

Howell: North Texas ranches, Texas Tech band together to fight quail decline

Mark Howell, For the Times Record News
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Few things in life are better than hunting bobwhite quail with a good dog. It's even better when you're able to find a few coveys and get some quality dog work in looking for singles. Unfortunately, those days have been few and far between over the last several years.

According to the Quail Forever organization, quail population losses over the last 25 years range from 60 to 90 percent across the country. The reason for the population plunge is simple - massive losses of habitat suitable for quail. There are five major factors leading to the losses of habitat: intensified farming and forestry practices, succession of grassland ecosystems to forests, overwhelming presence of exotic grasses like fescue and coastal Bermuda that choke out wildlife, and urban sprawl.

These types of habitat loss are difficult to overcome and require a concerted effort on the part of landowners to turn things around. Since 97% of Texas is in private hands, it's largely up to them to do something about the problems quail face.

Early this year a new and promising initiative was organized to help landowners increase quail numbers on their land. The Anchor Ranch Program was born out of a small group of conservation minded individuals forming an alliance between ranch owners and the Texas Tech University (TTU) Department of Range and Wildlife Management in Lubbock.

This broad front of ranches and Texas Tech research expertise is coming together with the following goal. "To further our knowledge and understanding of the northern bobwhite and scaled quail and their habitat relationships with the goal of expanding the range of sustainable populations. In concert with Texas Tech University, conducting research and educating new biologists and landowners in quail management."

Charles Hodges is among the early organizers and is a leader in the program. Hodges stated that the reasoning to include Texas Tech was "the university is geographically centered in some of the last remaining contiguous quail habitat in the state. The faculty includes Dr. Brad Dabbert who holds great respect among quail scientists and Dr. Ron Sosebee, who is a plant expert specializing in vegetation management for quail." Adding these highly respected researchers and other TTU staff gives the program instant credibility and promise.

The 38-county study area includes Wichita, Archer, Young, Wilbarger, Baylor and Throckmorton counties. The remaining counties are all to the west and south, but Clay and Jack counties will hopefully be added soon if cooperating ranches can be found.

Originally only properties over 1,000 acres were sought, but realizing how fragmented habitat has become in some locales Hodges says the program will now accept smaller acreages if they hold promise.

Each ranch will host a research demonstration project during at least one year of a five year commitment. The research can be done by the landowners themselves in conjunction with TTU or TTU could do the work by themselves.

Potential projects include: influence of supplemental feeding on quail movement, survival rates, reproductive success and recruitment to the fall population; influence of prescribed burning on quail brood habitat, including insect and seed production; influence of the capture event and radio transmitter on quail survival probability and other projects that are of interest to landowners.

In return, the program provides each ranch with a fall covey and spring call count; early quail season e-bulletins concerning harvest rate suggestions; report of quail recruitment to the ranches fall population; report of important fall and winter foods used by birds on that ranch; a gate sign; ranch visit by a wildlife biologist/range scientist to assess habitat conditions and suggest quail management strategies, and an invitation to the annual field day symposium. Additionally, the program will serve to help provide verification for a wildlife exemption under the tax code.

Hodges stated "there has been a tremendous response so far and we feel very blessed to have some of the great ranches of the state participating." Ranches in the Wichita Falls area that have signed up include the Waggoner Ranch, the Circle A in Archer County, the Pitchfork Ranch and the 6666 Ranch in King County.

More ranches are needed to broaden and enhance the effort across the wide range of counties and habitat conditions. The program would like to have up to three participants per county and there are still plenty of openings in Hardeman, Foard, Wilbarger, Wichita, Baylor, Knox and Young counties.

In my opinion, this massive research effort has an excellent chance for success in helping to turn around the precipitous decline of our quail populations. Improving and increasing habitat is the key to increasing numbers of any wildlife population. Many other wildlife species including non-game will benefit from this program's success.

For more information about the program or on how you can participate contact Charles Hodges at 214-679-9781 (d) or 972-387-1000 (e) or Google "Quail Tech" to find the web site that should be active later this week. This program is vital if we are going to stop the decline of quail in Texas.