

Talk of the South

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YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO SOUTHERN CULTURE



Conservation



by PHIL BOURLAIN

The Quail Doctor

One man's mission to
restore Texas quail populations
before it's too late

Bird Man

Dale Rollins and his
dogs survey the
Rolling Plains Quail
Research Ranch

“I NEED A VOLUNTEER,” SAYS DALE ROLLINS TO the four English setters—Deuce, Annie, Babe, and Ellie—lined up on the top seat of his dune buggy. Two of them bail out, over my seat and onto the ground. The other two are content to sit and watch the brace of white dogs running ahead of the buggy, noses cocked for the slightest whiff of a covey.

And there will be plenty of coveys. The 4,700 acres of Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch (RPQRR) near Roby, Texas, are loaded with birds. The problem these days is that the rest of Texas isn't. In fact, many areas of the state have experienced some of the worst quail seasons on record in recent years. While the rolling plains of northwest Texas remain one of the bobwhite's last, best refuges, even there, quail populations are declining an estimated 3 percent a year. With the RPQRR as his bastion, Rollins, who grew up a quail hunter in southwestern Oklahoma, has drawn his line in the Texas clay.

Rollins, fifty-five, setter whisperer, quail hunter, and Texas A&M Extension Wildlife Specialist, serves as director of RPQRR, which was created in 2007. The ranch vision statement reads: “To sustain Texas' wild quail hunting heritage for this and future generations.” To that end, the RPQRR serves multiple roles: It's an outdoor lab and demonstration farm, showing landowners how to manage property for quail, and it's home to Rollins's Bobwhite Brigade youth camps.

Studying quail ecology is the year-round work of the RPQRR. Birds on the ranch are live trapped, weighed, aged, sexed, and banded. They are counted by helicopter, by bird dog survey, and by whistling counts. Reptiles, predators, insects, cover, and food crops all receive scrutiny from Rollins's crew of assistants and grad students.

Habitat work is ongoing, but the ranch already supports an excellent population density of one quail per acre. One surprising focus is prickly pear cactus control. Small “patch burns” of cover on the ranch attract the RPQRR's mini-herd of radio-collared cattle to graze the fresh shoots, preventing prickly pear growth. Rollins explains that cacti are beneficial for quail, but the spines hurt dog feet. A ranch without much cactus is easier to hunt, and in Texas, quail survival depends on hunters willing to pay four- to-seven-dollars-an-acre lease fees to keep land in

bird cover instead of in cattle or cotton production.

The ranch also serves as the new home of the Bobwhite Brigade summer camps Rollins founded in 1993. Since then, six hundred teens have gone through the quail biology camps. Campers begin the week by dissecting a quail as Lynyrd Skynyrd's “Free Bird” plays in the background. Rollins, a classic-rock fan, explains: “The song goes, ‘And this bird you cannot change.’ I tell them, we can't change the bird, so we have to change the habitat to suit it.” They

spend the rest of the session learning what quail need to survive.

Rollins says that only about 5 percent of the campers go on to careers in wildlife, but inspiring the next generation of biologists isn't the main point of the camp: “It's our goal to produce leaders conversant in conservation. We celebrate those of our ‘coveys’ who go on to become lawyers, teachers, CEOs, and soccer moms. One federal judge or senator with an appreciation for wildlife is better than a dog box full of biologists in the big picture.”

Not many people get to hunt the RPQRR—just Bobwhite Brigade campers, donors, and the occasional lucky journalist. Coming from the northern edge of bobwhite range, where five coveys is a huge day, I was in awe. On a brief afternoon hunt the day I arrived, we moved six or eight coveys. Hunting from morning to dusk the next day, we had a genuine twenty-five-covey day; the last morning, we found eight coveys in one hour before I had to leave. In between covey rises, Rollins showed me good West Texas quail habitat: clumps of brush at softball-throw intervals, and the occasional larger lotebush—easily bigger than the buggy—where birds can spend the night in safety.

At eleven, Annie is the oldest of Rollins's dogs, and the retrieving specialist. Every time she brought Rollins a quail, he told her: “I'll miss you someday.” As he surveys the ranch, Rollins understands the task ahead is not an easy one. “It worries me that we have had few successes in restoring quail abundance once it has blinked out, as it has in east Texas. Populations are slipping here in West Texas also, and it's on my watch,” he says. “The quail are here, but we need to stop the bleeding and start pushing these populations eastward.”

► For more information on the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, go to quailresearch.org.



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