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## CKWRI Quail eNews

News from the Richard M. Kleberg, Jr. Center for Quail Research at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute

**Richard M. Kleberg, Jr. Center for Quail Research**

**Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute**

**CKWRI Quail eNews - January/February 2012**

Happy New Year! Please note that beginning in January 2012, Quail eNews will be changing its circulation from monthly to every other month.

In this special issue, Dr. Leonard Brennan and Dr. Fidel Hernández discuss the concerns over suggested changes in hunting seasons, bag limits, and more. Included is a special note from Dr. Fred Bryant, Director of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute.

Over the past 30 years, we have chosen to let our science and data speak and let policy-makers choose to use it or not. This has served us well. Over the years, we have gained a measure of respect for our rule of "let the data speak". But on this issue, many supporters out there have asked us "what do you think?" Lenny and Fidel have done their best to mix in good data with an opinion about a potentially looming decision. While they do not profess to know what has happened to quail in north Texas, they have an opinion about how fragmented landscapes may affect quail. But we believe we have a good idea about quail in south Texas. We only propose here to offer a well-formed opinion and hope others will see its merit. No-one is more passionate about a wildlife species than quail hunters and quail enthusiasts--and I mean **no-one**. That landowners and quail hunters down here voluntarily stop hunting to save the breeding stock is the final measure of caring and of stewardship. Nothing speaks louder than that, not even scientific data.

---Fred C. Bryant, Director of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute

### **QUAIL HUNTING SEASONS, BAG LIMITS, DROUGHT, AND HABITAT IN TEXAS**

Leonard A. Brennan

***Providing the science  
behind quail  
conservation and  
management.***

**January/February 2012**

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*"The first game law ever adopted by the Texas Legislature occurred in 1861. The purpose of the law was to close the bobwhite quail season on Galveston Island for two years to allow the quail population to recover. This law....did not work. Sick quail populations reflect sick landscapes and not the impact of unruly, overzealous hunters and poachers. Some quail populations have declined and disappeared where no hunting was conducted. Despite this fact, many have tried to repair quail populations with regulations. All such attempts have failed."*

—Jerry L. Cooke, Quail Regulations and the Rule-Making Process in Texas, in *Texas Quails: Ecology and Management*, Texas A&M University Press, pp. 304 and 300.

*Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*

—George Santayana

Of the two remaining stronghold regions for quails (bobwhites and scaled quails) in Texas, the Rolling Plains has not had a quality quail hunting season (if any quail season for that matter except in theory) during the past three years (2009 -2010 through 2011-2012), and South Texas has not had a quality quail hunting season during two of the past three years (2009-2010 and 2011-2012). For South Texas, we recorded juvenile:adult age ratios lower than 1:1 during those years. The problem, as we see it, is that an extreme and persistent La Niña oscillation in the Pacific Ocean has been the driver behind historic drought and excess heat during much of this period. The La Niña oscillation broke down a bit in late 2009, and we received some well-deserved rain in 2010. In South Texas, bobwhites responded quite well to this influx of rainfall, and the 2010-2011 quail season was very good. We recorded juvenile:adult age ratios as high as 5:1 in many areas.

Quails in the Rolling Plains also responded to the 2010 rainfall pulse; their numbers increased by 20% from 2009 based on Texas Parks and Wildlife Department roadside count data. However, quail numbers in 2009 were historically low and even with this increase, the 2010-2011 quail season in the Rolling Plains was lousy and quail hunters were extremely disappointed. Hunters were left scratching their heads as to why the 2010-2011 quail season in the Rolling Plains was so terrible, when in fact it was simply unrealistic to expect that quail numbers could triple or quadruple in one year.

Since then, that witch—La Niña—has come roaring back and in her wake, more drought and heat. The result was virtually no quail production in either the Rolling Plains or South Texas during the 2011 nesting season.

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The result of such extended drought and excess heat is that under such conditions, quail production essentially goes to zero no matter how much good habitat and usable space is available. We have a 10-year data set that shows more than 90% of the variation in annual production of bobwhites in South Texas is explained by cumulative rainfall from April through August. In semiarid, subtropical environments such as South Texas, adequate rainfall is the key driver of quail populations, so long as ample habitat and usable space for quail is kept on the landscape.

The current plight of quails in Texas has caused many people, including those who wield great influence over public opinion, to call for cutting back quail seasons in Texas by either shortening the season, reducing the bag limits, or both. While these opinions are well intentioned, it is our opinion that shortening the season or reducing bag limits will do nothing to solve the plight of quails in Texas. It is impossible to repair quail populations with regulations. It has been tried numerous times. It has failed every time it has been tried.

### **Sending a Message**

One of the rationales for shortening the season and/or reducing bag limits for quail in Texas is that many people think Texas Parks and Wildlife needs to “send a message”. Presumably, the people who are calling for these additional limits think this message is: “*Quail numbers are so low that you should stop hunting them or drastically reduce the extent to which you hunt them.*” However, at least in South Texas, quail managers and hunters already know and heed this message. They have self-regulated their quail hunting accordingly. For example, during the 2009-2010 and 2011-2012 quail hunting seasons, there has been virtually no quail hunting in South Texas. It has been difficult to impossible for us to get even a sufficient number of wing samples from our Quail Associates Program to estimate juvenile-adult age ratios!

