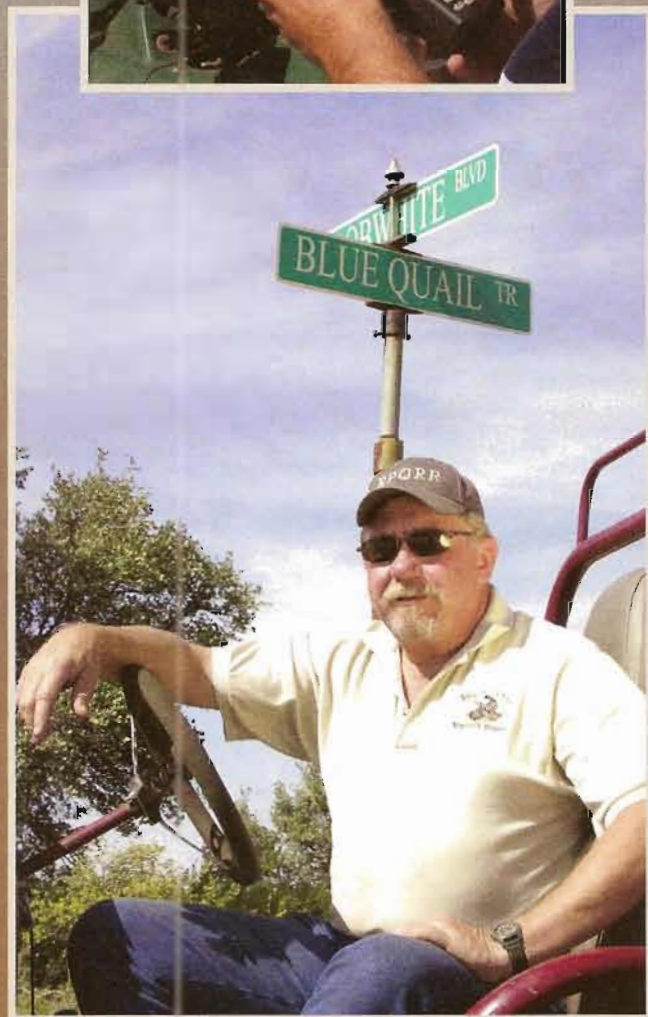


Tweaking the Knobs for Quail

By Burt Rutherford

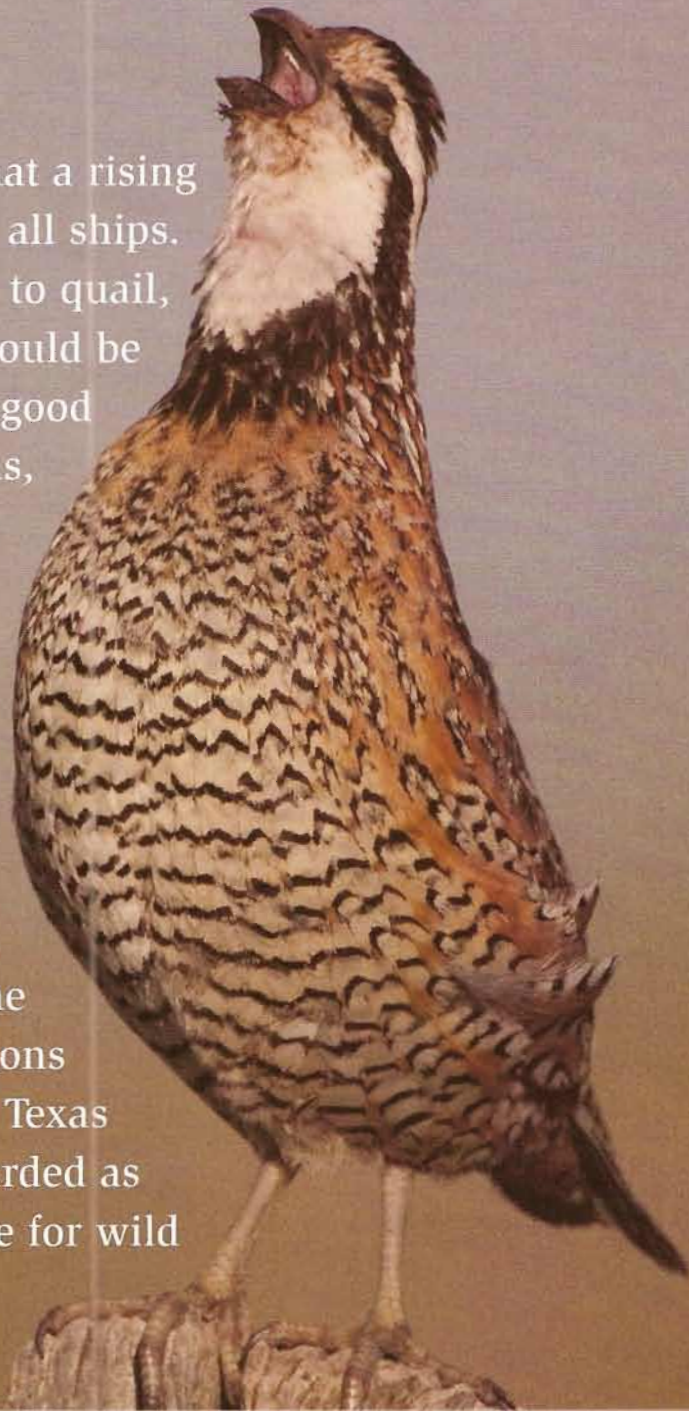
Radio telemetry is a key technology in the research at the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch. It not only provides information on quail activity and biology, but researchers use radio collars on predator species such as coyotes, raccoons and roadrunners to learn more about their behavior, as well.



