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Flight risk

Shrinking bobwhite numbers concern sportmen, biologists

On March 10, about 800 sportmen attended the Park Cities Quail 2011 annual dinner and auction. When the gavel fell on the last auction item, more than $410,000 had been raised for quail research and education.

That’s a pretty good economic indicator of the desperation quail hunters feel toward the continued plight of their favorite game bird. And make no mistake, bobwhite quail are in free fall, some estimates indicate a 20-year, 85 percent quail decline throughout the bird’s home range.

In portions of West Texas, the downturn has been precipitous. West Texas is the largest contiguous area of quail habitat in America. One veteran hunter at the March 10 event lamented the state of his 9,000-acre hunting lease.

“It’s always been a pretty good quail country,” he said. “You know how many coveys we found on 9,000 acres? We found one covey. I guess it could have been raining.

It may be worse if dry weather persists. A Texas crop and weather report issued on March 22 by Texas A&M indicated critically dry conditions in both South Texas and West Texas, the top quail regions.

A quail forecast released by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department just before the hunting season began in October 2010, said biologists were cautiously optimistic about the quail outlook.

That’s despite the fact that quail counts in the Rolling Plains were eight birds per 100 acres (the long-term average is 2.5) and counts in South Texas were 3.6 birds per crane (the long-term average for this region is 8.6).

Portions of South Texas were better than expected, while most of West Texas was much worse than expected. Texas and Oklahoma are the strongholds for wild quail, but bird hunters in neither state are feeling comfortable about the future. In fact, Oklahoma recently announced it was economically insufficient to investigate the future affecting bobwhite and other upland birds.

"Quails are a big deal in Oklahoma," said Doug Schoeling, upland game bird program leader for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. "When ODWC biologists visit the deposit, what they (legislators) ask about is quail.

"Schooling said nobody really knows what’s wrong with quail in Texas and Oklahoma, which still appear to have vast areas of good habitat. They plan to look at all of them, from deer corn and other sources, disease, parasites, predators, herbicides, pesticides and habitat fragmentation.

Meanwhile in Tennessee, hardly the epicenter of wild quail, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency is offering a one-time incentive payment of $800 per acre for landowners who enroll in a federal program called Conservation Reserve Program and who improve habitat for bobwhite quail.

The payments are capped at $8,500 per landowner, but that’s better than nothing, says Dallas businessman Charles Hodges, a supporter of Quail-Trax, a research group from Texas Tech.

"Tennessee should not be more progressive than Texas in quail funding," Hodges wrote in an e-mail.

TPWD has budgeted about $44 million this year for upland and migratory game bird projects, some of which overlap. The agency has a growing good of money that’s been left unspent, however, and that bothers conservationists like Stan Graf.

The Dallas businessman serves on TPWD’s Upland Game Bird Advisory Committee and is concerned that money generated by the state agency’s upland and migratory game bird stamps is not being properly used. The stamps cost $7 and are required of hunters, in addition to a hunting license.

"The good news is that over $44 million has been accumulated in the last few years," Graf said. "The bad news is that money is not being spent at a rate when quail and quail hunting are on a steep decline. A portion of those monies for quail research and habitat improvement projects could make a real difference.

Graf said the Legislature has not appropriated conservation stamp money, instead using conservation funds to balance the state budget.

"This is not right, it is not honest and it is not what open government is supposed to be about," Graf said.

Pickens named honorary chairman

Dallas businessman Boone Pickens has been named honorary chairman for National Hunting and Fishing Day 2011, observed Sept. 24. Pickens’ predecessors have been entertainers or athletes.

Pickens said conservation is something he learned from his father, at a very early age and continues to practice. Two quail hunts for 12 people to his 66,000-acre Mesa Vista Ranch in the Texas Panhandle raised $260,000 for the Park Cities Quail auction March 10.

Considered one of the world’s leading authorities on energy issues, Pickens is also a noted philanthropist with contributions exceeding $800 million.

"I love the time that I get to spend hunting with friends, or even sitting on a pond bank with a fishing pole," he said. "I’m thankful that I have those activities as an escape from my business life.

Breaking down Park Cities Quail donations

Park Cities Quail will write checks to quail research and education next month for $485,000. That includes $315,500 for the Bobwhite Brigade Youth program, $66,000 for Quail-Trax (Texas Tech research program) and $432,000 to the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, which PCQ has adopted as its funding priority.