



TEXAS WILDLIFE



IN THIS ISSUE

- TEXAS HABITATS – TEXAS FORESTS
- PLANT PROFILE – OSAGE ORANGE
- FAMILY PHEASANTS
- TEXAS BIG GAME AWARDS RECOGNIZES NEW WHITETAIL RECORD ENTRY
- STILL LIFE WITH ROADRUNNER
- DEATH FROM ABOVE: HAWKS & QUAIL



A Christmas Carol

(Through a Quail Hunter's Eyes)

A northern bobwhite hunkers down on a cold winter day. Savor times and memories afield this holiday season with family and friends.

Remember when you only got three channels on the TV set, at most? I was only a boy then, living an ideal life in rural southwestern Oklahoma. But, I will always remember certain television specials — good enough for you to put down your BB gun and climb out of your foxhole long enough to watch them, year after year. Classics like “The Wizard of Oz” and “A Christmas Carol.” You remember the one featuring Mr. Magoo as Ebenezer Scrooge?

The novel *A Christmas Carol*, by English author Charles Dickens, was first published 160 years ago (on December 19, 1843). In case you missed it, or are like me, and it’s been 40 years or so since you watched it, here’s the story line. The tale begins on Christmas Eve seven years after the death of Scrooge’s business partner Jacob Marley. Scrooge is a greedy and stingy businessman who has no place in his life for kindness, compassion, charity or benevolence. After being warned by Marley’s ghost to change his ways, Scrooge is visited by three additional ghosts – each in its turn – who accompany him to various scenes with the hope of having Scrooge change his cold heart.

The first of the spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Past, takes Scrooge to the scenes of his youth, which stir the old miser’s gentle and tender side by reminding him of a time when he was more innocent. The second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present, takes Scrooge to several scenes (e.g., the family feast of Scrooge’s impoverished clerk Bob Cratchit and his crippled son Tiny Tim) in order to instill in the miser a sense of charity for his fellow man. The third spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, haunts Scrooge with dire visions of the future if he does not learn and act upon what he has witnessed. Scrooge’s own neglected and untended grave is revealed, prompting the miser to aver that he will change his ways.

When Scrooge awakens Christmas morning, he has become a different man overnight and now treats his fellow men with kindness, generosity and compassion, gaining a reputation as a man who embodies the spirit of Christmas.

Sometimes I have similar dreams, but in my version Bob Cratchit takes the form of bobwhite, and I am Tiny Tim, the boy who would have only a hard candy Christmas. You are cast in the role of Scrooge. Sweet dreams.

The Ghost of Christmas Past

I will never forget my thirteenth Christmas — I got my first shotgun . . . a Revelation single-shot .410 and a box of shells. Surely there was a Santa Claus! Christmas mornings were always special at our house because Daddy had the day off from the cotton gins, which meant, that after Christmas breakfast, we went hunting. Quail were always the centerpiece of our safaris. For if you were raised in southwestern Oklahoma and mentioned you



In addition to seed foraging, bobwhites will eat insects. Adequate supplies of quail food diminish, beginning with the first frost.

Photo by Rolf Nussbaumer

A pair of northern bobwhite quail at a pond in Starr County.

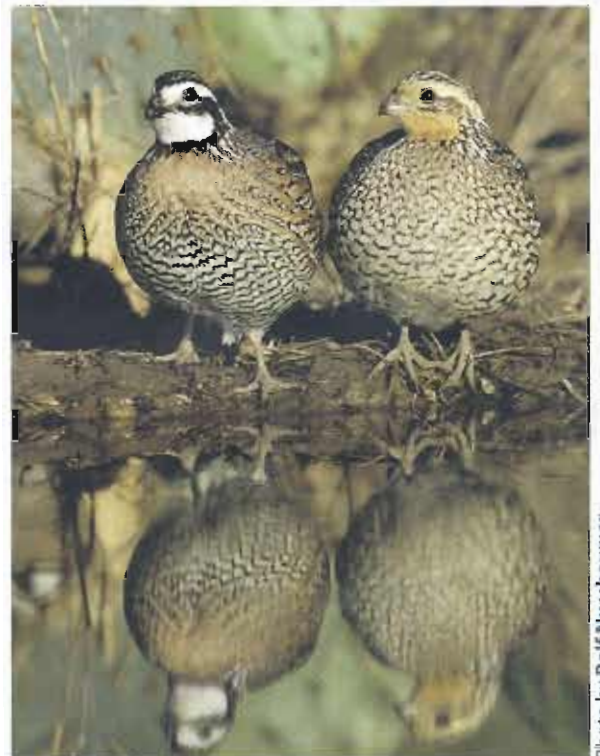


Photo by Rolf Nussbaumer

Landowners should take advantage of continuing education opportunities to become better managers of quail. For information on what you can do, see the sidebar on page 14.