Dale Rollins sits at the intersection of Bobwhite Blvd. and Blue Quail Trail on the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch. The research conducted under Rollins' watchful eye will help biologists and ranchers alike understand and then reverse the quail decline.

**“4,720 ... purchased with a grant
from The Conservation Fund”**

It's been said that a rising tide raises all ships. When it comes to quail, Dale Rollins would be happy with a few good whitecaps. Rollins, Texas AgriLife Extension wildlife specialist in San Angelo and one of the nation's noted experts on quail biology, has long fretted about the general decline in quail populations nationwide. While Texas has long been regarded as the last, best place for wild



Research and Education

If the right arm of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch (RPQRR) is research, the left arm is education.

"We've got the most wonderful teaching and training opportunity there is" for landowners interested in quail, says Dale Rollins, Texas AgriLife Extension wildlife specialist, one of the nation's most noted

experts on quail, and leader of the RPQRR's research and education missions.

In the more than two years that RPQRR has been in existence, it already is fulfilling its education mission in a number of ways, with one field day under its belt and a number of smaller, more specific gatherings of quail enthusiasts.

The ranch's second field day is Sept. 25 and Rollins hopes to significantly increase numbers over the 125 people who came last year. In addition, the ranch's Web site, <http://teamquail.tamu.edu/RPQRR2.htm>, has proceedings from last year's field day as well as additional information on ranch activities.



CR HARD DRIVE H069
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BB 1065 DOMINO 5077
Purchased in 2006 from BB Cattle Co. he was, in our opinion, the best offering. His dam is a prominent Landmark cow in the BB herd, which really lends to his scale. One of the growthiest bulls we have seen. Calves are born light and hit the ground growing.



UPS NEON 6198
Purchased in 2008 from Upstream Ranch, we are now seeing our first calves. We are very impressed how well our heifers calved from him. The calves look good and should carry the performance traits of the Neon line. Out of a Home Builder Dam of Distinction, he should integrate well at the Case Ranch.



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quail populations while the rest of the nation saw their birds disappear, the Lone Star State has not been immune to what biologists loosely tag the "quail decline."

And as somebody who turned landowners and hunters alike from to for answers, that left Rollins with a lot of questions — questions he knew he could find the answers to, if he only had a place where he could push a few pawns.

.....
If you're a quail ... you're near the bottom of the food chain.
.....

Rollins now has that place and it's called the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch (RPQRR). It began, oddly enough, after a successful quail hunt. "Three or four of us were lamenting the fact that quail tended to be headed south and that somebody needed to be a Paul Revere and wave the flag," Rollins remembers. As the conversation progressed, the idea of a research ranch came up.

