

The Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch: an Odyssey for Quail

Sometimes It Just Takes a Storm

article and photos by Dr. Dale Rollins



D. Rollins 09

Cadets of the Rolling Plains Bobwhite Brigade release a covey of radio-marked quail at the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, January 2009.

Take Forrest Gump for example. When Gump made a pledge to his best friend “Bubba” to get in the “shrimpin’ business,” his luck was pitiful at first. Bubba died in Viet Nam, and Lt. Dan lost both legs. But Forrest had made a commitment to Bubba, so when he got out of the Army he used all his savings to buy a shrimp boat, the “Jenny.”

But being a shrimp boat captain proved to be tough. Then Hurricane Camille showed up and wrecked the Gulf Coast shrimp fleet, except for one boat—the “Jenny.” Lt. Dan made peace with God. Suddenly the shrimp business got real good, and the Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. was born.

In recent years, I’ve found a number of similarities between Gump’s life and mine. We both had loving mothers who encouraged us to find our destinies in life. We cherish memories of special “Jennys.” We each had close friends whose word was their bond. And we’ve both had a feather that floated through our lives.

Maybe the feather’s path symbolizes destiny and fate, maybe just chance, or “maybe a little bit of both.”

In my case, the white feather was a bobwhite’s feather. I heard my first

“poor-bob-white” when I was five years old outside our kitchen window. Mama told me “that bird sings its name.” And it’s been calling to me ever since.

Quail Decline

The storm in quaildom is almost as dramatic as Hurricane Camille. I didn’t realize it until January 1992 when I read an article by Dr. Lenny Brennan, then-research director at Tall Timbers Research Station in Florida and now at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. He predicted that bobwhites would be “recreationally extinct” in the southeastern U.S. by 2005. I didn’t believe his fatalistic forecast at the time, but turns out he was spot on—and the storm (quail decline) spread all the way to IH35, leaving many a quail hunter to lament his losses.

Now, 1992 was a great quail year in west Texas where I hunt, but Brennan’s message was not lost. I vowed at the time to my setter, Suzie, that if quail were going to blink out here in west Texas, it wasn’t going to be on my watch.

Fast forward to 2005—our most recent great quail year. As four of us celebrated a great day afield in Fisher County watching a full moon rising, we

talked of the quail situation and the need to be more proactive if we wanted to ensure the future of our quail-hunting heritage. The idea of a quail research ranch was conceived.

And two years later, the idea hatched—The Conservation Fund purchased a 4,720-acre ranch in western Fisher County. A year later a new 501(c)(3) charitable foundation, the “Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch” hatched.

The Odyssey

The feather had landed. But the odyssey had just begun.

To my knowledge, the RPQRR is one of a kind. Its mission is “to sustain the heritage of wild quail hunting for this, and future, generations.” At the ranch, everything points to quail. The pastures, save one (which I’ll mention later), are named after bird dogs past and present.

It’s a wonderful landscape if you’re into quail. Rolling topography with “quail houses” (escape coverts about the size of a Volkswagen beetle) situated about a softball throw apart illustrate nicely the concept “usable space.” When people ask for directions to the ranch, I tell them to drive west of Roby on U.S. 180 until they

see a piece of property on their left that looks like quail heaven, and they've found it.

One of the neatest features of the ranch is a ridge that runs north-south and almost bisects the ranch from east to west. We have dubbed this feature "Telemetry Ridge" as it affords easier surveillance of radio-marked quail. And what a vista it provides!

Point Number One of my late bird dog "Suzie's 12-point plan for success" exhorts one to "always hunt with good dogs." Surround yourself with folks who are smarter than you, and you'll be better just by the competition. To exemplify this point, a board of directors was recruited, including Rick Snipes of Aspermont (president), Ray Stoker Jr. of Odessa (secretary), A. V. Jones Jr. of Albany, Joe Crafton of Dallas, and Jack Fields of Houston. Also, an advisory committee, chaired by Paul Melton of Roby, was named that consisted of landowners, hunters and other students of quail.

Research Efforts

For the first year, most of the research was aimed at defining baseline inventories of quail, their enemies, and various aspects of the habitat. A total of 25 "mile markers" (listening posts) were established across the ranch from which whistle counts are conducted in the spring and fall. Over 100 permanent brush canopy cover transects were installed, so we can monitor vegetation changes across the years. Plant, seed, and insect dynamics are monitored in various habitat types.

