



BILLY POPE

# Modern-day Quail Hunting

*Hunting pen-raised birds is now the norm in Alabama, and there is a range of opportunities to do so, from high-end to basic.*

Most Baby Boomers who love the outdoors will remember the heyday of hunting bobwhite quail in Alabama, when a group of hunters with quality bird dogs might flush a dozen or more coveys in one day.

Unfortunately, that type of wild bird hunting started to fade in the mid-1980s and the slide continued at a rapid pace. Those used to hearing the male's distinctive mating whistle in the spring and summer, long to hear that *bobwhite* again.

Efforts have been underway on numerous fronts to try to revitalize the wild population, but progress has been painfully slow.

For now, bird hunters must rely on pen-raised birds for any consistent action. In Alabama that means a wide variety of choices from a bare-bones hunt with birds, dogs and a guide furnished on a relatively small tract of land, to a five-star experience in a horse-drawn wagon, world-class bird dogs and a full-time chef waiting back at the elegant lodge.

## MOST HUNT PEN-RAISED BIRDS

Rex Clark, 55, and wife, Jacque, run High Log Creek Farm and Hunting Preserve near Hatchechubee, Ala. It's the Clarks' intention to serve up old-fashioned quail hunting with horse-drawn wagons and a kennel full of champion bird dogs. When the hunting is finished, the Southern hospitality spills into a luxurious lodge with a gourmet chef.

"We've been doing this for 12 years," said Rex, who is also a cattle rancher. "I've quail-hunted all my life. And quail hunting in Alabama has almost become a thing of the past. There are very few wild birds left.

"I still run a plantation, too, where they're hunting wild birds. There are several places around still hunting wild birds, but not many."

Like most outdoorsmen of his era, Rex remembers well when Alabama had an abundance of wild bobwhites, especially in central Alabama, where Union Springs is known for its bird dog field trials.

"We were still hunting wild birds in the late 70s and early 80s," he said. "We still had a lot of birds back then in Alabama, north Georgia and Tennessee. Then everything got privatized, and public land bird hunting became non-existent."

There have been many theories as to the decline of the wild bobwhite – increased predation from coyotes, a species that was scarce in Alabama until the late 60s; infestations of fire ants that came through the Port of Mobile; but the most often cited reason is the change in land-use practices with very few small farms and fewer and fewer pea patches and fence rows for habitat.

"If I knew what happened to them, I'd be a rich man," Clark said. "And I'd get them to come back. That's the only thing anybody knows for sure. Everybody has their ideas and suggestions, but I don't think anybody has a definite answer."

On the tracts that he manages for wild birds, Clark focuses on habitat improvement.

"I tried everything in the last eight

or nine years,” he said. “I don’t know yet what has been the most successful. They’ve been on a downhill slide for the last eight or 10 years. This year seems to be a little better.”

For those places intensively managed for wild bobwhite populations, Clark said a good day is for hunters to experience three to five covey rises per day.

“But the bulk of Alabama quail hunting is commercial-hunting operations now,” he said. “That’s pen-raised birds. It ranges from put-and-take to early-release birds. It’s all geared toward commercial operations. You’ve got some people who are putting birds out on their own place, but it gets horrendously expensive.”

## QUALITY AFFECTS HUNTING

Clark said the quality of the pen-raised birds can affect the quality of the hunt as well.

“Birds are \$4 a pop and are probably going higher because there’s a shortage,” he said. “The kind of hunt you have depends on quality of the birds. People are having to use some kind of little dog to flush the inferior birds. The better birds, you can’t tell the difference between them and wild birds.

“It’s the quality of the breeders, the quality of the supplier, the quality of the birds and how they are fed and taken care of. You start with a bird that’s been flying for generations, if you feed him properly, he’ll fly. It’ll get up like a wild bird. If he’s properly taken care of, that pen-raised bird can put on a show. I mean that pen-raised bird came from a wild bird at some point in time. If the genetics are right, he can fly just as hard and fast as a wild bird.”

Clark said he’s not about to divulge his technique for providing customers with the most realistic bird hunts possible in this era.

“I don’t think I can discuss that,” he said. “That’s why I’ve got the business I’ve got. That’s why I’m a 100-percent full. I’ve got people following me around, trying to figure out what I’m doing. Even the boys working for me haven’t figured it out, and some of them have been here seven or eight years.”

High Log Creek hunts birds on more

than 4,000 acres, which gives the operation plenty of options for the hunts.

“Some of the operations are hunting on 50-60 acres, but they don’t charge what I do,” Clark said. “You can go bird hunting for \$250 if you want to, but I’m \$3,800 a day. There may be somebody else in Alabama still using mules and horses, but I’m not sure about that. Most are using golf carts and four-wheelers. They’re not trying to do it the old way, and they’re not covering as much ground.

“Some places are two hunters, one guide with his own dog with a 50 to 60 acres. And there’s nothing wrong with that. The business has got room for everybody. It’s just that nobody wants the massive overhead and massive outlay that I’ve got. We hunt one party at a time, but we keep 40 dogs and between 35 and 40 horses.”

Despite the expense of keeping up such a big operation, Clark said it still is cheaper than trying to hunt wild birds.


“The outlay on money per wild-bird kill is horrendous,” he said. “I know some plantations where I could live on what they’re paying for three wild birds a year. If I hadn’t been in the farming business, there is no way I would think of opening a bird operation like this with a chef, full lodge and six employees. But I’m not complaining much. We’ve been full for most of the last 11 years. We felt a little pinch in 2008, but it didn’t last long.”

## LOWER COST HUNTING

While High Log Creek encompasses the full plantation experience, Circle B Quail Farm in Baldwin County focuses on the quail aspect. A member of the Alabama Quail Trail, Circle B is a day-hunt operation that offers a variety of opportunities for pen-raised quail on the 500 acres that have been in one family for more than two centuries.

“The property has been in our family since 1792,” said Col. Tiger Smith, (Air Force, ret.). “My great, great, great uncle got leave from General Washington’s Continental Army and rode down with his family after the American Revolution and staked it off from the Joshua Tract. And it’s been in the family ever since.”

Kenny Bryant runs the quail operation, while Smith concentrates on property management and habitat enhancement for the quail operation.

“We put out 20 birds per gun,” Bryant said. “We can’t guarantee you’re going to kill that many, but we’ll guarantee you’ll see that many. The price is \$200 per gun, up to four guns. The minimum is two guns per hunt. That includes cleaning the birds and packing them on ice. We’ve got good dogs and guides. We do it all. All you have to do is show up with your shotgun and shells.” 



## Quail Hunting in Alabama

Quail hunts with pen-raised birds are traditionally available in Alabama from Oct. 1 through March 31 each year.

**The Alabama Quail Trail** ([www.alabamaquailtrail.com](http://www.alabamaquailtrail.com)) is a statewide organization set up to promote research about the decline in wild quail populations, as well as provide landowners with information on how to improve habitat for quail and other ground-nesting birds. Alabama Quail Trail hunting preserves are scattered throughout Alabama.

**Alabama Black Belt Adventures** also promotes a variety of hunting opportunities, including quail. Visit [www.alabamablackbeltadventures.org](http://www.alabamablackbeltadventures.org) for a list of outfitters and lodges available for quail hunting.

**High Log Creek Farm and Hunting Preserve**  
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