

Rolling Plains Quail

Back in Wisconsin, a February morning in the mid-20s would seem balmy. But here on the mesquite-dotted plains of West Texas—Fisher County, to be precise, about 50 miles west and a little north of Abilene—that same temperature feels shockingly, marrow-chillingly cold.

I'm sitting on the passenger side of Dr. Dale Rollins' pickup, with the window rolled down and the engine turned off. We're parked deep in the heart of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch (RPQRR), the 4,700-acre property for which Rollins serves as executive director, listening for the lispy "wake-up" call of the bobwhite quail—the adored, imperiled handful of feathers whose preservation is the reason the ranch exists.

It's early; the sun has yet to rise. But the pink glow on the eastern horizon is growing more intense, the stars are winking out above us as the canopy of sky fades from black to blue, and the thorny features of the landscape—so powerfully remindful of the African veldt—are beginning to reveal themselves. The place we're parked, mile marker 11E, is one of 25 "listening posts" where Rollins and his staff tabulate the number of rooster quail they hear calling in the spring—data they use not only to index the ranch's overall breeding population but also to gain a sense of its distribution and how it relates to vegetation, topography, land use and a host of other factors.

The focus at Rolling Plains is squarely on quail—bobwhites first and foremost—and to a lesser extent the handsome scaled quail ("blues" in Texas) that share this portion of their range. But to fully understand quail—and, most pointedly, the challenges to their survival—it's necessary to un-



COURTESY OF ROLLING PLAINS

Tracking radio-collared quail is just one of many projects being undertaken by the RPQRR.

derstand the dynamic ecosystem of which they're one of many interconnected parts. So while the people at RPQRR always keep an eye out for the birds, they never lose sight of the bigger picture, either.

Mile marker 11E had the highest counts on the ranch in the spring of 2008, but this morning the silence is deafening. Rollins is unconcerned. "We might have gotten here a little late," he shrugs. "Or it could be they just didn't feel like calling this morning." We also agree that our ears, punished by 50-odd years of gunfire, rock & roll, and sundry other insults, are no longer the sensitive auditory instruments they once were.

Rollins cranks the engine—I'm deeply grateful for the rush of warm air—but before he can put the Toyota in gear I spot

the cruciform silhouette of a Cooper's hawk arrowing through the mesquite.

"That's a bobwhite quail's worst nightmare," he says. "It's like Freddie Krueger and Jason rolled into one. A quail being chased by a Cooper's hawk will literally scream in terror. When we say that a quail that has to fly longer than four seconds or farther than 75 yards to get to cover is in big trouble, it's mostly because of the Cooper's hawk."

Rollins explains that among the many research projects they have planned is one that will track radio-tagged Cooper's hawks and northern harriers to determine the role quail play in their respective diets. Similar studies are planned for coyotes, raccoons, roadrunners and rattlesnakes—quail predators all.

The ranch's first objective, Rollins says, is to "defend the high ground" and ensure that the Rolling Plains ecoregion, comprising some 24 million acres in northwestern Texas and western Oklahoma, remains a bobwhite quail stronghold. As he describes these various predation studies, I'm reminded of another aphorism from the vernacular of warfare: Know thine enemy.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Dozens of live-trapped quail have been fitted with radio collars—there's a reason the rocky landform that rises up more or less in the middle of the ranch is known as "Telemetry Ridge"—and hundreds more have been leg-banded. Baseline surveys of insects, small mammals and "herps" (amphibians and reptiles) are ongoing, vegetative changes are continually monitored at more than 100 sites, helicopter transects count coveys and map their locations with laser range finders connected to GPS-enabled tablet computers . . .

It's dizzying, really, and that's *before* you factor in the educational events hosted at the ranch: Field Days for the general public, intensive QuailMasters study programs for sportsmen and property

owners, the Distinguished Lectureship in Quail Management series, the list goes on. Says Rollins, who folds his duties at RPQRR into his work as a wildlife specialist for Texas AgriLIFE Extension (the outreach arm of Texas A&M University): “Will Rogers said that people’s opinions are changed through observation and not by argument. So it’s one thing to talk about proper grazing management, brush sculpting [manipulating brush cover in quail-friendly ways] or prescribed burning, but it’s another to bring people in, show them what we’re doing and give them information they can take back and apply on their own properties.”