A list of current projects includes:

- A comparison of census techniques for quail, including whistle counts, helicopter counts and "mark-recapture" of leg-banded birds;
- Nesting ecology involving radio-marked quail, including comparisons of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields versus native rangeland, and how dummy nests (simulated quail nests using chicken eggs) can be used to monitor nesting success;
- Patch-burn-grazing as a means of achieving a quail-friendly approach to prickly pear management. Small (10- to 20-acre) burns within a larger pasture are monitored with GPS-equipped cows to document grazing behavior and plant and insect dynamics;
- Supplemental feeding with a 24-

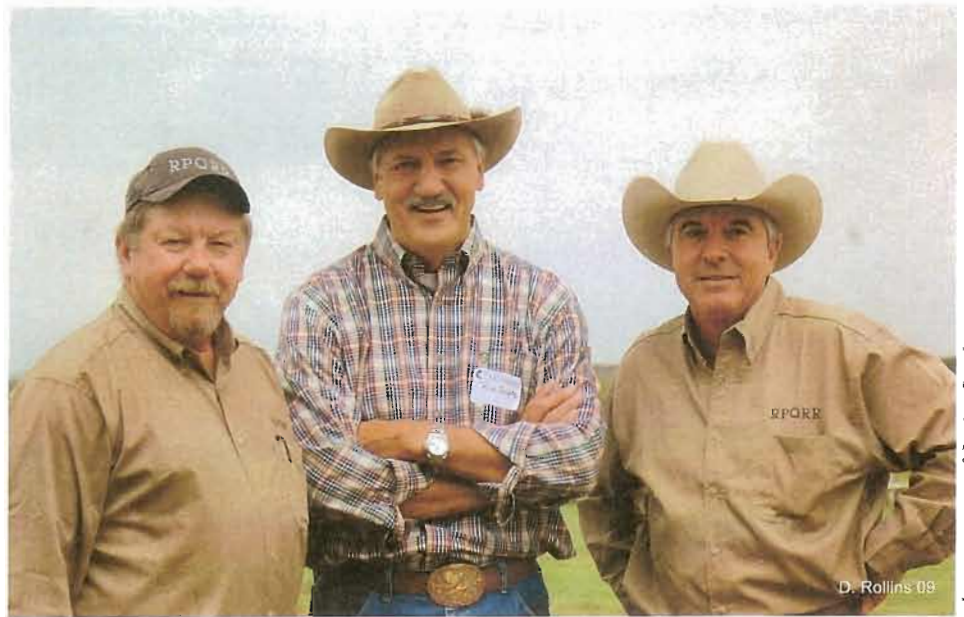


photo courtesy of Janice Southern

(l-r) Dr. Dale Rollins serves as ranch director, Rick Snipes of Aspermont is President of the Board, and Paul Melton of Roby is chairman of the advisory committee.

percent crude protein layer ration to see if the negative effects of a dry fall and winter on nest initiation can be mitigated;

- Studies of other critters that may have a direct, or indirect, impact on quail abundance—reptiles, rodents and raptors.

New projects for 2009 include:

- GPS-surveillance of coyotes and raccoons during the peak of quail

nesting season in order to understand how a quail's major nest predators "work the habitat" relative to our management schemes;

- Surveillance of roadrunner nests with micro-video cameras to monitor prey delivery at the nest (what is the proportion of horned lizards, grasshoppers, or quail chicks);
- Radiomark and monitor Cooper's hawks and northern harriers (marsh hawks) during the winter months to characterize their capture rates on quail.

Research projects like these take money, people, and time to bear fruit. Collaborations have been forged with research colleagues at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute), Texas Agrilife Research (San Angelo, Vernon and Uvalde offices) and Texas Tech University.

While research efforts to date have focused on the ranch itself, new projects are planned for 2009 that will address topics in the eastern Rolling Plains. These include (1) "Operation Texas Wintergrass" (assessing impacts of Texas wintergrass in habitat degradation), (2) "Operation Jump Start" (assessing restoration efforts with wild-trapped quail and "Surrogators" – commercial brooder units), and (3) "Operation Idiopathic Decline" (with an admission that "the doctor don't know"). Additional projects will be proposed for scaled (blue) quail in 2010 at sites near Midland.

We do some strange things at the



While the ranch has mostly bobwhites, several coveys of scaled (blue) quail also reside there. This radio-marked hen will be monitored to study nesting ecology and survival.

ranch, and sometimes what we don't do is equally as unusual, according to prevailing paradigms. We kill some things (e.g., bermudagrass) that some graziers would consider heresy, and we don't kill others (coyotes and rattlesnakes) that raise eyebrows of visitors.

