



THE

QUAIL-TECH

ALLIANCE



We are at the Quail Tipping Point

It's Sunday morning on the first weekend of fall, and my conscience is hurting. The unrelenting sun of July, August and early September has now taken a southerly pitch, and the promise of oncoming autumn is seen in the expressions of five setters in the back yard. This year, above all years, it is incumbent upon all of us to really consider whether or not to pull the trigger.

I believe that there is no dyed-in-the-wool quail hunter who wouldn't sacrifice 90 days of shooting wild birds in exchange for the preservation of the sport and the chance for the recovery to occur on a much faster timeline. Fully aware of the political ramifications of asking Texas Parks and Wildlife to shorten the season, or halve the bag-limit; it seems more appropriate for that agency, and all agencies, this year to suggest an alternative to the taking of those precious quail that are left for this spring's hopeful rebound.

The Quail-Tech Alliance has worked diligently all summer to provide proof: stark, disappointing, tragic proof of the toll taken by the summer temperatures and the lack of moisture, bug population, and natural feed-source. The evidence is indisputable with the chick survival numbers from scientific research on some of the best-managed ranches in Texas; we simply have no crop of chicks this year. The near 100 percent total failure of the reproduction of 2011 is due to many factors such as drought, in some areas for the past three years, searing temperatures over the summer in an unprecedented display of punishing heat, and in the staggering toll taken on habitat complicated by the necessity of grazing in a truly hostile natural environment. We simply have no chicks. The young-of-the-year counts, were they to be taken this year, probably would have been a historical low as a product of the extreme conditions and the continuing decline.

It has to hurt your conscience to even consider shooting this year. The serious Quailers won't do it. The amateur Quailers probably don't know any better. And the meat hunters, just like the meat fisherman, think that the only medal for their efforts is an ice-chest full of meat. This would be a perfect year to adopt a catch-and-release strategy, such as fly-fishing has adopted, in order to better preserve our sport. Absent of that technical reality, we really need to consider this year being catch-and-release to the point of encouraging all quail-hunters to go forth, to point, flush and count. It's this counting that will remind people why we have taken such drastic measures in this, the most devastating year to wild quail populations in the last two decades.

Most coveys in the Quail-Tech Alliance system re-aggregated in late July and early August, having given up the opportunity to nest and carry off a successful clutch. There are anomalies around our areas, and certainly those precious few have lost the majority of their chicks to heat. Some ranches suffered 90 percent loss in the first 12 days after hatch. This heart-breaking story has been repeated throughout the rolling plains with few exceptions. The only bright spots were the product of June rains in Archer County and in surrounding areas. Though Archer and surrounding counties were spared the extended drought, they still suffered from the temperature and starvation death-loss in the chick population.

If there was a silver lining to the devastating temperatures and dry conditions it was that for the third year in a row, the Quail-Tech team has detected the presence of West Nile virus, but without the mosquito population to transmit it, only one active antibody out of 275 samples was found. The correlation of these findings with the dry season further points to evidence that the mosquitoes and standing water produced by normal rains provides the delivery mechanism that West-Nile needs to spread as quickly and completely as it has in the past. There are those that still doubt disease plays a role in the demise of quail populations, however, ongoing broader sampling should yield conclusive evidence to the premise that the disease is a major factor.

Your bird dogs won't mind the fact that there are no retrieves. After all, the beauty of our sport occurs prior to and during the flush, and it is only icing on the cake as a bird is delivered to hand. However this is the year to gather the memories you create with points not encumbered by gun positions and gun safety, but enhanced by the patience of being able to take great photos, which will be cherished all too soon.

This year has taxed every facet of the ranching industry and has, in many cases, forced the consolidation or complete dispersal of herds that have been assembled and refined over the last 20 years in the rolling plains. As painful and economically devastating as that has been to us, the same has occurred silently to our quail population.

Absent of the political reality of cancelling the season or severely curtailing the bag-limit, surely the suggestion of a voluntary limitation on the taking of wild quail will give politically appointed organizations the cover they need to not enact or overpower a population who believes that since they pay the money, they should get to kill the birds. This power of suggestion will only fall on ears that are receptive and open, and sensitive and sympathetic to the plight of the population of wild quail in Texas. I believe, and will continue to believe that the majority of quail hunters will fall into that open-minded category.

It's time to really examine your conscience this year and see if you really can escape the guilt that could be brought by wiping out half of a covey who has suffered through the most vicious summer in Texas history, all so that you may take those 100 grams of meat to the skillet. I don't believe any serious quailer would even hesitate. So let's support the communities in the quail-bearing areas, let's go to the leases; let's get our dogs out. Let's hold some of the finest points to be recorded on film, let's be sure and count the coveys as they flush, but let's keep the guns on safety this year.

Let's exercise the diligence and self-control necessary to give the birds a leg-up in what will hopefully be a recovery year fueled by a wet winter, spring and summer. If the birds had a vote, I'm sure they would say, "Let your conscience be your guide."

Quail first,

Charles Hodges