When you consider that “the quail ranch” has been up and running only since the spring of 2007, the momentum it has generated becomes all the more impressive. It points up the dedication of everyone involved—the staff, the board of directors, the advisory committee, the myriad donors and volunteers—to the ranch’s mission: the perpetuation of Texas’ wild quail hunting heritage “for this and future generations.”

For the past quarter-century if not longer, the news from the bobwhite quail front has been unremittingly grim. In many parts of the Eastern, Southern and Midwestern US, where quail formerly were abundant, the bird has disappeared. And even where remnant populations hang on, their numbers are so diminished that biologists and game managers have declared the species “recreationally extinct.”

Perhaps nothing puts the problem in starker relief than this: When the National Audubon Society released its report *Common Birds in Decline*, the list was headed by the bobwhite quail. During the report’s 40-year survey period (1967-2007), the bobwhite’s numbers nationwide declined by a staggering 82 percent, from 31 million to 5.5 million.

Even Texas, where quail numbers remain robust compared to the rest of the country, wasn’t immune. Quail populations there have been declining at a rate of 4.9 percent per year since the early 1980s (in East Texas the rate has been much higher). The fabulous 15-to-30-covey days that were the signature of Texas quail hunting have become less the rule and more the exception.

None of this was lost on the Texas quail hunting community—least of all on Dale Rollins, who’s known in the Lone Star State as “Dr. Quail” and in 1993 founded the Bobwhite Brigade, a “quail camp” for 13- to 17-year-olds that’s been widely

emulated since then.

“It’s not possible to think more about quail than I do,” Rollins said. “It’s 24/7/365 for me.”

He and some friends were thinking about the birds after a hunt in early 2005, wondering what the future might hold and whether the kind of success they’d enjoyed that day was destined to become a memory—as it had in most of the bob’s historical range. Someone suggested that they needed to “get ahead of the curve” in West Texas while the birds were still in good shape, and as the conversation progressed, the idea of a quail ranch—a “real world” site for quail research and the development and demonstration of effective management techniques—began to take shape.

Fueled by the widespread sense that something like this was not only needed but also long overdue, the concept quickly gained traction among a broad base of stakeholders. One of its earliest and most ardent supporters was Paul Melton, the hard-charging Abilene sportsman who now serves as the chairman of the RPQRR advisory committee. Melton learned that the former W.T. Martin Ranch, straddling Highway 180 west of Roby in Fisher County, was about to come onto the market. It was 4,700 acres of classic West Texas quail country, it had a healthy population of birds, and the differences in vegetation between its various pastures made it ideal for testing and comparing management techniques.

It was, in short, a plum. With the Virginia-based Conservation Fund kicking in the cash, the Martin Ranch was purchased in October 2006, and in March 2007 the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch was incorporated as a nonprofit entity under section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code. A five-person board of directors oversees its operations, and having met the board’s chairman, Rick Snipes (whose ranch near Aspermont is a showplace), I can attest that these are the kind of smart, successful, high-powered guys who keep a sharp eye on the bottom line and for whom failure is not an option.

“My vision for the ranch,” Snipes said, “is a living laboratory that serves as not only a testing ground for different theories concerning the preservation of wild bobwhite quail but also a ‘best practices’ demonstration area that landowners, hunters and interested parties of every stripe can visit and use as a learning center. Ultimately, our goal is to stem the decline of the bird farther east in the counties nearer Dallas-Fort Worth, and we’re initiating several research projects with cooperators

‘off site’ that we hope will bear fruit in this regard.”

Serendipitously, at about the same time that the RPQRR was getting its legs under it, the recently formed Park Cities (Dallas area) chapter of Quail Unlimited was casting for a project to throw its considerable fundraising weight behind. As reported here in July/August 2008 (Game & Gun Gazette, “A Boone for Texas Quail”), the Park Cities banquet in March ’08 broke all QU records and resulted in the presentation of a check for \$550,000 to the quail ranch. That came on the heels of a cool \$1 million donated to the ranch’s endowment fund by legendary Fort Worth oilman and lifelong quail hunter W.A. “Tex” Moncrief Jr.

It’s nothing new for Texans to rally behind a cause, of course (the events of 1836 in San Antonio come to mind), and when it comes to securing the future of the bobwhite quail—the most iconic, charismatic and beloved of Texas’ gamebirds—they’ll put their money where their mouths are every time.