Hunting with Good Dogs

The ranch was blessed to come along just as a new chapter of Quail Unlimited was created in Dallas. The Park Cities Chapter has adopted the ranch as sole beneficiary of its fundraising. In 2008, in only its second year of existence, the PCQU broke all of QU's fundraising records and sent a check to the ranch for \$550,000—talk about putting the wind underneath a quail ranch's wings!

Other students of quail have also left their mark. W. A. "Tex" Moncrief Jr., a renowned Ft. Worth oilman and lifelong quail hunter, donated \$1 million for the start of the ranch's endowment fund. Accordingly, the "Tex" pasture is the only one not named for a bird dog. Other supporters have pledged from \$20 to \$20,000. We hope to increase the endowment to \$6 million, but the economic recession of the past year has been untimely for such endeavors. As the economy recovers, we hope to build a multi-purpose educational facility (estimated at \$1.8 million) atop Telemetry Ridge.

An Outdoor Classroom

Education is a key cog in preserving Texas' quail-hunting heritage, and is the sequel to our research efforts. The ranch hosts an annual field day in September (September 25 this year), various day-long educational efforts like Plant Appreciation Days, symposia like Brush Sculptors and unique events like the Satellite Bird Dog Census where bird dog owners equip their dogs with Garmin Astro GPS dog collars and canvass the ranch for quail. An annual Distinguished Lectureship in Quail Management is held each January in Roby.

Recognizing that prescribed burning is a Crescent wrench for habitat managers, the ranch hopes to serve as the nucleus for a new Western Rolling Plains Prescribed Burn Association.

Since its inception, the ranch has been the recipient of excellent media exposure. Feature articles in popular media including newspapers (e.g., *Dallas Morning News* and *Austin American-Statesman*), magazines (e.g., *Field & Stream*, *The Cattleman*), and blogs (e.g., *Field &*



Quail hunts are conducted on the ranch for three reasons: fundraising, public relations, and youth hunts. Here Breanna Irvin of Bonham walks into a nice covey rise during a Bobwhite Brigade hunt.

Stream and Garmin) help increase exposure to the ranch and its mission.

Hunting on the ranch is permitted for three reasons: fundraising, public relations, and youth events. Three or four hunts are auctioned off to various organizations that support our mission, and a couple more are provided to outdoor writers to enhance media exposure. Finally, two hunts are held annually for youths of the Rolling Plains Bobwhite Brigade. The quail harvest for the past two years has averaged about 140 birds.

Quail face a stormy future with ominous clouds on the horizon in the way of burgeoning human population growth and habitat fragmentation. But when the sun rises over Telemetry Ridge in June, and "poor-bob-white" whistles flood the landscape, a rainbow of hope frames the ranch and indeed, the future of quail hunting in west Texas.

To learn more about the ranch, see our website at <http://teamquail.tamu.edu>. I hope to see you at our second annual field day on September 25! 🐔

LaCoste Heads Up RPQRR Team

Lloyd LaCoste, TWA Member from San Antonio, serves as the Research Technician for Texas Agrilife Extension and on-site manager for the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch. Lloyd earned his B. S. Degree in Range Management from Texas A&M University and has worked on well-known quail ranches in south Texas (Hollywood Camp and Mota Bonita Ranch) prior to his appointment at Roby. Lloyd's wife Cathy is also part of our team, and their daughters Brittany (9) and Loren (5) will surely grow up to be students of quail.

Kurt Huffman of Austin is conducting his doctoral research at the ranch on "patch burn-grazing as a quail-friendly approach to prickly pear management." Drew McEachern of Paducah recently earned his M.S. degree from Angelo State University studying the ranch's herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians). Dave Barre, a research assistant from Australia who earned his M.S. degree in Ecosystem Sciences at Texas A&M University, oversees studies on plant ecology.

The ranch relies heavily on student interns for summer labor. Interns to date have included James Jackson of Meridian, Barrett Koennecke of Comfort, Josh McGinty of San Angelo, Angel Garcia of Lubbock, Brandon Wilson of Rocksprings, Corbin Neill of Friona, Jeremy Rychlik of San Angelo, and Bryce Jones of Paducah. Students interested in serving an internship at the ranch should contact Dr. Rollins at d-rollins@tamu.edu. 🐔