Photo by Dick Wilberforce



Just as Ebenezer Scrooge reconsidered his actions upon dreaming of his abandoned tombstone, so must we be mindful of how our actions affect quail, good or bad.



Memories of one's first quail shot over pointing dogs are indelible. Here Kory Humphrey of Sonora makes such a memory with Dr. Rollins on a cold January morning at the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch.

were going "bird hunting," it was understood you were going quail hunting. There were no larger distractions (e.g., deer or turkey), but "birds" were bountiful.

Now Daddy was not your typical southern gentleman quail hunter, and we did not have a bird dog (seems no one did back then but the barbers). Our hunts consisted of driving the dirt roads and pastures south of Hollis trying to spot a road covey of bobwhites or blues. I was always amazed at how Daddy could spot a rabbit's eye or a tightly-wadded covey of quail hunkered up under a plum thicket.

Seems our hunts always started with a drive down "Potshot Road," a two-mile stretch of dirt road that went along the west side of the Hudspeth place. Then, we'd trek eastward past Uncle Bill's place and "Possum Kingdom" (part of the old Cary place characterized by gyp sinks, hence opossums). The old LaCasa schoolhouse was always good for a covey, and "Arthur's place" across the road to the north was good for a couple of coveys. Then we'd head south a mile to "Sprout's" where we'd find

both bobs and "those wild ol' blues."

A box of .410 shells cost \$3 a box, and a box of .22 shorts was 54 cents. I'd take the cartridges out of their box and re-stack them deftly time and time again. Indeed those were good times for me — and for bobs and blues, too. I wouldn't trade these memories for X-boxes, I-pods, or deer blinds.

I could show you with GPS precision where I claimed my first quail on the wing with the .410. I have the memory cued up even today and see the bird (a hen) folding at the zenith of its flush. My best friend Coondog Cary and I would spend many a day walking the mesquite-studded pastures with our .410s, content with either small game (quail and doves) or big game (i.e., a jackrabbit). Catch me in a reminiscing mood, and I can wax for hours on these exploits.

I am a product of my environment.

The Ghost of Christmas Present

I cannot remember a poor year for quail hunting

until 1984. A drought and the coldest winter that I've experienced (especially December 1983) wreaked havoc on bobwhites. I was thankful we had blues as they served as "drought insurance." I experienced firsthand the "booms and busts" and was thankful for the rains in the fall of 1985 as they afforded the landscape a blanket of broomweeds in 1986 and 1987. Ever since, I have extolled the virtues of broomweed as a canopy, indeed insulation, for quail.

The '87 season was, and is, the benchmark for my generation. I'd heard Daddy speak of how the bobwhites flourished in 1958 after the rains of 1957 finally broke the drought of the fifties. I began to appreciate how drought "cocks the hammer" and rains "pull the trigger" for quail irruptions in the Rolling Plains.

But then, hard times befell our quail. Blues disappeared both abruptly and completely in 1988; somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas, to be exact. The bobwhites rebounded in 1992 and again in 1997. But to this day, a sighting of blue



Photos by Dale Rollins

Above: Like Tiny Tim, quail are frail and are subject to an array of threats. Management must concern a quail's well being not just from Nov-Feb, but indeed every day of the quail's life.

Left: Scaled quail (more commonly referred to as "blues") have disappeared across much of their eastern range in Texas. These blues are being released at a site in Baylor County.

couple of times, and he often echoed Scrooge, but in different verbiage. "We study the past, and apply it to the present, that we may affect the future." Nigh was a history teacher before entering politics, hence his appreciation for the past and its bodings for the future — if we heed them.

If I might paraphrase that quote for quail, it would be "we study the past, and apply it to the present, given our current state of ignorance, that we may affect the future." Note my insertion. It is an acknowledgment that our knowledge base is incomplete.

Several years ago I coined the phrase "Idiopathic Quail Decline." Idiopathic is medical jargon that means the Doctor doesn't know what the problem is — the origin of the disease is unknown. I offer the lamentation as a sign of (at least my) ignorance of quail happenings. Oh sure, there are many landscapes and back forties where the culprit is obvious. Perhaps it's overzealous brush control or overzealous grazing. We wildlifers are quick to chant a mantra of "habitat loss" and point our fingers there, perhaps in a show of blind faith.