Along with Rollins on that 2004 excursion were some folks from a philanthropic foundation. The idea found fertile ground. "Lo and behold, a few years later, they said they would be interested in finding property for a research ranch."

In October 2006, property was found — 4,720 acres on the blacktop between Snyder and Roby, which was purchased with a grant from The Conservation Fund. The Paul Revere of quail finally had a horse. Better yet, he also had a place to make the saddle.

Quail-based research

In the two-plus years that RPQRR has been home to quail research, Rollins and a cadre of graduate students have embarked on an ambitious series of research projects. "One of the main things we're doing is a patch-burn grazing study," Rollins says. Ultimately, it's designed to develop a quail-

(Continued on page 28)

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 CL 1 DOMINO 417P CL 1 DOMINETTE 8104H 1ET
 42482357 CL 1 DOMINETTE 0112K 1ET CL 1 DOMINO 5131E
 CL 1 DOMINETTE 411
 L1 DOMINO 03396 L1 DOMINO 00552
 CL 1 DOMINETTE 6128S 1ET L1 DOMINETTE 9689J
 42692473 CL 1 DOMINETTE 095K CL 1 DOMINO 640F
 CL 1 DOMINET 496 1ET

BW	WW	YW	MM	M&G	FAT	REA	IMF
2.1	49	81	17	41	0.02	0.49	0.15



HH ADVANCE 6098S ET

42674077 - Calved: Jan. 17, 2006 - Tattoo: BE 6098

HH ADVANCE 932J 1ET HH ADVANCE 6052F
 HH ADVANCE 3196N HH MS ADVANCE 4054D
 42370242 HH MISS ADVANCE 9082J HH ADVANCE 740G
 HH MS ADVANCE 7072G
 HH ADVANCE 767G 1ET CL 1 DOMINO 500E
 HH MISS ADVANCE 2111 M HH MISS ADVANCE 251B
 42281272 CL 1 DOMINET 496 1ET CL 1 DOMINO 386
 L1 DOMINETTE 850413

BW	WW	YW	MM	M&G	FAT	REA	IMF
0.7	49	86	25	50	0.06	0.51	0.09

Herd sires:	BW	WW	YW	MM	M&G	FAT	REA	MARB
L1 DOMINO 03447	2.0	36	56	12	30	0.06	-0.10	0.03
CL 1 DOMINO 629S	4.6	45	69	24	47	0.01	0.04	0.23
CL 1 DOMINO 9113J	2.7	39	74	15	34	0.02	0.15	0.34
HH ADVANCE 222M 1ET	0.2	31	57	25	40	0.03	0.26	-0.07
CL 1 DOMINO 262M	0.9	48	76	19	43	0.02	0.02	0.11
L1 DOMINO 06576	1.4	41	69	9	29	0.03	0.12	0.10
L1 DOMINO 06457	-1.7	29	57	8	22	0.02	0.02	0.17
M 262 DOMINO 506R	3.7	51	85	17	43	-0.01	0.15	0.06



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FOR QUAIL ...

(Continued from page 24)

friendly approach to prickly pear management.

"I'm not mad at prickly pear," Rollins says. But the quail ranch has no shortage of the plant, "and there comes a point when it inhibits huntability — then it has probably exceeded its threshold from a quail standpoint."

The ongoing study takes advantage of an 800-acre pasture heavily crossed with ranch roads that divide the pasture into a number of smaller grazing sites. Three of those sites, about 80 acres total, were burned and then grazed with cattle from December until July.

.....

... refining ways to better grow quail ...

.....

"We're trying to do two things," Rollins says. "First, we're trying to get some consumption on that scorched prickly pear, hoping to get some synergy going between the fire and grazing to help keep prickly pear at tolerable levels."

Second, they're hoping to get some synergy going between the cattle and the quail. The ranch is blessed with plenty of grass which, like prickly pear, can be both a boon and a bane for quail. "We want the cattle to focus their grazing on those burn sites," Rollins says. "We want to intentionally overgraze it, take those areas down to the ground so the ragweed, the dove weed, those kind of things, will grow up." Around those burn sites, where the forage is less palatable to cattle, less grazing pressure will be applied.