Unfortunately, the idea of “sending a message” about hunting seasons and the plight of quail has a high likelihood of backfiring. This is because a huge proportion of the public will perceive this message in a way that somehow makes them think *quail hunting has been responsible for the low numbers of quail.* In our view, this is would be a grave mistake. Too much quail hunting pressure is not the cause of the dire situation for quail in Texas. Nevertheless, this is how many, many people in the general public will perceive such a message. And perception often becomes reality, whether we like it or not.

### **North versus South**

Much has been said and written about the failure of quails in the Rolling Plains to respond to the pulse of rainfall in 2010, in contrast to the fact that the birds in South Texas did respond quite well. We think that the role of habitat is as important, and perhaps even more important, than any other factor that may be limiting quail numbers in the Rolling Plains.

Although the actual landscape metrics have yet to be quantified, quail habitat in the Rolling Plains is likely far more fragmented than it is in South Texas. One can come to this conclusion simply by driving around these two regions of Texas. In the Rolling Plains, much of the remaining quail habitat

sits as fragments in a broader matrix of dry-land cotton and other sterile—for quail anyway—agricultural fields. When historic drought hits such a landscape and devastates quail numbers to the point where there are local extinctions, it is extremely difficult for the birds to recolonize vacant patches of habitat when conditions again become favorable. Expecting a rapid recolonization by quail in such a landscape in only one year is probably unrealistic.

The quail habitat situation in South Texas is considerably different from the Rolling Plains. Most importantly, there is no cotton farming or other production agriculture operating in the heart of South Texas quail country. This simple phenomenon has probably been a saving grace of quails in South Texas. Thus, the vast majority of land throughout places like Kenedy, Brooks, Jim Hogg, and other counties is still dominated by native rangeland (even though invasive, exotic grasses loom as an emerging problem, there is still a critical mass of quail habitat in South Texas that is unequalled anywhere else in the U.S.). During the 2009 drought, bobwhite populations were significantly reduced over vast regions of the South Texas landscape. It was quite odd and in fact unsettling, to drive around for 2-3 hours at a time, through excellent habitat and see essentially no bobwhites. During the 2010-2011 hunting season, we observed a dramatic recovery of bobwhite numbers. However, during the course of several hunting trips, it was clear there were still large areas of habitat that were not recolonized by the birds after just one year of favorable rainfall.

### **Things are Upside Down**

In a recent article, our colleagues Drs. Chris Williams, Markus Peterson, and Fred Guthery argued that quail management today is “upside down”. By this, they mean that state hunting regulations are imposed on a broad scale and habitat management is implemented on an individual property or pasture scale. Thus, a change in hunting regulations is usually ineffective with respect to sustaining quail numbers at the landscape scale. Self-regulation on the local ranch or pasture scale, which is already being done in many areas, however, can be extremely effective at conserving quail numbers.

An analogous way to think about quail hunters and self regulation is to consider the speed limit on Interstate 10 in West Texas, which is 80 miles an hour. This 80-mile per hour speed limit is the maximum driving speed allowed under *ideal road conditions*. Speeding along I-10 at 80 miles per hour through thick fog would be extremely dangerous, if not fatal. Driving 30 or 40 miles per hour would be more reasonable under such conditions. Self-regulation by quail hunters works the same way as drivers self-regulating their speed—when conditions call for it, they adjust their behavior accordingly.

Changing the quail hunting season by shortening the season length or reducing the bag limit will only perpetuate the upside down nature of quail management. This is because the problem with quails in most of Texas is too little habitat, not too much hunting. When quail numbers are low, quail hunters self-regulate. They do not need any one to tell them that there are too few quail to hunt. They already know this. On the other hand, when quail numbers do recover, having a shortened season and reduced bag will only limit opportunity and punish hunters who have already self-regulated their

efforts during the bad years. This kind of policy also sends a message, albeit a bad one. What it says is: *“Ok quail hunters, your reward for restraint and self-limiting your hunting during bad years will be to impose more restrictive, top-down limits on your hunting during good years.”* Is this any way to reward a constituency for good behavior?

Finally, the solution to the quail problem in Texas lies in creating and restoring habitat in a large-scale, purposeful manner that provides for the annual life history needs of the birds. The scale of habitat needed by bobwhites is much, much larger than we originally thought. For example, a genetic analysis of South Texas bobwhite population structure indicates that dispersal takes place over a radius of more than 30 miles, or across an area of habitat greater than 200,000 acres, which is much larger than we originally thought. This kind of information certainly challenges the long-held belief that bobwhites live and die within about a mile of where they were hatched. It also should make us rethink the scale at which we need to maintain, or restore, habitat to sustain bobwhite populations.

Purposeful management on the appropriate scale provides nesting, brooding, loafing, and escape cover that provide the habitat structure and foods the birds need to survive and reproduce, when it finally rains again. And it will rain. The flipside of purposeful management is cultural management, which is supplemental feeding, predator control, food plots, releasing pen-raised quail, using surrogates etc. These kinds of efforts typically do little to sustain and elevate wild quail populations. Shortening the quail season and/or reducing the bag limit, even if done on a regional scale in Texas, is simply another form of cultural management that will do nothing to recover, sustain, or elevate quail numbers in Texas. It never has. It never will.

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*The mission of the Richard M. Kleberg, Jr. Center for Quail Research is to develop a scientific basis for the sustainable management and harvest of wild quail populations throughout South Texas and elsewhere.*



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