



In Pursuit of Wild Quail  
**Texas Style**

Story by Douglas M. Dear  
Photos by Ed Nicholson



One of the horseback outriders retrieves a Texas Bobwhite.

Rusty on point



One of the most complicated, unanswered questions game bird biologists study is why the populations of Northern Bobwhite Quail (*Colinus virginianus*) have so dramatically declined. The Bobwhite, named for its distinctive call, has a habitat range that includes most of the United States, Mexico and even parts of the Caribbean. In days of old, Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia were all considered to be quail-hunting meccas.

The reasons for the decline in the population of quail run the gamut from changes in farming practices and urban sprawl to increases in predators. Many scientists believe that the widespread increase in fescue grass has had a major effect; it is too dense to allow the chicks to pass through its blades and it also crowds out the weeds, which provide seeds that are an important part of the quail's diet. Others say that the decline in the aggressive hunting of the quail's natural predators such as the fox and the federal protection of hawks and eagles have caused the decline. Still others think that pesticides and herbicides are at

the root of the problem. The consensus view is that the Bobwhite is a delicate bird that is affected negatively by many if not all of these issues.

A number of state agencies and conservation organizations have been promoting the practice of planting food plots and leaving hedgerows for the birds. On my own farm in Madison County, Virginia, I plant 10 acres of food plot specifically for the quail—of course the doves and deer like it too. For the last two years I have consistently seen two coveys on my 200 acres—a start but not enough birds to hunt. Food and cover alone do not seem to be the answers.

So where are the quail in quantities resembling the populations of days gone by in Virginia? The answer is South Texas—and an invitation to hunt a friend-of-a-friend's 20,000-acre South Texas ranch was not the type of invitation that I could pass up.

South Texas is unique country; it is the kind of ground that can require 20 acres to feed a single cow. It has lots of rattlesnakes but also plenty of deer, wild pigs, and best of all – quail. Farming practices in general have not changed much over the years in this part of the country because most of it is not farmed. And while some of the land along the Gulf is suitable for cotton or milo, much of the inland is not very suitable for row crops without massive irrigation, making this type of farming unprofitable.

Cattle ranching is done in this part of Texas, but the relatively low density required to sustain a herd allows for a good balance between wildlife and cattle. Many ranches in this area have made the determination that recreation is the best use for the land and have focused their efforts totally on hunting deer, wild boar and quail, abandoning cattle and crops completely. Some of the ranches, like the one I hunted, are private operations for corporate entertaining, friends and family. Others, such as the largest ranch in Texas, the King Ranch,





The author (R) approaching a covey



Man and dog need protection from the sand burrs.



allow the public to lease hunting land and also provide guided hunts.

Part of what makes quail hunting in this part of Texas so interesting is the ruggedness and sheer immensity of land that needs to be covered in a day's hunt. Proper attire to accommodate this terrain is a must for both hunter and dog. And because of the vast acres of land to be hunted in a day, a bird buggy and horseback out-riders are also a must.

Proper attire for the bird hunter consists of calf-high snake-proof boots, snake-proof chaps and of course blaze orange vest and hat. The chaps are needed for the snakes but also for the sand burrs, which are some of the thorniest, toughest burrs I have ever encountered. The dogs must have their feet completely taped to combat the burrs as well.

The bird buggy is a converted

four-wheel-drive one-ton pickup that has its roof chopped off and has been modified with high-rise benches to carry up to four hunters with the dogs underneath in 10 individual kennels. The front two seats remain for the driver and a dog trainer.

Upon arrival at the designated section of the ranch for the day's hunt, the horses are unloaded from their trailer and a dog is released from the kennel in the bird buggy. With the dog released and the two horsemen, one on each side of the buggy about 100 yards out, the hunt is on. The hunters in the buggy follow the dog at a very slow pace and wait for either the dog to go on point or the horsemen to spot a covey of birds – at which time the hunters proceed on foot, spread out about 10 yards apart in a parallel line for safety.

Only three hunters hunt at the same time, as the goal is to take no more



than three birds from a covey. This practice assures that the covey will continue to thrive and that wild quail will remain plentiful in South Texas. Rarely are the three birds taken on the initial covey flush, and the hunters proceed on foot to chase down the birds from the “busted” covey. The three-bird rule is a good one, and I am glad to see that everyone I met in Texas understood the need to conserve this valuable resource. Hopefully, if the populations of quail in Virginia return to sustainable levels, these same practices will be adopted.

In a day’s hunt, it is not unusual to cover more than 500 acres. The quail tend to congregate in the “motts” or clumps of mesquite trees, cactus and prickly scrub that make up small islands in the open native grasslands. This also tends to be the kind of place the rattlesnakes like, so you need to always be careful when approaching the birds. Because of the vast acreage, it is standard practice to use six to eight dogs in the morning and another six to eight in the afternoon. The dogs are typically hunted for no more than 20-30 minutes at a time.

On a good day, moving a dozen coveys is not unusual, and seeing these wild birds fly is really amazing. The speed and acrobatic formations of the coveys sometimes makes the shooter lose focus, forgetting to pick out just one bird at a time, often resulting in no birds at all! And while the bag limit in Texas is 15 birds a day, we were

all very happy to self-impose a limit of eight birds per hunter.

South Texas is a must-visit for the wild-quail aficionado. As a hunter and as a conservationist, I long for the days when Virginia wild quail may be found in the numbers that are seen in South Texas. And after an incredible few days of hunting these arid lands, I remain more puzzled than ever as to how the rugged food-deprived countryside of South Texas can have such an abundance of wild quail while the comparatively gentle and food-abundant countryside of my Piedmont farm holds so few birds. Hopefully organizations such as Quail Unlimited, along with state and federal agencies, will continue to study and eventually solve the quail-decline mystery.

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Douglas Dear, an avid bird hunter and fly fisherman, is the owner of Rose River Farm), a popular trophy trout fly-fishing destination located on the Rose River in Madison County(www.rosriverfarm.com). He also serves as chairman of the board of Project Healing Waters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to healing our wounded veterans through fly fishing.

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