

Bobwhite Quail Conservation

AN UPDATE ON EFFORTS TO HELP THIS IMPORTANT GAMEBIRD

Regional Quail Conservation

First of all, the decline of the bobwhite quail population goes well beyond the borders of the Magnolia State. In fact, data from national bird monitoring efforts suggest that bobwhites have been declining since at least 1966 across most of the range of the bird. While each state wildlife agency had its own approach to quail conservation, the efforts were not well organized before 1995 when the Southeast Quail Study Group (SEQSG) was formed to bring together bobwhite experts from across the region.

In 1998, the directors of the Southeastern states' fish and wildlife agencies charged the SEQSG to develop a regional recovery plan for bobwhites. The end result was the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI), a recovery plan for "Northern Bobwhites" (the proper common name for bobwhite quail) across 22 southeastern states. The ultimate goal of the NBCI was to restore bobwhite quail populations to levels found in 1980 – a significant undertaking by any stretch of the imagination.

The NBCI provides an important road map for states working to recover bobwhite populations and has helped conservation interests influence national policies that increase and improve bobwhite habitat. For example, members of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus inserted language into the 2002 Farm Bill that encouraged the Secretary of Agriculture to support the habitat conservation objectives of the NBCI. As a result, the SEQSG and USDA's Farm Service Agency have collaborated to develop numerous bobwhite-friendly practices such as the Conservation Reserve Program "Bobwhite Buffer" practice (CP-33) and whole-field habitat practices (CP-38). Intensive monitoring efforts have documented that these practices are increasing local populations of quail and other wildlife.

More recently, the SEQSG expanded to become the National Bobwhite Technical Committee (NBTC) in an effort to include some states (with quail) in the Midwest, West, and Northeast. The NBCI has also been expanded to reflect this change, becoming more of a true range-wide recovery plan (the NBCI was recently renamed National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative). Today, the NBCI office is housed at the University of Tennessee and is a collaboration of state, federal, and private organizations and agencies that continues to be the focal point of bobwhite recovery efforts nationwide. For more information on the NBCI or the NBTC, please visit www.bringbackbobwhites.org.

Bobwhite quail have been in decline in Mississippi since at least the 1960s, but efforts are under way to help reverse this decline.

By Dave Godwin and Rick Hamrick

Some Mississippi hunters may remember a time not too long ago when the bobwhite quail was one of the most popular game species in the Magnolia State. It may seem hard to believe, but forty years ago, when deer populations were still becoming established in many portions of Mississippi, quail hunting was a common pastime across our part of the South, and stories of great bird dogs are retold today by many of our fathers and grandfathers. It's unfortu-

nate, but many folks, particularly young and new hunters, were not around to enjoy those days. The decline of the bobwhite quail over the past 40 years has been much discussed and well documented, and today the bird exists in relatively low numbers across much of the state. We know that many factors have conspired to cause such a noticeable change in quail populations, but the primary cause has been the significant reduction in the quality and quantity of suitable habitat.

Simply put, the way we used our land 40 years ago produced excellent quail habitat as an accidental by-product.

By comparison, current land-use practices within our forests, farmland, and grazing lands generally result in poor habitat for quail. The recovery of bobwhite quail through habitat improvement is an important conservation issue for wildlife biologists across the range of the bird and particularly for MDWFP's Small Game and Habitat programs.

Quail Conservation in Mississippi

Here at home, the MDWFP has collaborated with Mississippi State University and other partners to sharpen the focus of NBCI down to the state level, and together have developed a proactive recovery plan for quail in the Magnolia State. The MDWFP is committed to working with landowners interested in quail management anywhere in Mississippi. However, the plan recognizes that there are some areas within the state that are better suited for quail, and thus targets quail conservation in those areas where we might have greater chances of success.

While there is no doubt that focusing on private lands is the key to achieving any wide-ranging success with bobwhite recovery, the MDWFP has emphasized quail habitat on some of its public Wildlife Management Areas. This emphasis on some state-owned WMAs (such as Charles Ray Nix WMA in Panola County) is providing some extremely interesting results (i.e. noticeable increases in local quail populations), as well as serving as demonstration areas where other landowners can observe successful management techniques first-hand.

The great news is that managers have had some success in helping quail populations rebound in Mississippi. Both private and public land managers have documented increases in populations in areas where sound management results in habitat that successfully provides the life requirements of bobwhites. One of the more encouraging results has been the

ability of the “Bobwhite Buffers” practice to produce countable increases in quail just by adding suitable cover along the borders of working Mississippi crop fields. Cost-share opportunities available make this practice a win-win for farmers and for wildlife.

Quail management is really no more difficult than proper management for other wildlife, but it does require active habitat manipulation such as disking and burning every year. Therefore, quail habitat management is intensive. Furthermore, quail habitat must be managed at an adequate scale (often 5,000 acres or more) to produce populations that can be sustainably hunted. Although these facts may seem discouraging, suitable quail habitat can be restored across multiple landholdings if landowners believe it is important. If you want to succeed, get to know your neighbors and work with them to make a difference for quail.

The vast majority of existing or potential quail habitat in Mississippi occurs on private lands. Thus, private landowners are essential to successful quail habitat and population restoration goals. The MDWFP provides technical guidance to private landowners interested in managing quail habitat anywhere in the state.

For additional information on bobwhite quail management and conservation in Mississippi, visit our agency quail page at home.mdwfp.com/quail or call (601) 432-2199.



Upland forest management is a critical part of quail habitat restoration. Thinning and prescribed burning can be used to produce ground cover conditions utilized by quail.

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Native grass and wildflower cover established along the edges of crop fields provide critical cover for quail. Field edges are often lower-yielding areas for crops, so little production is sacrificed to provide quail habitat.



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What Can You Do to Help?

If you are interested in seeing bobwhite quail populations restored in Mississippi, perhaps the best thing that you can do is to become involved in one of the many conservation organizations that promote habitat management for quail and other wildlife. While many Mississippians are clearly interested in quail, quail hunters and quail enthusiasts have never been well organized within our state. Organizations such as Quail Unlimited, Quail Forever, Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation, and the National Wild Turkey Federation all promote bobwhite conservation. Look into these organizations and see if you are interested in helping them promote habitat for bobwhites and other upland wildlife. Take the time to visit the websites that were mentioned in this article, become familiar with what is being done to promote quail conservation in Mississippi and across the range of the species. Learn as

much as you can about quail habitat and management, and encourage others with similar interests to do the same. If you are still actively hunting quail, please help the MDWFP to monitor populations by participating in the Small Game Hunter Survey (see home.mdwfp.com/quail), and please make every effort to introduce youth to quail hunting.

The whistle of bobwhites has been a welcome signal of spring for many generations. Countless hunters of all ages have anxiously anticipated a covey flush just in front of a good bird dog. With dedication, persistence, and patience, we can bring back local bobwhite populations to maintain these great traditions.

Dave Godwin is Small Game and Turkey Program Coordinator, and Rick Hamrick is Small Game Program Leader for the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks. Both live in Starkville.