But what of more insidious and less obvious changes? Let's examine what I'll call "chronic habitat change" — not a revolutionary change, like that induced by too much brush control, but one that is equally as detrimental. I'd offer Texas wintergrass as a candidate for such espionage. Yep, that wonderful cow forage. It seems to me that Texas wintergrass has captured and dominated much of the historic quail range across the southeastern half of the Rolling Plains. From a quail's viewpoint, it has become the Rolling Plains' version of tall fescue. Certain weather regimes and management practices foster this cool-season perennial. A weather pattern that features dry springs and summers and wet falls and winters promotes wintergrass. I suspect fall-calving management regimes do, and mesquite canopies over about 30 percent do, too. Oh, and as a "C3" grass (so noted for the way it metabolizes carbon), it is favored by greenhouse gases.



Li'l Annie rests behind a limit of bobwhite cocks after a successful day of "quail snooker." Rollins coined the phrase where one's limit is reached if more than two hens are bagged.



These scaled quail, also known as "blues," settle in for a dust bath.

And things appear to be going well for some of the quail's enemies, e.g., Cooper's hawks, raccoons and feral hogs. Indeed, for these three predators, these may be the best of times. We supply the latter two with high-protein deer pellets and high-energy deer corn, so why should we be amazed when there's a fresh coon track in every cow path across the landscape? Ask yourself: Does my management favor quail or the enemies of quail?

South Texas quail biologists are alarmed at the spread of several invasive grasses and the negative impacts they portend for bobwhites. Bobwhite aficionados east of the 100th meridian are handicapped by coastal bermudagrass, and Octobers all across Texas ring purple with seedheads of King Ranch bluestem, another invasive grass. All claim to be "improved grasses," but for what? Not for bobwhites.

Elsewhere I have discussed various hypotheses about quail decline; read up on these in the June 2010 issue of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch's "e-Quail Newsletter." (You can subscribe to e-Quail at www.quailresearch.org.)

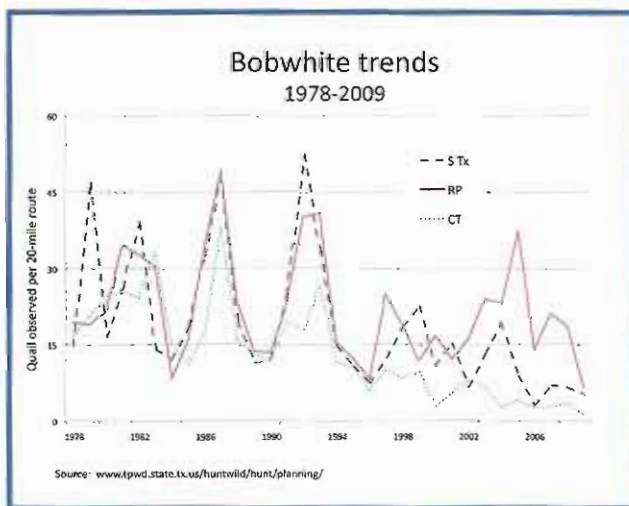
We toast our wildlife success stories, be they whitetails or wild turkeys, white-winged doves or black-capped vireos, while the iconic bobwhite fades from the scene, almost unnoticed by any, except quail hunters. We have traded our Wingmasters for compound bows and our dog boxes for tree stands.

"Well we hate to hear about the quail decline, but the white-tailed deer is doing fine. Sell your dogs, but have no fear, sling some corn and go hunt deer."

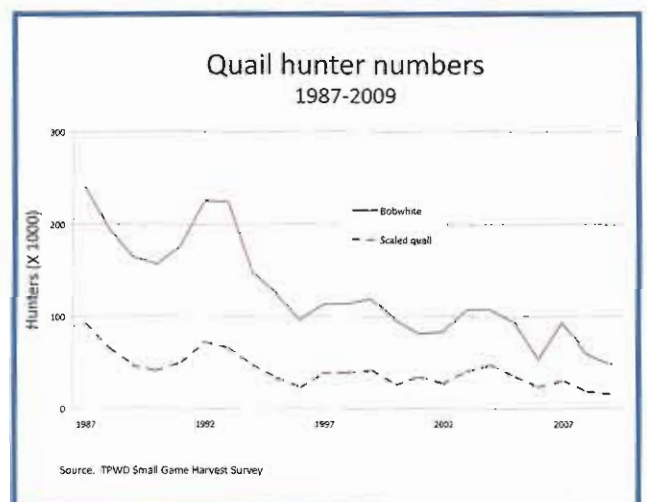
There are many facets to the future of quail, but complacency on our part should not be one of



Photo by Dick Wilberforce



Bobwhite abundance in three ecoregions of Texas, as gauged by TPWD's annual roadside counts; "RP" = Rolling Plains, "S. Tx" = South Texas Plains, "CT" = Cross Timbers. Data for other ecoregions are available at the website cited.



