatization.
In all this emerges a view of American nature as heavily mediated by human actions and ideology, and also a reminder of the sometimes-bizarre interplay between non-human animals and human culture. It is also a reminder on how human hierarchy affects the natural world around us. Owen Denny’s vision of “the upbuilding of the Pacific Northwest” was successful because he and his fellow sportsmen occupied positions of influence.112 This allowed them to withstand objections and proceed with their project. Ultimately, I am not sure whether Denny truly did “benefit the world for living in it,” nor if importing the pheasant really counted as “upbuilding” the Pacific Northwest.113 But one certainty is that the ring-necked pheasant’s introduction to America epitomizes the way social power becomes inscribed in nature.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Dr. Coll Thrush, University of British Columbia, for his guidance on an earlier version of this essay.


3. Ibid.


7. The complexities of settler-colonialism go well beyond my working definition. For a brief discussion of the aspect most relevant here — the interplay of settler-colonialism and nature — see Lorenzo Veracini, SettlerColonialism: A Theoretical Overview (United Kingdom: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 82–83.


12. Ritvo, “Going Forth and Multiplying,” 405; Dunlap, “Remaking the Land,” 308;


14. Crosby, Ecological Imperialism, 145–94. On page 193, Crosby asserts that the species traffic was heavier from Europe to the regions it colonized than vice versa, but many species were introduced to Europe from colonized areas during this era, including the American squirrel and muskrat.


16. On the creation of these organizations, see Minard, All Things Harmless, Useful, and Ornamental, 1. On their goals, see Christopher Levet, They Dined on Elans: The Story of the Acclimatisation Societies (London: Quiller Press, 1992), 28–29.

17. Dunlap, “Remaking the Land,” 310–11; Minard, All Things Harmless, Useful, and Ornamental, 108. On page 120, Minard notes that continuing enthusiasm remained for fish acclimatization in Australia beyond that date.

18. On events in Great Britain, see Lever, They Dined on Eland, 94–98. On the initial ef- fort in France, see Osborne, Nature, the Exotic, and the Science of French Colonialism, 75–76.

19. American acclimatization societies primarily focused on introducing song birds. See Lewis, They Dined on Eland, 83–90. Lewis implies that these were mostly short-lived organizations but rarely notes when they ceased to exist, reflecting the groups’ almost total lack of archival records. The Portland Song Bird Club—founded in 1880 by C. P. Pfluger—is an exception, perhaps. It has archival collections held at the Oregon Historical Society, which might yield an interesting tale. See Audubon Society of Portland records, Ms. 2950, OHS Research Library. For brief discussion of Americans who imported bird species on their own initiative, see John C. Phillips, “Wild Birds Introduced or Transplanted in North America,” Technical Bulletin No. 61, United States Department of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1928), 4, 8, 10, and 12.

20. Merchant’s work focused on colonial New England, but she implied the wider applicability of the idea. Merchant, Eco-Cultural Revolutions, 261–70.


23. These were the work of New York City notables, including Schieffelin, in the short-lived American Acclimatization Society. Lewis, They Dined on Eland, 83–84.“

24. On his first two shipments of ring-necked pheasants, see Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers;” 241–46. On his 1888 shipment, see “Arrival of Chinese Game Birds,” Morning Oregonian, December 15, 1884, p. 3. Years later, Gertrude Denny also asserted that Denny arranged a shipment of pheasants to San Francisco at the behest of that city’s mayor, but she does not supply a date. They seem to have perished because the mayor died before the shipment arrived, and no one knew what to do with the birds. Gertrude Denny to J. S. Pilcher, July 25, 1898, Ralston Collection, series 2, box 3, folder 1, Lewis & Clark Archives and Special Collections.


30. Dunlap, “Remaking the Land,” 312, 316, 318. Dunlap also mistakenly wrote that the year of the pheasant’s introduction was 1889. But Dunlap at least mentions the pheasant, which other scholars who analyzed the worldwide acclimatization movement ignore. For instance, Christopher Level, They Dined on Eland, devotes only seven pages (183–190) to American acclimatization efforts with no mention of the ring-necked pheasant. Dunlap, Nature and the English Diaspora, 55–56. Dunlap, “Remaking the Land,” 308.


36. On the law barring exports, see “Game Laws: Mongolian Pheasants Cannot Be Shipped Out of Oregon,” Morning Oregonian, June 6, 1893, p. 11. The law was frequently flouted, and birds reached Washington, British Columbia, and California by 1894. See Laycock, The Alien Animals, 34, and also my discussion below. On the influx of shipments once their importation was legal, see Laycock, The Alien Animals, 34–35.

