

Quail Numbers Reflect Shrinking Habitat State, federal officials teaming to reverse trend



By Bruce Ritchie
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Ed Hart of Williamston, Mich., scanned the open pine forest in northern Leon County, then spotted the bird dog amid some underbrush.

The dog was crouched in front with its back arched high and its tail sticking straight up – the posture of a bird dog that's spotted game.

As Hart approached, a small flock of bobwhite quail from the underbrush with startling suddenness. But the dog remained in place until Hart grabbed his collar and guided him back to an all-terrain vehicle.

Hart and Sheila Cassidy, of Malvern, Pa., travel the country training dogs for hunting and competitions. They said they look forward to returning to the Red Hills region north of Tallahassee because it has ideal conditions for finding quail.

"It's a national treasure you have right here," Hart said.

Scientists say that although quail are well preserved in the Red Hills, there is a reason to be concerned about the future of the species. Their population has declined throughout their range by at least 65 percent in the last 20 years, according to the Southeastern Quail Study Group.

To reverse the trend in Florida, state and federal officials say they're joining together to restore quail habitat on public lands. Scientists at Tall Timbers Research Station north of Tallahassee are playing a key role in the effort.

Forests in decline

Scientists say quail numbers are declining because the pine forests and fields on which they depend either have been developed or haven't been managed for quail and other wildlife.

The birds need forests and fields with plenty of grasses that produce seeds for food, said Bill Palmer, director of the Game Bird Program at Tall Timbers.

The quail also need underbrush to protect them from predators including hawks, foxes, bobcats and snakes.

Some of the thick pine forests need to be thinned so that sunlight can reach the forest floor, allowing the grasses to grow, Palmer said.

By setting fires every year or two, landowners can clear out the small hardwood trees and bushes that compete with the grasses and other beneficial plants, Palmer said.

Improving forests for quail also helps other rare wildlife and plant species, said Nick Wiley, director of the Division of Hunting and Game Management for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Some of those species include wild turkeys, gopher tortoises, indigo



snakes, fox squirrels, Bachman's sparrows, wiregrass, wild ginger and orchids, Wiley said.

Managing land for quail "has enormous potential to add ecological value to our public lands," Wiley said.

A bird in hand

The morning sun cast golden rays through the pine forest at Pebble Hill Plantation south of Thomasville, Ga.

Andy Rush, a game-bird lab techni-

cian at Tall Timbers, held a bobwhite quail and began counting down from five before letting the quail go.

But before Rush could say "four," there was a flash of feathers and a thunderous beating of wings. The bird soared through the forest and glided to a landing out of sight.

Rush will be back again to locate the bird as part of Tall Timbers' research.

The quail was outfitted with a radio transmitter that is about the size of a nickel and has a thin, flexible antenna.

The researchers will track the movement of the bird to determine its movements and its fate. They can use that information to advise landowners on how they can help produce more quail on their land.

Researchers learned that between 60 and 90 percent of the birds will die each year, with most eaten by predators. Hunters are responsible for less than 10 percent of the annual losses on lands that are hunted, Palmer said.

In areas where the habitat quality is poor, quail are particularly vulnerable to being wiped out. Hurricanes, droughts and predators can disrupt reproduction of the remaining flocks.

Quail also can produce two or three clutches of eggs per year, with 12 to 20 eggs per clutch. That's enough to make up for the annual population losses, Palmer said.

So having a good combination of grasses, weeds and shrubs helps the

and state and federal agencies met in Tallahassee on Nov. 14 to launch their joint effort to boost quail populations. They agreed to tap the Tall Timbers Research Station to coordinate the effort.

Dick Corbett of Monticello, a member of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, said the Red Hills region serves as a model for the rest of Florida.

"The marvelous thing is that we have Tall Timbers and the Red Hills," Corbett said. "The habitat in the Red Hills is the ideal habitat."

Back on the farm

Off Centerville Road in northern Leon County, Hart and Cassidy were finished training a pair of dogs owned by Jon Kohler. But 18 other dogs owned by the couple were wagging their tails, eager to go for a run.



There were no guns, so no birds were shot that day. But some – not a lot – will be killed during the hunting season, Kohler says.

Charles Harvey, a retired surgeon who also had some dogs along for the training, said he enjoyed it when he used to own a plantation in Jefferson County. He managed it for quail – thinning the forest, burning and planting food plots.

"I think you enjoy working for the birds as much as you do when you actually get them," Harvey said. "It's a real challenge."

In the Red Hills, landowners have access to thousands of acres to enjoy quail hunting with their families and friends, said Corbett, who manages a 16,000-acre plantation with his wife near Monticello.

Corbett said he also wants to provide the public with a place to hunt quail on some of Florida's 5 million acres of conservation lands.

But first the state must work to save quail by restoring habitat before the remaining populations are snuffed out.

"If we don't do something in state government it will be gone," he said. "This is our last opportunity."

birds rebound each year, he said.

Quail and quail hunting have played an important role in Southern culture in the past, Palmer said, and they still can in the future.

"Hearing a bobwhite and flushing a covey – the bobwhite whistle in the spring time – most people know what a bobwhite quail is," he said.

Elected officials, researchers and representatives of conservation groups