Slip-sliding away; quail hunter trends for both bobwhite and scaled quail have declined significantly over the past 30 years.

them. Indeed, Tiny Bob's future is in our hands; he is crippled, and we're not certain of the root(s) of his multifaceted malady. This year he shows signs of recuperation, and maybe such momentum will carry us with new optimism. I hope so.

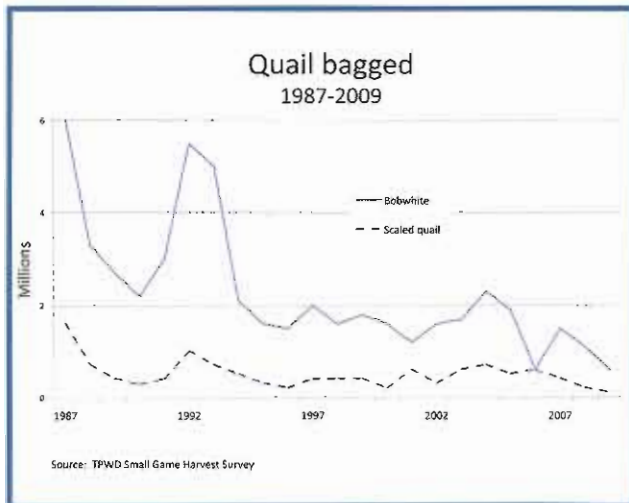
But let's not sit back and watch as the quail wave plays itself out across Texas. I don't want to lament to my grandson how great my bird dog was but now how he cannot personally experience the thrill of such moments afield. Not on my watch.

As we approach the Christmas season, savor the times and memories afield with friends and family. Maybe even take in a television special, especially if you hear the voice of Mr. Magoo.

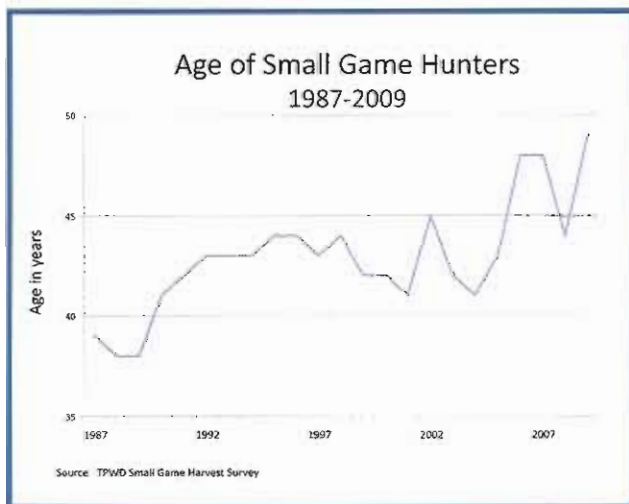
I hope you lose sleep over it.

"I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

- Ebenezer Scrooge



Hunter harvest for both species of quail has followed similar trends as quail abundance and hunter numbers.



Quail hunters, as gauged by small game hunters in general, have gotten older. Lack of recruitment is a serious concern for all aspects of hunting and for the agencies that rely on hunting license sales.



Photo by Dick Wilberforce

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Become a "Student of Quail." Seek to better understand the quail equation on your back forty and become a more skilled quail manager. Sign up for QuailMasters and avail yourself to continuing education opportunities. The class of 2011 will muster in April.
2. Take a kid quail hunting. I often claim to have introduced more kids to quail hunting over the past 15 years than anyone, and my tally is less than 75. That's really a paltry score. Seek to do your part.
3. Send copies of "Texas Quails: Ecology and Management" (available at online bookstores for about \$30) to your comrades, lessees and other colleagues.
4. Make copies of "Where Have All the Quail Gone" as stocking stuffers and share generously. You can download it at www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_rp_w7000_1025.pdf.
5. Get a bird dog; then you'll have a vested interest to be involved in quail management.
6. Support the Bobwhite Brigade (www.texasbrigades.org). They need your most important assets, i.e., (in ascending order) your funding, your time and your children (or grandchildren).
7. Support your local quail. Join and support your local chapter of Quail Coalition or Quail Forever. Fund research efforts aimed at quail restoration. (Most gifts are tax-deductible.)
8. Seduce a deer hunter. Put him on a covey rise behind a brace of bird dogs, and that deer blind will lose a bit of its luster.
9. Answer the call. Be a champion for the quail's plight. Renew your membership in the Texas Wildlife Association or join for the first time. Voice your concerns inside (e.g., TPWD) and outside (legislators) quail circles via TWA and on your own.
10. Don't miss this month's TWA Wildlife for Lunch series that features Dr. Rollins speaking on "Trophy Quail Management." See page 41 of this magazine for details.