37. It is unclear if this purchase was illicit or a loophole around the no-export law. Henry A. Hjersman, “A History of the Establishment of the Ring-Necked Pheasant in California,” California Division of Fish and Game, 1946, 3.

38. For the creation of the California game farms and the size of California’s pheasant kill in the 1960s, see Laycock, The Alien Animals, 35–39. On the failure of the first game farm, but the success of the second, see Hjersman, “A History of the Establishment of the Ring-Necked Pheasant in California,” 5 and 10.

39. On the early history of the birds in South Dakota, see Laycock, The Alien Animals, 36. For the subsequent size of the ring-necked pheasant population in the state and the valu- able hunting industry it supported, see Russell L. Rice, Fifty Million Pheasants: The Story of Game Birds in South Dakota (Pierre: South Dakota Department of Game and Fish, 1941), 1, 10. In an echo of rhetoric to be discussed later, Rice states on page one that some South Dakota- tans hoped for the replacement of the “vulgar native grous” with the pheasant.


41. Christopher Cokinos, Hope is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds (New York: Tarcher/ Putnam, 2000), 147, 178, and 184.

42. Shaw, The Chino or Denny Pheasant in Oregon, 11–12. Laycock also implied that the success of the pheasant inspired other introductions. Laycock, The Alien Animals, 42.


Nevada Department of Wildlife, April 1970), p. 6. On page 9, Christiansen calculates the total number of chukars released in America from 1931 to 1970 at 795,000.

46. Denny quoted in W.R. and G.C. “Natural History,” Forest and Stream, 472. For another example of the logic that some acclimatization was bad, yet some was good, see Cristadoro, “Ringnecked Pheasant and Carp,” 539.

47. Gertrude Hall Denny, however, received a pension derived from State Game Commission funds and private subscriptions after grateful sport-hunters campaigned to rescue her from penury in the late 1910s. She died in 1933 at the age of 96. “Denny Memorial Fund is Growing,” Morning Oregonian, July 29, 1917, p. 4; Lana Leneve, “Out-Of-Doors Stuff,” Coquille Valley Sentinel, August 18, 1933, p. 6.


49. Although the ring-necked pheasant was Denny’s most successful import, he tried many other species of both flora and fauna. The bamboo tree was also one of his importations, although it is not clear if he was the first to import it to the Pacific Northwest. See Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 239. An 1883 Oregonian article mentioned that Denny’s imported bamboo stands were flourishing on local lands. No other source of bamboo was mentioned, so it could be that Denny was the first to import bamboo as well. See “Imported Bamboo Plants Flourishing,” Morning Oregonian, June 18, 1885, p. 5.


51. Ibid.


54. These quotes derive from two different sources, but the spirit and sentiment of each is the same. For the first, see Hollister D. McGuire, “Pheasants for Virginia,” Forest and Stream, October 16, 1897, p. 309.


57. Shaw’s contrast of the grouse with the pheasant may also evoke a settler mentality noted by Louis Warren. For many American colonists, “the extinction of wildlife” was positively linked to the “conquest of Indians”; either was a triumph over the wild for settlers, and meant the success of the settler-colonialist endeavor. Louis S. Warren, “Animal Visions: Rethinking the History of the Human Future,” Environmental History 16, 3 (July 2016): 412.


60. Ibid., 246–47. Here Holmgren refers to the shipment sent to San Francisco that Gertrude Denny talks about in her letter — Gertrude Denny to J.S. Pitcher, July 25, 1918, Ralston Collection, Lewis & Clark Archives and Special Collections — but her only source for this was a 1907 Oregonian article. George M. Himes, “Erect Memorial to Denny,” Morning Oregonian, March 27, 1907, p. 8.

61. Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 234–35. In this passage, Holmgren was imagining Gertrude’s reaction to skeptics and boosting Owen’s confidence in the scheme (“Let’s try!”); however, she made no reference to any documentary source.

62. Ibid., 241, 250.

63. Ibid., 234, 259.

64. Ibid., 239–40. Denny’s mistake was a momentary lapse, as he knew much about Asian game birds. See Denny quoted in W.R. and G.C., “Natural History,” Forest and Stream, 472.

65. For the article on Denny’s death, see “Snap Shots,” Forest and Stream, July 7, 1900, p. 1. On the continued use of “Mongolian pheasant” into the 1960s, see Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 240.

66. This is at variance with Holmgren, who sees this as an innocuous or perhaps hardheaded insistence on continuing to use the same term as ever. Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 244.


69. “Shooting Begins Today,” Morning Oregonian, October 1, 1899, p. 5; “Chinese Pheasant Season to Open,” Morning Oregonian, September 27, 1903, p. 17.


