

Is deer corn a quail killer?

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As another poor quail season grinds toward a halt, I'm struck by a disturbing thought. [Texas](#) deer hunters may be killing more quail than quail hunters kill, and the deer hunters are not even aware they're doing it.

How is that possible? Deer hunters put out an estimated 300 million to 500 million pounds of corn each year to bait white-tailed deer near hunting blinds. Anyone who's watched a bait pile in quail country has seen birds eating corn. It's not just quail; a huge variety of seed-eating birds, including some rare species, consume those golden kernels.

Several factors are blamed for the precipitous decline of bobwhite quail, habitat changes ranking first. I don't think it's a coincidence, however, that the quail decline parallels the dramatic expansion of white-tailed deer and deer hunting throughout West Texas.

Even in South Texas, the state's other ecological island of quail habitat, the practice of baiting deer with corn accelerated in the 1980s. In December, I hunted quail in the Oklahoma Panhandle with John Cox, a wildlife biologist who feeds quail, both as a means of supplementing the birds' natural diet against harsh winter weather and to congregate them for hunting. He no longer uses corn or the smaller grain seeds that quail hunters often prefer.

"I'm feeding the quail with black-eyed peas," Cox said. "Peas work great in an automatic feeder. When you buy them in bulk, they're cheaper than corn. Quail, deer and turkeys all love the peas, and I can go to sleep at night not wondering how many coveys I poisoned that day."

The poison that Cox refers to is aflatoxin, a substance produced by fungi that grow on corn and other food staples. Aflatoxin rates in wildlife corn caused a stir in the 1990s when biologists became concerned about potential damage to deer and other wildlife.

The U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#) does not allow grain that tests more than 20 parts per billion of aflatoxin to be fed to dairy cattle or used for human consumption. It winds up as wildlife feed. Several studies have indicated aflatoxin can weaken and even kill wildlife.

West Texas quail guru Dale Rollins said he's more concerned with secondary effects of aflatoxin. Diminished immunity means the birds are more susceptible to disease. Feeding the birds tends to congregate them, so disease spreads more quickly.

In December, Texas Tech's Quail Tech Alliance sent out a memo to its charter ranch members warning of the risk of supplemental feeding after a cooperating ranch tested its wildlife corn and found it contaminated. Information is available at the project Web site, www.quail-tech.org.

Every expert I've spoken with said that the wildlife feed industry is doing a better job of testing for aflatoxin. Corn testing 100 ppb or higher is not acceptable as "deer corn." Read the label on every sack of corn you buy. That's the good news.

The bad news comes from Scott Henke, a researcher with the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute in Kingsville. His aflatoxin research concluded that putting clean corn into aflatoxin-contaminated feeders defeats the purpose of aflatoxin-free corn.

"My study showed that no one storage practice short of freezing the grain effectively curtailed the growth of fungi-producing aflatoxin," Henke said.

Aflatoxin tests are performed when corn is bagged at the mill. Sacks of corn may sit for months in a warehouse or in front of a convenience store. On a ranch, corn and other feeds are routinely stored in bulk bins.

Furthermore, I've never known of hunters who clean out their feeders with disinfectant or even a power washer.

The issue is complicated by the fact that aflatoxin occurs in nature. Also, quail or other birds that succumb to aflatoxin don't die under the feeder. They get sick and weaken slowly. They die out of sight, hiding in thick cover, and are usually eaten by a coyote or some other scavenger.

I'm not sure how scientists can even design a study that reveals the impact of aflatoxin on quail, but common sense tells me the impact is significant.

How many times have you heard this quail hunter's lament? "We had plenty of quail in September but they were gone by November and I don't know what happened to them." Deer hunters ramp up their feeding programs in September and October.

The evidence may be circumstantial but, until somebody convinces me otherwise, I believe that deer corn is taking a toll on Texas birds.