


Ecology and
Management
of the
Bobwhite
in
ALABAMA

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By **STAN STEWART**
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Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries



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Foreword

Wildlife conservationist Aldo Leopold said “a thicket without the potential roar of a quail covey is only a thorny place.”²⁶ He viewed a land without quail as somehow incomplete and missing a valuable element of life. Only a quail hunter could make such a lament. Many of us long to again experience the rise of a favorite covey in front of a white statue of sinew and steel. But, the old haunts have changed, replaced by the disputable marks of “progress.” In days past quail just happened. We didn’t give much thought to why they were there. We just expected them to be there, like the sun coming up. Those days are gone.

Associated with quiet countrysides, patch farms, idle fields and open woodlands, the bobwhite earned the reputation of the gentleman’s game bird. Today’s southern landscape is vastly different from the one that fostered our quail hunting tradition. Perhaps only the dedicated old-time quail hunters know how drastically quail hunting has changed. Because the younger generation does not really understand the stark changes in quail abundance, it does not have the passionate sense of loss that fosters a desire for restoration. It is a painful irony that this bird, once so benefited by man’s actions, is now so displaced by man’s actions.

The bobwhite’s future is bright in one sense. We no longer have to depend on quail just happening. We can make them happen. In recent years managers and researchers have re-visited sound bobwhite biology and have made new discoveries about bobwhite behavior, ecology and management. Individuals who are applying this knowledge are currently experiencing unprecedented bobwhite management successes and population highs. The message is clear. Quail do not have to be just a part of the past. They respond to management. Supply the birds a favorable environment and they usually increase rapidly.

It is not foreseeable that bobwhites will again be inadvertently abundant. For populations to increase, all who are concerned about the bobwhite, including wildlife agencies, wildlife managers, landowners, advocacy organizations and hunters must learn to think differently about the occurrence of bobwhites in contemporary landscapes. We must become more precisely knowledgeable of their requirements. We must look for innovative ways to include quail habitat in land uses. We must be proactive and cooperative, concentrating on proven methods, both old and new.

At the Fourth National Quail Symposium, long time bob-

white researcher John L. Roseberry, speaking from the heart of quail plantation country where the bobwhite is still supreme, said “We have sufficient knowledge and skill to produce locally abundant quail populations. To be a viable game species, however, [quail] must be reasonably abundant over relatively large portions of the landscape.”³⁵ Identifying opportunities to incorporate reasonable amounts of quail habitat across landscapes and into major land uses is today’s challenge.

The Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI), prepared by the Southeast Quail Study Group at the request of the Directors of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, was released in 2002. NBCI is essentially a rangewide bobwhite recovery plan that quantifies the habitat additions needed in agricultural, pasture and forest landscapes to restore bobwhite populations to 1980 levels, when they were still reasonably abundant over much of the landscape. In Alabama at that time, bobwhite populations were declining at a rate of only 2 percent annually. From the mid 1980s to mid 1990s the quail loss accelerated to a 9 percent per year average annual rate of decline. The landscape conditions that prevailed in 1980 were clearly more suitable to bobwhites than current landscapes.

As a direct result of the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, the United States Department of Agriculture in 2004 announced, by no less a spokesman than the President himself, a far-reaching Northern Bobwhite Quail Habitat Initiative within the Conservation Reserve Program. The implications for quail restoration are enormous because CRP is such a popular and well-funded program of national scope. The initiative is designed so that any landowner with active cropland who wants more quail back on the farm now has the financial resources available through CRP to install productive quail habitat along the borders of farm fields. Participants who meet basic CRP eligibility rules and who apply for CRP conservation practice CP33, Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds, are automatically approved for enrollment. Enrollment provides financial assistance to install the practice and annual rental payments for at least ten years to maintain the practice. It also includes a very attractive up-front bonus payment for electing to enroll farm land in this practice with high conservation value. The future for quail is indeed bright if conservation initiatives such as this are implemented on the landscape.

Stan Stewart

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Stan Stewart

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