



Will the Boom Last?

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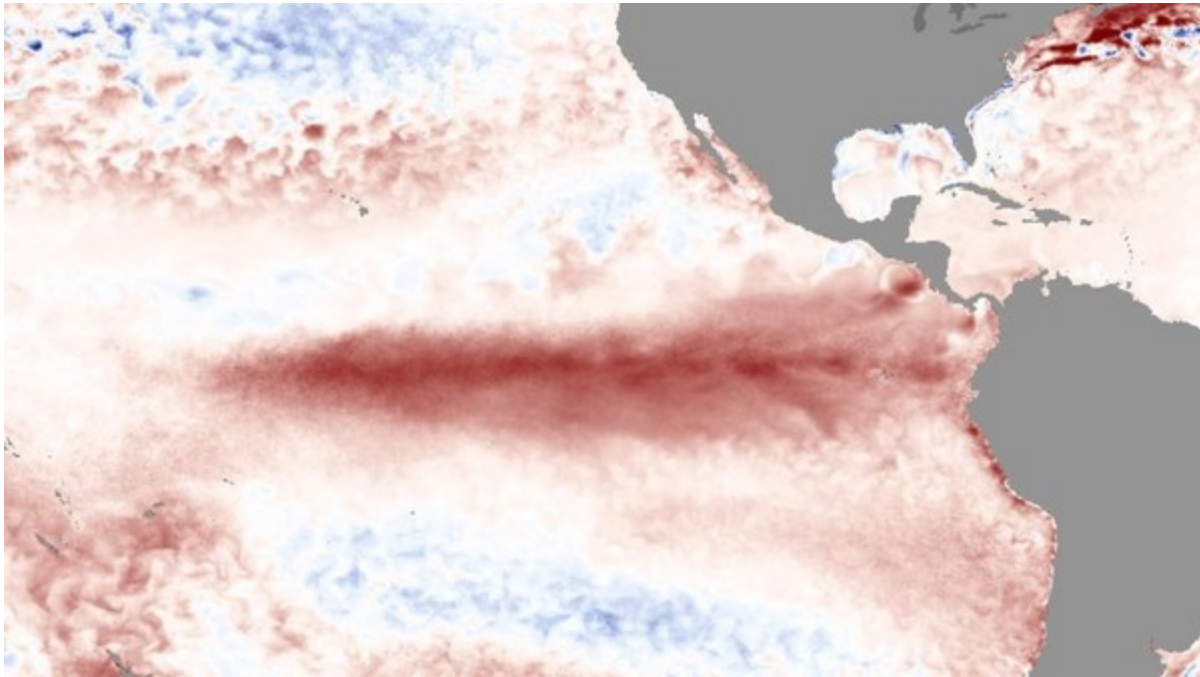
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The 2015-2016 quail hunting season will go down in the books as one of the best-ever on record for South Texas. Ever since the fall (September) of 2013, things could not have been better for bobwhites in South Texas. The fall rains in 2013 jump-started the boom that was driven by excellent nesting success and brood production during the springs of both 2014 and 2015. Reports of 30+ coveys per day were widespread and common this past winter.

The big question I have been getting lately is: Will the boom last? Translation: Will we have another year of great quail hunting in 2016-2017? The answer: It depends. It depends mostly on El Niño.

Earlier I wrote a CKWRI Quail eNews article about how the El Niño and La Niña Southern Oscillations in the Pacific Ocean drive the precipitation patterns that profoundly influence quail populations in South Texas. The warming of the water in the Pacific Ocean during El Niño pushes atmospheric moisture northeasterly up into South Texas. This results in the precipitation that is so critical for quail production during the spring and summer. But El Niño only lasts for a year or two, after which the waters of the Pacific cool into either a neutral phase between El Niño and La Niña, or, if the cooling is extensive enough, a full-blown La Niña occurs. When this happens, we are back into a dry period with little or no quail production.

We are currently in one of the strongest El Niño events on record. Note the extensive warm water over large areas of the Pacific Ocean in the figure below. These warm Pacific waters are responsible for March of 2016 being one of the wettest months on record in South Texas. We are set up for another potentially great quail nesting season in South Texas for spring 2016. What happens next—quail wise—depends on how long the El Niño phase of the southern oscillation cycle hangs on.



Sea-surface temperature anomalies in Feb. 2016. The strong El Niño is shown by the tongue of red warmer-than-average sea-surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. (NOAA)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts that: *“El Niño is forecast to weaken through the spring with conditions in the equatorial Pacific Ocean potentially transitioning to La Niña next fall”*, according to the latest monthly outlook issued by NOAA.

The message here is generally not good for quail in South Texas. We are currently set up for another great quail nesting season in South Texas, but if La Niña comes into play this fall, it may have a negative impact on quail survival this winter because of a lack of precipitation. As much as I hate to say it, we might—and might is the operative word here—be set up for a situation like the one we experienced in 2007-2008.

The 2007-2008 quail season in South Texas was one of the strangest on record. It rained frequently throughout the summer of 2007 and the result was excellent quail production. Then, in September of 2007 it stopped raining, and it pretty much did not rain until July of 2008. The extremely dry winter caused quail to become very difficult to find across many pastures where they were abundant early in the fall. The next edition of this newsletter will discuss some potential factors that seemed to be responsible for quail becoming difficult to find as the 2007-2008 hunting season progressed.

Meanwhile, because of what we know about how the El Niño-La Niña oscillation impacts quail in South Texas, it is important for quail managers to stay abreast of what the forecasters at the National Weather Service are predicting with respect to the potential emergence of La Niña this fall. You can keep abreast of these forecasts by following this link: <https://www.climate.gov/ens>.