



The Ring-Necked Pheasant: Seize the Day!

Are you the kind of person who freaks out when you see a spider? Who yells for your dad to come squash the one that somehow made its way into the bathtub? A lot of people really dislike spiders, even have phobias (intense fears) of them. Well, get ready, because the Joro spider, a colorful arachnid with 4-inch legs that can fly by “ballooning” through its silk threads, is currently invading New York. Soon, no doubt, it will be making its way here. The good news is that these spiders, originally native to Japan, are very skittish around people, and their venom, unless you have an allergy, is very weak.

But then there’s poor Florida and the Burmese python. These imported snakes, native to Africa, were introduced into the state by people who kept them as pets, then released them or had them escape into the wild. In parts of Florida, near and in the Everglades, they have wiped out whole populations of mammals, and they are even taking their toll on alligators.

Animals that make their way out of their native lands, usually by human transport of one form or another, and into another where they quickly spread, are called invasive species. When they destroy or out-compete indigenous animals, they have a negative impact on the environment. That is why most countries now ban or restrict the introduction of non-native species within their borders. But it wasn’t always that way. Some species that we think of as native, and have learned to enjoy or at least tolerate, were intentionally introduced into other countries. The sparrow, that pervasive little bird you probably see flitting around every day in your neighborhood, was an invasive species from England. Some people in Brooklyn brought them over in 1851 to eat Linden Moth



Joro Spider

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caterpillars that were destroying basswood trees. A few others did something similar and soon *Passer domesticus* were nesting from sea to shining sea.

European colonists brought dandelions to New England for their medicinal and food properties (who eats dandelions?), and now they are the bane of lawns everywhere. Then again, if they hadn't, we'd all have missed out on the fun of blowing their seeds into the air when we were little!

So, invasive species of plants and animals are kind of par for the course throughout history. But who would have thought that an invasive species would become South Dakota's state bird? That's right, the ring-necked pheasant didn't start out on the plains of South Dakota. Instead, it came from China.

A United States consul general—sort of an ambassador but in a city in a foreign country, not the capital—named Owen Nickerson Denny brought pheasants from Shanghai, China, in 1881 and released them around Portland, Oregon, his hometown. When they seemed to disappear without a trace, he did it again in 1882 and 1884. Soon, this group of immigrants had a growing population.





Some South Dakotans, fond of the birds, their telltale cackle, and their regal appearance, released some in South Dakota in 1891 but without any luck. In 1908, a group of Redfield, S.D., farmers let three pair go in a place called Hagmann's

Grove, a bit north of town. They flourished, and the state game department bought around 50 pheasants and released them near Redfield as well. Soon, South Dakota had ring-necked fever and during World War I, more than 7,000 were added to the local populations in Spink County, in the James River Valley. That was all it took. Soon, ring-necks were everywhere, and the year after the war, South Dakota held a one-day pheasant season, 200 of them finding their way into cooking pots. The pheasant became so popular that the South Dakota Legislature declared it the state bird in 1943. Today, there are estimated to be about 6 million ring-necked pheasants in our state, depending on the year.

But what does any of this have to do with being sturdy? Well, the ring-necked pheasant is an object lesson for us, a lesson in what you can accomplish when you take advantage of the opportunities before us. It can be summed in an old, popular, Latin adage: *Carpe diem*, which means, *Seize the Day!* It means to be bold, take action, don't let life conquer you. Instead, conquer it.

Now, to be clear, the ring-necked pheasant didn't set out to populate the Great Plains of America. None of those early nesting pairs had any idea that they had been removed from Asia and brought over to a new continent and then, by sheer force of will, became a huge population of birds. Animals don't have that kind of perspective or foresight.

But people do. The ring-necked pheasant did take advantage of an entirely new environment in North America because their genetic heritage and their behavior allowed them to do so. People have an extra factor—we can



South Dakota State Historical Society, Archives

see what's possible, we can look at an opportunity and decide to capitalize on it. We can seize the day.

Think about the incredible opportunities in your life. You live in the most powerful, free society in the world. You have technology in your hands—a school computer or iPad—that your grandparents couldn't even have imagined when they were your age. You have medical care that prevents you from getting most childhood diseases and cures you when you do get sick. Your needs are probably pretty much provided for. Your school offers an academic program that will prepare you for life—math and reading and science and history. Do you have a favorite subject? Think about that. Perhaps this will become your academic passion, a field of study that will consume your interests for the rest of your life, something you can truly be great at.

And what about all the athletics and activities your school offers? Do you love basketball or football or volleyball? What about track? These are also opportunities. If you don't try some of them, you'll never know if you are good at that or not. You'll never know just how much you enjoy them. Your school library and the public library in your town are stocked with great books—classics of literature identified by generations of people as worth reading; new books



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on scientific discoveries and new social problems and trends; biographies on people who saw opportunities (Elon Musk and Caitlin Clark to name a couple) and tackled them and had insane success. America's greatest writer, Mark Twain, once said of reading, "The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read." What Twain meant was that books are an opportunity, but you have to seize the page.

The ring-necked pheasant found its way to America. It had its opportunity to spread out over the land and, in South Dakota, boy did it make good! They are so wildly successful, we've been hunting them now for more than a century. People come from all over the world to engage in the South Dakota pheasant hunt. More than 120,000 South Dakotans and non-South Dakotans do so every year – harvesting, some years, almost a million birds.

That kind of success isn't limited to birds. We, too, can enjoy it. We just need to watch out for opportunities, train for them, and, you guessed it, *seize the day*.



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Want to learn more?

As long as you're reflecting on the bird that made the most of his opportunities in America, think about other ways to "experience" the wily ring-neck. Huron sports the largest statue of our pheasant in the world. Visit him sometime as he watches over Highway 14. Or head out for opening day with hunting companions from your family. You'll have a great walk in the fields of South Dakota, see amazing marksmen take down a bird or two, maybe take a shot yourself, and even tuck into a delicious pheasant supper!