

North Region Quail Stewards

Quail Stewards Answer the Call for Quail

article and photos by Dale Rollins

Why is it that we never consider rationing until we see the bottom of the barrel?

—Abraham Lincoln

Texas is home to some incredible wildlife success stories. We puff out our chests regarding our successes with wild turkey restoration, and nobody touches the Lone Star State when it comes to white-tailed deer management. But somewhere, somehow, we have watched as an icon of our youth has been “slip-sliding away” over the eastern three-fifths of Texas. Sadly, the familiar “poor-bob-white” whistle, and the dapper quail that sang it, has faded from much of its former range.

But there are landowners who are not taking this insult lying down—or their quail for granted. Indeed, they proclaim: “quail decline? Not on my watch.”

Your TWA Foundation (TWAF) initiated an awards program recently to recognize such quail stewards. Via their recognition, we have an opportunity to mimic their inspiration and spread their gospel of quail management. Over the next several months, the finalists from each of five categories (North Region, South Region, Desert Quail, and Restoration (Group and Individual categories)) will be featured.

This month, we feature the North Region category, which includes the winner (Snipes Ranch) and the other two finalists (Hailey and Wild Wings Ranches).

Winner: Snipes Ranch Stonewall County

The Snipes Ranch encompasses 6,000 acres in northwestern Stonewall County, about 10 miles northwest of Aspermont. Owned and operated by Rick and Lana Snipes, the sandhills of the Snipes Ranch are the epitome of usable space for bobwhites. “Quail houses,” consisting of sand shinoak, hackberry, and lime pricklyash, dot the landscape as if painted on a Cowan, Drinkard, or Booth canvas. Little bluestem ripples across the sandhills, while western ragweed, prairie acacia, and bullnettle tempt bobwhites with abundant seeds.

When it comes to a passion for bobwhites, Rick Snipes, originally from



North Region winner Rick Snipes discussing his quail management strategies with a QuailMasters group.

North Carolina, is highly motivated—perhaps more motivated than most native Texans. He’s watched as bobwhites disappeared from his home country and across the southeastern U.S. He knows firsthand the danger inherent in resting on one’s laurels. His mission now is to produce “great hunting in good years and good hunting in poor years.”

Snipes had hunted on the property for years, and when it became available 20 years ago, he and several partners were quick to seize the opportunity. Several years later, Snipes bought out his partners. Now, 20 years later, thanks to some TLC and good management, the Snipes Ranch is one of the most beautiful and productive quail ranches anywhere.

During a recent tour this past May with the QuailMasters class, Snipes listed the key tools in his habitat tool box. “A friend once asked me to list 20 priorities for managing habitat. I told him, ‘give me control of the grazing management and the brush management, and you can have the other 18 things!’”

What was once chronically overgrazed (when Snipes procured the ranch) now sports a coat of bluestems, which offer prime nesting habitat for bobwhites. Today Snipes practices put-and-take grazing

by leasing his grazing on a per-pound of gain basis. He also is experimenting with patch-burn grazing to achieve surgical strikes when the grass gets too thick.

From 2002-2006, the Snipes Ranch was a cooperator in Texas AgriLife Extension Service’s Texas Quail Index. A 10-mile transect was set up across the ranch, with T-posts placed as mile markers from which whistle counts and various habitat measurements were conducted. The ranch was consistently in the top-ten of ranches monitored. Typically, more than 12 cocks could be heard calling from any of the listening posts.

One particularly useful index was the “simulated nest survival.” A total of 36 simulated (“dummy”) nests were set out to mimic where a bobwhite would nest, then nests were checked two and four weeks later to see how many had “survived.” When his simulated nest success dropped off in 2005, and evidence suggested feral hogs as a major nest predator, Snipes implemented a hog-trapping program and removed over 200 hogs from the ranch—the next summer his nest success bounced back.

The ranch consists almost entirely of deep sands as evidenced by its covering of sand shinoak. While the shinoak provides

good cover, too dense of a stand crowds out any food (save in the years of an acorn crop). Snipes used Spike 20P herbicide, applied in a checkerboard pattern (i.e., variable rate patterning) to treat larger expanses of shinoak. Today, he uses a Solo blower to apply Spike from the back of his Jeep to provide focused control of shinoak.

Snipes Ranch hosted the Texas Quail Study Group in 2004 and has also hosted a Quail Appreciation Day and other range management tours. He has assisted several Bobwhite Brigades and currently serves as President of the Board for the new Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch (www.quailresearch.org).

Snipes practices consumptive quail management, and his kennel of black-and-white English pointers is proficient in their task of finding, and pointing, the plentiful bobwhites that call the ranch home. A Labrador retriever takes over from there. Hunting is for Snipes and his guests only. In a good year, the covey count will be 40 coveys per day—half that in a “bad year.”