"So now we have a kitchen for quail, because that's where the bugs and weed seed will be. Right next to it, we have nesting areas for quail." The cattle were equipped with GPS collars, allowing researchers to document where and how the cows used the pasture. "We monitor the ragweed dynamics, we monitor the insect dynamics and we'll see if we're accomplishing our goal of making

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those better food production and brooding areas for quail.”

Food chain dynamics

“If you’re a quail, you’ve got to appreciate that you’re near the bottom of the food chain. Everything out there likes to eat you, your chicks or your eggs,” Rollins observes. So they have embarked on several studies looking at the predator-prey relationship from a quail-level perspective.

That’s done largely with radio telemetry technology. “We kept about 70 birds radio marked through the winter just to keep tabs on winter survival,” he said. Then in February and March, they trapped around 150 hens and fitted them with radio collars.

.....

**... sick quail doesn't ...
wave a white flag.**

.....

The birds were scattered out in pastures, then monitored for their nesting and brood rearing behavior. “Did they nest in prickly pear or in the grass? Those in the patch-burn area, where did they nest in relation to the burn areas? Did their broods use those burns? Those types of questions are what we’re getting at with the telemetry work.”

Another predator-prey relationship they are investigating is the interaction between roadrunners and quail. “In the court of public opinion, roadrunners would be lynched by most West Texas ranchers relative to their perceived impact on quail,” Rollins says. “Maybe they are [negatively impacting quail}], maybe not.”

To help answer that question, researchers trapped and collared several roadrunners. That allowed them to find the nests, which are especially well hidden. Once the nests were located, researchers set up video surveillance cameras to see what type of food the adult roadrunners brought their chicks. “Did they bring grasshoppers, horny toads or bobwhite chicks? That’s going to

be a very interesting aspect of the study," Rollins says.

And then there are coyotes and raccoons. Researchers trapped and fitted radio collars on four coyotes and four raccoons earlier this year, then monitored their activity. "We wanted to know how they worked the landscape during May and June, the peak nesting months." The research will give biologists a general idea of how the two main egg predators search the landscape. Once they know that, they can begin to look at various tools to frustrate their search.

One of the first projects, which yielded the first graduate thesis produced by ranch research, is still ongoing. Called "herp arrays," they're three-pronged traps that catch and hold snakes and amphibians. Not only do the results give researchers an idea of other nest predators working the pastures, but also a baseline of biological activity on the ranch.

"As a steward of that property,

and as naturalists and scientists, we want to know what we've got out there," Rollins says. "We want a good inventory of everything we've got — the plants, the animals, even some of the ones we don't have much appreciation for. But we've got to see what we've got out there so when we pull the quail string over here, how does it affect the horned lizard population, the rattlesnake population?"

.....

Texas ranchers ... be well-served by the lessons learned ...

.....

Baseline research is one aspect of their effort to better understand the predator-prey relationship. The other aspect is applying that to quail management. "If you think about predation, you want to know what some of the predators — a roadrunner, a red-tailed hawk or

a coyote — might be eating at different times of the year that might deflect some of the pressure from a quail's other predators. And if you do patch-burn grazing, does that facilitate or negate some of these 'buffer' species, like snakes and amphibians?"

And finally, they're looking at ways that landowners might help their quail better deal with one of the state's ongoing issues — drought. "There doesn't seem to be anything much harder on a quail than a dry fall, a dry winter and a dry spring. There's something about the trifecta of drought seasons that really puts a kink in nesting."

So Rollins and his graduate students tried to see if they could overcome that by providing a layer ration during this year's nesting season. "Some pastures got a 24% protein ration, others got milo and others didn't get anything. We had 15-20 radio-collared hens in each of those pastures and were looking



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to see if the birds that had access to protein initiated nests earlier and were able to overcome the dry weather kink that a dry fall, winter and spring puts on those birds," Rollins says.

Why a ranch dedicated to quail research?

In his many years as a quail researcher, Rollins has never had a problem finding landowners willing to cooperate with research trials. "But there are always complications. If you're dealing with a landowner whose primary interest may be livestock production, there will be pinch points somewhere down the road. As a researcher, I may want to push the system one way when I know it doesn't make economic sense, and I can't ask them to bear the brunt of those costs."

The Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, on the other hand, is focused exclusively on refining ways to better grow quail, allowing researchers to ask the questions that might not make much sense at the time, but need to be asked anyway as they attempt to both quantify and qualify the body of quail biology knowledge.

But that's not to say Rollins isn't interested in conducting research with cooperating ranches. As the RPQRR moves forward in fulfilling its vision "to sustain Texas' quail hunting heritage for this and future generations," researchers hope to "send the cavalry east," as Rollins puts it, and seek answers to declining quail populations in other parts of the Rolling Plains.

"There are certain things we're going to do here in Fisher County that will have applications in a lot of places, and there are others that are not going to make much sense to Tarrant County or Wise County or Wichita County, areas that 15 years ago had pretty vibrant quail populations and now have basically nothing."

Rollins has three main projects in mind that, if enough factors line up to make them possible, he'd like to conduct. One he calls

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“Operation Wintergrass”.

Texas wintergrass, which also goes by several other names, is the backbone of a lot of winter grazing in the eastern Rolling Plains. It is not, however, a quail-friendly vegetation in Rollins' opinion. “This may sound like heresy to a lot of people, but we're looking at doing some control measures on Texas wintergrass, restoring some areas to more of a warm season grass component,” and seeing if that doesn't provide more of an incentive for a hen quail to want to raise a brood.

A second big-ticket item on Rollins' wish list he calls “Operation Jumpstart”, which would involve restocking apparently habitable sites in the eastern Rolling Plains with wild trapped quail. “We know we can't do it with pen-raised quail. So we want to try it with wild trapped quail and see if we can re-establish quail on some of their previous habitat.”

And the third item he calls “Operation Sentinel”. There's a lot that researchers don't know when it comes to diseases that may affect quail. “A sick quail doesn't get out on the road and wave a white flag. It goes back in the brush and dies and is eaten before anybody knows it,” Rollins says. “Operation Sentinel would be basically an early-warning system where we'd monitor quail in a number of places along the northern and eastern perimeter. Should anything begin to happen disease-wise, we'd have a barometer.”

The future for RPQRR research, both on-site and off-site, is of course driven by money. In 2008, the Parks Cities Chapter of Quail Unlimited in Dallas donated \$550,000 to the ranch. If the group is able to continue that commitment, Rollins is hopeful that the research arm of the RPQRR can continue and be extended beyond the ranch's perimeter fence.

Texas ranchers with an interest in quail will be well-served by the lessons learned at RPQRR. “Most of those things (research results) will plug very well into a typical grazing land, ranching paradigm,”

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Rollins says. "Maybe (that will require) tweaking the knobs a little bit, but we want to be able to show ranchers and absentee landowners the landscape and the methodologies it takes to sustain quail."

And Rollins intends for the ranch to be a good neighbor as well. Already they donated a pumper unit to the volunteer fire department and are setting up a \$1,000 scholarship at the two high schools in the county—Roby and Rotan.

Beyond that, he sees the ranch serving as a hub to promote prescribed burning in the area. "The whole idea of prescribed burning will be a fairly large part of the quail ranch in terms of our brush management and prickly pear management," he says. "But prescribed burning has taken about three giant steps backward in the last five years or so, with wildfires and the concerns tending toward paranoia by some people." That, he says, has taken a powerful tool out of a rangeland manager's toolbox.

Several prescribed burn associations have come together throughout the state in the last few years and Rollins thinks the quail ranch can be a hub for such an organization in the western Rolling Plains. "We have a selfish motive, because we're hamstrung by a burn ban and there's no relief in sight. So we're hoping to use (the ranch) as a training and education site to teach other landowners and to demonstrate to county officials," that prescribed burns can be done safely, even in a drought.

The time, Rollins says, was right for the quail ranch to serve its purpose. "The spectre of quail decline is upon us," he says. "I can't guarantee that we're going to find answers at the quail ranch that will reverse anything. But I'm convinced that if we don't do something, quail are going to continue to go down the tubes."

Ranchers throughout the Lone Star State would be worse off should that happen. But as Rollins knows, sometimes a rising tide begins with a few good whitecaps. ■