

## Projects search for answers on quail decline

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Quail season fittingly began on Halloween, and it looks like another trick-or-treat sort of a season. Many veteran bird hunters wait until cooler weather when bird dogs can run without overheating and with less chance of encountering rattlesnakes.

Most of the reports trickling in from early quail hunts ranged from mediocre to dismal. There were a few good reports, and there are always more birds than you think. Hunting success will pick up by Thanksgiving but a pall has descended on bobwhite quail hunters concerned over the steady decline of their favorite game bird.

Quail fans are keeping their fingers crossed that research projects such as those being done by the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Kingsville and Dale Rollins' Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch at Roby will solve the mystery of the quail decline while there's still time to turn the tide.

The good news is that Texas Tech University is entering the quail research game with the enthusiasm of a young English pointer just released from a dog trailer. The Quail Tech Alliance is organizing an ambitious project called the Anchor Ranch Program.

"Lubbock is geographically situated in proximity to the best bobwhite quail habitat remaining in America," said Dallas businessman Charles Hodges, a Texas Tech alum and member of the Quail Tech founding board. "It seemed logical that Texas Tech should be a leader in quail research."

The college agreed, and the Anchor Ranch Program was born. Hodges said the research area encompasses 38 counties that cover about 22 million acres. The idea is to get a cooperating research ranch, an Anchor Ranch, in each of the 38 counties.

Ranches sign up for a minimum of five years and must pay \$3,500 annually to help fund the research. Graduate students will be assigned to each ranch. Dr. Brad Dabbert, Texas Tech's Associate Chairman of the Department of Natural Resources Management, said ranch owners have some choice in research emphasis on their property.

One landowner may blame the quail decline on predators while someone else thinks the problem is rooted in weather patterns, livestock grazing practices or native grass and brush patterns. All the cooperating ranches must record biological information that includes weather data and quail counts.

"The Anchor Ranch Program is going very well," Dabbert said. "I'm getting a lot of calls from people interested in being a part of this project. People are obviously very concerned about the quail decline."

Dabbert said the program will eventually have its own Web site that can be the public can access. Weather patterns and quail counts provide valuable information to bird hunters but the end result is sharing information about management practices that help quail.

Hodges said 10 ranches are enrolled in the program and 10 others are being considered. There's so much interest, in fact, that the Quail Tech board is considering expanding the study areas to more counties on the eastern fringe. For enrollment details, call Hodges at 972-387-1000 or 214-679-9781 or Dabbert at 806-544-5860.

"We should wind up with a wonderful data set for an important quail area that has diverse habitat and weather patterns," Hodges said. "This information will become a resource for all quail-minded landowners to use in stemming the quail decline."