75. Contemporaries sometimes differentiated between pot-hunters who intended to eat what they killed and market hunters who intended to sell what they shot. Nevertheless, both were ultimately hunting for subsistence and both qualified under the derogatory term “pot-hunter” since they used methods that sportsmen deplored. James A. Tober, Who Owns the Wildlife? The Political Economy of Conservation in Nineteenth-Century America (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 45–46.


Blightford, “Make the desert blossom like the rose”
78. The quoted words derive from a 1919 Morning Oregonian article that claimed the pheasant was “an oriental that assimilated without a bit of racial dispute.” See “A Glorious Upland,” p. 8.

79. On the shipment, see “Arrival of Chinese Game Birds,” Morning Oregonian, December 15, 1884, p. 3. For the caretaking role of the Multnomah Rod and Gun Club, see Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 248. The club tried to alleviate its financial woes via a shooting tournament, exhorting that “any man who buys a ticket contributes indirectly toward what will improve our fauna,” but it was not enough to stay solvent. More About the Shooting Tournament,” Morning Oregonian, June 4, 1885, p. 6.

80. For the date of the law and the inclusion of other pheasant types in it, see S. H. Greene, “Wildfowl in Oregon,” Forest and Stream, April 23, 1891, p. 269. Holmgren omits the legislature’s initial resistance entirely, as well as the subsequent sport-hunter contention. Our understanding of the controversy unfortunately remains limited to the press, as the debates of Oregon’s legislature were not meticulously recorded in the nineteenth century.

81. Barron, “Mongolian Pheasants,” 163. For another source that bemoans the “stupidity” of the legislature, see Sagamore, “Imported Pheasants,” Forest and Stream, April 9, 1885, p. 2.

82. Barron, “Mongolian Pheasants.” It is true that the ring-necked pheasant lived on and prospered, but I do not know the fate of the other pheasant varieties included in this shipment beyond that they were moved to Protection Island, Washington. Virginia Holmgren writes of them that “the full story can never be told” owing to lack of evidence. Likely, they did not last. Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 251.

83. Sagamore, “Imported Pheasants,” 203. Ibid.


85. On conflicts over game between landowners and sport-hunters in the fin-de-siècle United States, see Tober, Who Owns the Wildlife?, 119, 125, and 130–31.


100. “Game Out of Season,” Morning Oregonian, November 21, 1893, p. 4.


95. There are still articles that suggest farmer discontent after this date, though. See F.L. Washburn, “What the Birds Eat,” Morning Oregonian, November 24, 1893, p. 9; Owen N. Denny, in “Mongolian Pheasants,” Forest and Stream, January 26, 1895, p. 65. On the ascending popularity and financial success of Oregon’s post-moratorium pheasant hunting season, Laycock describes it as a “bonanza.” Laycock, The Alien Animals, 34. I lack exact numbers on Oregon’s profit from hunting licenses, but one can assume it was substantial or there would be no need for game protection laws or a game farm. One might also infer that pheasants were lucrative from Oregon Fish and Game Protector McGuire’s 1899 remark that “the breeding of these birds for export [to other states] has become quite an industry.” Hollister D. McGuire, “Pheasant Rearing,” Forest and Stream, February 25, 1899, p. 149.


103. “Game Protection: An Association to be Organized for that Purpose,” Morning Oregonian, January 15, 1894, p. 5.

104. On the game committee, see “Game Protection: An Association to be Organized for that Purpose,” Morning Oregonian, January 15, 1894, p. 5. For Denny’s speech, see Owen N. Denny in “For New Game Laws,” Morning Oregonian, October 26, 1894, p. 10.

105. “Chinese Pheasant Season to Open,” Morning Oregonian, September 27, 1903, p. 17.


107. On the initial scheme to lease Simpson’s farm, see “Pheasants to be Raised by State,” East Oregonian, December 30, 1911, p. 1. On the game farm’s importance and success, see Frank B. Wire, “A Brief History of the Oregon State Game Commission,” 3 and 10. Holmgren also noted that by the 1960s, Oregon managed two pheasant game farms which produced around 20,000–30,000 birds per year. Holmgren, “Chinese Pheasants, Oregon Pioneers,” 256.


110. Phillips, “Wild Birds Introduced or Transplanted in North America,” 1–2. Despite his dismissal of newspaper sources, Phillips consulted some periodicals, such as Forest and Stream, which he referenced on pages 11, 12, and 14. Because Phillips largely eschewed historical newspapers, he mostly restricted his source base to input from contemporaneous game commissioners, USDA professionals, and sportmen (p. 7). Thus, his descriptions of bird introductions sorely lacked the contemporary discourse which attended them.


Blatchford, “Make the desert blossom like the rose”