

Star-Telegram

Quail hunting days of old are long gone

Posted Saturday, Oct. 24, 2009

By Bill Miller

wmiller@star-telegram.com

It's easy to long for the "good old days" if you are a quail hunter.

"I'm 72 and I started quail hunting in Texas when I was 16," said Massey Tillman, a Fort Worth lawyer and retired federal judge. "In the late '60s and early '70s, I had a law partner who had a ranch between Fort Worth and Weatherford.

"But now there's no quail at all around Weatherford, or even around Palo Pinto County.

"It's really sad to me."

Quail season begins Saturday (Oct. 31) and runs through Feb. 28. But hunters like Tillman can recall days afield in decades past when their bird dogs could kick up multiple coveys of 20 to 40 birds.

Not so anymore.

The National Audubon Society reports that the plump, short-legged northern bobwhite quail has seen its populations slide from 31 million birds nationwide in 1967 to about 5.5 million today.

The "Bob" is now a poster child for disappearing species, ranking No. 1 on Audubon's top-20 list of birds in decline.

Old-timers at the coffee shop often blame the proliferation of fire ants, but there's more to it than that, said Sarah Robinson of Audubon Texas.

"I'm not going to say it's not fire ants, because you go out into a field and you see them eating on anything," she said. "But you also see declines in places with no ants out there."

A more likely culprit, she said, is "fragmentation," meaning vast areas of quality habitat for quail and other grassland birds have been disrupted by grazing and farming operations or housing subdivisions.

Fragmentation hasn't gone unnoticed by hunters like Tillman.

"Get in your car, drive south to Waco and all you'll see is cultivation," he said. "I can't fault farmers for trying to make a living, but in the process they've destroyed good quail habitat and hunting lands.

"Ranchers are overgrazing their properties and not letting cattle and quail peacefully coexist, and I say that as a member of the Southwest Cattle Growers Association."

But farmers and ranchers also lament fewer quail, and they're turning to Audubon Texas and other organizations to learn how they can reverse the losses.

Robinson manages Audubon's quail and grassland bird initiative in North Texas. For the past year, she has been meeting with landowners, evaluating habitat and suggesting strategies.

"We're not going to make anyone do anything they don't want to," she said. "But the beautiful thing about Texas is that it's mostly [controlled] by private landowners who have the right to do whatever practices they want."

And, she added, they don't have to forsake agriculture to adjust their land for quail.

"They just have to strike a balance," she said.

But more quail can be profitable.

Tillman said he pays good money to hunt bobwhites in South Texas, and biologists say that a land suited for quail also benefits other grassland birds, turkey, even deer.

The linchpin is grass, lots of it, but it has to be the right kind.