Congratulations to Snipes Ranch for garnering the top prize in the North Region!

**Finalist: Hailey Ranch
Shackelford County**

The best fertilizer is the footprint of the farmer.

—Anonymous

The Hailey Ranch consists of 2,500 acres just north of Abilene. Owned and operated by Rob Hailey, the ranch serves as a prime example of what hard work, innovation, and appreciation for ecological principles can do for wildlife, and for those who value them.

Hailey, a former Green Beret, is a one-man workhorse and has learned how to make his ranch “be all it can be” as habitat for bobwhites, doves, deer, wild turkeys, and even bluebirds. “If something’s good for quail, it’s good for all the other species of wildlife too,” he quips.

A cornerstone of Hailey’s management is his understanding of plant succession. “It’s important you know which plants are important for quail, and then how your management can be tweaked to foster those species.”

One of Hailey’s favorite practices is what he calls “zig-zags”—irregularly shaped disced strips that meander across the limestone hills. He used a bulldozer



Snipes (in hat) in the field with one of his pointers and a Lab.

to grub out the lanes initially, and then subsequently plows the strips with his tandem disc. Depending on the site, the strips turn to ragweed, sunflower, or most often doveweed (croton).

Hailey also uses several food plots, most of which are planted to a mixture of bearded and beardless wheat in October. The wheat fields then sport abundant sunflowers and doveweed the following summer, which sets the stage for some of the finest dove hunting anywhere.

Water is also important to wildlife, and Hailey makes certain his water troughs are accessible to quail. He also uses a small drinker, a smaller water facility available at ground level, as quail and most wildlife prefer to drink from ground level.

Rob is always willing to share his ranch with fellow students of quail. As he says, “no group or individual who wants to come and get a personal tour showing what can be done to help improve our wildlife has ever been turned down. They are always welcome.” Hailey Ranch has hosted Quail, Dove, and Plant Appreciation Days and was also a cooperator in the Texas Quail Index. The ranch is a favorite stop by QuailMasters classes, as well.

Hailey Ranch is a multi-faceted hunting operation. Guided hunts are offered for quail, turkey, and deer, whereas weekend dove hunts to corporate groups provide the bread and butter for the ranch’s survival.

Congratulations Rob—your hard work is surely paying dividends, and TWAF is proud to recognize you as a finalist.

**Finalist: Wild Wings Ranch
Scurry County**

Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you’re a thousand miles from the cornfield.

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

“Whenever I disturb the soil, good things happen for quail,” professes Rod Hench who, along with his wife Mary, owns the 8,000-acre Wild Wings Ranch east of Snyder. It’s no wonder that you’ll often find Rod atop an excavator or pulling a roller chopper through his Permian redbed soils. And his efforts are rewarded by quail-ambrosia like western ragweed, sunflowers, and buffalobur.

Hench purchased an overgrazed ranch in 1997, but thanks to rest from grazing, soil disturbance, a lot of sweat, and sound planning, the ranch has turned the corner. The ranch has huntable populations of both white-tailed and mule deer, feral hogs, doves, ducks, and both bobwhite and blue quail. The ranch was recognized as a Lone Star Land Steward for 2008.

Brush, especially redberry juniper and pricklypear, have been the targets of Hench’s management since he acquired the ranch. He uses grubbing, excavating, and raking to get on top of the juniper, then uses a roller chopper every three to five years as a maintenance tool. He says



A "zig-zag" field recently disced.



The field some months later, loaded with croton and sunflowers.



Rob Hailey sharing his understanding of plant succession with other quail ambassadors.



Rod Hench (l) of Wild Wings Ranch manages his land for optimum interspersed nesting, roosting, feeding and loafing cover for quail.

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the roller chopper has also helped him control pricklypear.

Good land stewardship for quail, including a good dose of brush sculpting, has also helped revitalize the historic Camp Springs. Sideoats grama, plains bristlegrass, and silver bluestem help capture rainfall and put it into the soil, and not down the Brazos River.

Several food plots have been integrated. The typical arrangement is wheat and hairy vetch planted in the inner two-thirds of the field, and then ring the perimeter of the field with an annual game bird mix of millets and sorghums.

Rod is a modest, unassuming student of quail who is always

ready to talk quail management with other students of quail. He currently serves on the Advisory Committee for the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch. And he keeps his eye on the goal.

"At first, the ranch restoration seems overwhelming, but if you stay at it things do get done. Our philosophy is the ranch is a better place today than yesterday, and will be a little better tomorrow."

Congratulations Rod and Mary for your prowess in land stewardship, especially on behalf of quail! 🐣

TWAF's Quail Stewardship Award features sponsored by Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Quail Decline Initiative.