

Big investment in quails' future

Fond memories of past hunts spur Moncrief to donate \$1 million

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Bobwhite quail got an early Christmas present when legendary Fort Worth oilman W.A. "Tex" Moncrief donated \$1 million to the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, a unique project in Fisher County. It's one of the largest single donations to benefit a Texas game species.

In his Fort Worth office, Moncrief, 87, presented a check to Texas A&M extension biologist Dr. Dale Rollins and research ranch board member Rick Snipes.

Moncrief, who brought out photos of he and his father, W.A. "Monty" Moncrief, hunting together in the 1960s, said he has known Rollins for several years. The researcher, considered one of the leading authorities on West Texas quail, once headed a research project on the Moncrief family's ranch, west of Fort Worth.

"I've had many great quail hunting experiences," Moncrief said. "Hopefully, this donation will help to bring back the quail that we've been losing all across Texas."

That's the idea behind the ranch, purchased last year by an anonymous foundation that spends millions each year on conservation. Most Texas wildlife research is performed on private property, with research costs generally paid by the property owner.

The disappearance of bobwhite quail from historic range in the Southeast has been widely documented. Texas remains the last stronghold of these remarkable game birds, possibly because of vast, unpopulated areas of West and South Texas.

Moncrief, who was born in Fort Worth, said he shot quail as a boy near his home on River Crest Country Club. Even in the old days, quail were more abundant in South Texas. Some of the best hunts he remembers were in Atascosa County in the mid-1930s while a student at Culver Military Academy in San Antonio.

"My dad had a lease down there south of San Antonio and there were so many birds you just couldn't believe it," he said. "It was lots of fun. Later, we hunted for years with our friends like Bob Green around Albany and that was great bird hunting as well."

In 1960, Moncrief and his father started putting together a significant ranch in Parker County, west of Fort Worth. Since then, he's done most of his quail hunting close to home.

"There were always quail on our ranch and there still are," Moncrief said. "We never hunted them very hard. My dad and I would go out about noon, get up a covey or two and shoot a few birds for breakfast or dinner. We never shot more than half a dozen or so quail and maybe a duck or two that we jumped off the tanks."

Though he still owns two bird dogs, Moncrief said he has not been hunting this year. He was injured nearly 50 years ago by a falling tree that twisted his knee and broke his leg. While the injuries healed, causing the oilman no problems for decades, he now walks with a pronounced limp.

"My bum knee makes it hard for me to walk on uneven ground," he said. "I'm afraid I might trip and fall while carrying a shotgun. This year, of course, the ground cover is so tall that it would be hard to find a quail. I don't think I've ever seen bluestem as tall as it is on our ranch this year."

Though the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch is paid for, Rollins said money must be raised for equipment, maintenance and research projects.

"Luckily, we have a lot of friends who believe that quail are a worthwhile species," he said. "We've received \$45,000 this year from the Park Cities and the Cross Timbers Chapters of Quail Unlimited, and we have a tractor that was donated by QU Chapters. We'd like to have a \$5 million endowment fund, and this gift from Tex Moncrief is a huge step in that direction."

Rollins and Snipes presented Moncrief with a Walter Matia bronze of flushing quail. Rollins was quick to point out that the bronze was paid for by donations from RPQRR directors, not from funds donated by the Fort Worth millionaire.