

The bobwhite quail has long thrived in West Texas; below, Dale Rollins, whose research cites parasites as a possible factor in the birds' decline.

Texas Hunters Hope to Save the Quail

By ANN ZIMMERMAN

Wild bobwhite quail are disappearing from West Texas, one of the last places in the U.S. where until recently they thrived, raising concerns about the future of the state's traditional quail hunt.

The ranchlands of Texas' northwestern plains have long been considered one of the bird's last bastions. But when an uptick in rain during the spring and summer of 2010 didn't result as expected in many more birds than the year before, hunters began to fear that more than drought was harming the birds.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's 2010 quail survey backed up the hunters' anecdotal reports. It found eight quail per area measured, far below the longtime mean of 21. In 2011, the survey showed 5.3 birds per area measured.

Some hunters recently asked the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission to shorten the 2012 hunting season and reduce the 15-bird daily limit. The commission said it will make a decision in August, a few months before the three-month hunting season for quail opens in November.

Meanwhile, some of the state's richest businessmen, including oil and gas entrepreneur T. Boone Pickens, are raising money to try to save the quail. A group called Park Cities Quail held a \$300-a-plate dinner last week, attended by 1,000 hunters. An auction for a quail-hunting trip to England with rock legend Steve Winwood drew a top bid of \$145,000.

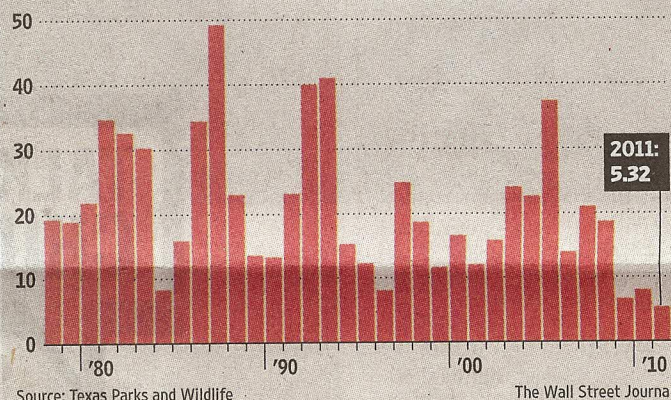
While the sport had an unflattering episode when then-Vice President Dick Cheney accidentally shot a Texas lawyer in the face in 2006 in South Texas, quail hunting occupies a cherished place in the state's outdoor culture. Texans wax poetic when they describe how hunting parties set



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Troubled Coveys

The average number of Rolling Plains Bobwhite quail per area measured in the Rolling Plains region of West Texas.



Source: Texas Parks and Wildlife

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out in midmorning with their hunting dogs, who romp a half mile ahead. When the dogs come upon a covey of quail—about 12 to 20 birds—they wait until their owners arrive, then, when signaled, flush out the birds, who take to the sky in all directions. Quail hunters can travel 1,000 acres a day.

"Quail hunting is a mystical, magical thing, and we all want our children to be able to experience it and not have to look at it in oil paintings," said Joe Crafton, a Dallas marketing executive who founded Park Cities Quail five years ago.

The group has bankrolled the Rolling Hills Quail Research

Ranch, a 47,000-acre spread an hour west of Abilene. Last month, researchers there found that the levels of parasitic worms in the eyes and intestines of West Texas bobwhite quail were three times as high as 50 years ago.

"When you have as many enemies as a quail has, something that interferes with its vision could make them more susceptible to predators," said Dale Rollins, a biologist who serves as the center's director. He cautioned the findings are preliminary, but researchers are now hoping to develop a medicated seed that would help the quail fight off the worms.

Bobwhite quail—ground-nesting birds less than a foot long, with a host of predators—have been declining for decades in the 25 states where they are indigenous.

Their population dropped 82% nationally since 1967 to roughly five million in 2007, a steeper slide than for any other common bird, according to the National Audubon Society.

Scientists have cited large-scale farming and suburban sprawl as the main culprits—though that isn't the case in the rolling expanses of West Texas—saying they have wiped out swaths of weed-choked terrain where the small, plump birds forage, breed and hide from their enemies.

Larry Hill, a retired aircraft mechanic in Krum, north of Dallas, has worked as a hunting guide and dog trainer in West Texas for the past nine years.

When he started, he said, he accompanied as many as 100 hunters a season. This year, he didn't have a single customer. He is considering giving away his 16 bird dogs, because he can't afford to feed them much longer.

"The quail is a type of dinosaur," he said. "It may be leaving for good."