Touring the ranch in Rollins’ tricked-out buggy—“The pride of the A&M fleet,” he quips—I get what amounts to a short course in the ecology and management of West Texas quail. Rollins stresses the importance of “usable space”—areas where quail can find everything they need to survive 365 days a year—and explains that when the density of potential nest sites exceeds the critical threshold of 300 per acre, nest predation drops dramatically.

“When it comes to nest predation,” he said, “the best offense is a good defense. The more places a bobwhite *can* nest, the harder it is for predators to *find* that nest.”

He shows me areas where they’re removing mesquite to open up portions of the ranch that are too brushy and other areas lacking overhead cover where they’ve planted sorghum alum, a tall-growing annual, in order to provide more “vertical structure.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge, according to Rollins—and this becomes pretty obvious once you know what to look for—is controlling prickly pear cactus. A certain amount of “pear” is beneficial to quail, but left unchecked it forms a spiky carpet that crowds out more desirable vegetation. In addition—and here it’s worth remembering that the ranch exists to perpetuate the heritage of quail *hunting*, not merely to keep the bird on the landscape—a dog facing a jungle of pear sees a sign scrawled in blood that reads “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

Prescribed burning, Rollins says, is an effective tool for suppressing pear, and in an attempt to demonstrate that burning can complement grazing—a key selling point for ranchers—they’re studying the response of cattle to small “patch burns.” Approaching a cluster of black Angus, he points out one wearing a tan collar.

“That’s a GPS transmitter,” he said. “It enables us to follow and plot the cattle’s movements over time. From what we’ve seen so far, they show a definite preference for the burned areas.” Rollins adds that because reducing prickly pear promotes broomweed, western ragweed and a host of other quail-friendly plants, it’s truly a win-win situation.

Throughout our tour, Rollins deploys his ever-present quartet of “research assistants,” hoping to show me the tangible proof of this massive investment of financial, intellectual and emotional capital. He’ll stop, say, “I need a volunteer,” and one or more will clamber down from their perch on the buggy’s upper seat to take a turn afield. The names of these assistants, who have four legs, silky white-and-orange coats and gaily feathered tails, are Annie, Deuce, Babe and Ellie. Scenting conditions are abysmal, and it’s at best an average year for quail—but the setters shine.

I lose track of the number of coveys they point, although it’s certainly closer to 20 than 15. With the director’s blessing, I even unlimber my Grulla 28 and, keeping my wits about me during the beautiful chaos, scratch down a few birds. (Other than a couple of youth hunts and the occasional hunt for PR purposes, the ranch is closed to hunting.) At age 11, Annie is the matriarch and designated retriever, and whenever she delivers a bird to Rollins, he says, “Gonna miss you someday, baby.” Most of the birds I shoot are banded and one is radio-tagged; all are weighed, aged, sexed and have their band information recorded before they’re cleaned and packaged.

At RPQRR nothing is wasted—and nothing is taken for granted.

That night, sitting in the living room of the modest but comfortable ranch headquarters after a dinner of brisket, beans and cornbread, Rollins, as usual, is talking quail. He’s worried that Texas wintergrass, a native plant but one that “chokes out” the more desirable bluestems and bunchgrasses, may be spreading in response to global warming; he’s concerned that feral hogs, which are incredibly destructive nest predators, are becoming more numerous. The possibility of West

Nile virus, avian influenza or some other disease becoming endemic in the quail population has him on edge, too.

“I’ve heard it said that reversing the decline of the bobwhite quail is the greatest conservation challenge ever faced in North America,” he says. “We’ve seen duck numbers rebound, we’ve seen wild turkeys go through the roof, we’ve seen white-tailed deer and Canada geese become nuisances—and yet bobwhite quail remain one of our greatest enigmas.”

He pauses for a moment, then reflects: “Sometimes quail seem as tough as barbed wire; other times they seem as fragile as wet tissue paper. But the establishment of the quail ranch has given us the keys to the kingdom. Now it’s up to us.”

Author’s Note: For more information on the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, including the latest news, a synopsis of current projects and a calendar of events including field days and other “open house” opportunities, visit www.quailresearch.org. Donations are welcome, and all donors receive a copy of the annual report. Private tours are available by appointment; for arrangements contact Dr. Dale Rollins at d-rollins@tamu.edu.