

Reversing the decline of Texas quails

November 25 2013, by Steve Byrns



A volunteer releases a covey of radio-collared quail at the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch in Fisher County. Radio telemetry research provides information on quail movement, mortality factors and nesting ecology. Credit: Dr. Dale Rollins, Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch

The Texas A&M University System and Texas A&M AgriLife are on a mission to address the state's dwindling wild quail populations, and a recent \$2 million state-funded initiative reflects the importance of quail to the state of Texas.

The biennial exceptional item slated for fiscal years 2014-2015 was

funded by the state legislature and became effective Sept. 1. The initiative will support integrated approaches by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, collaborating with Texas A&M AgriLife Research, to marshal the resources of the A&M System to address [quail](#) decline.

John Sharp, Chancellor for Texas A&M University said, "We appreciate the support of the state in funding potential solutions to this critical statewide issue. Based on our AgriLife Extension studies, every time a pickup and dog-trailer pull into a West Texas community, they're worth about \$8,500 to the state's economy, with about 60 percent of those dollars going to local coffers."

According to a recent study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, quail are ranked third behind deer and dove as the state's most popular game species in an industry that exceeds \$1.5 billion annually. AgriLife Extension studies show about 65 percent of Texas hunters come from urban areas. So dwindling bird numbers not only threaten rural economies, but also reduce hunting opportunities for many urban residents.

"Reversing quail decline in Texas is built around both education and research focused on landscape improvements to increase quail populations and investigations into diverse factors that interact to cause quail decline," according to Dr. Doug Steele, AgriLife Extension director.

Quail are an important game species, but they are one among many other grassland birds whose populations share the same downward population trend. Investments in quail research and educational efforts will benefit quail while also providing information on a wider range of game and nongame species.

Dr. Jim Cathey, AgriLife Extension wildlife specialist and project leader for the quail decline initiative, has just released a limited call for research proposals to identified quail researchers across Texas. The proposals that are funded are intended to produce results that help better understand the causes of these population declines and how to provide remedies. Areas identified for consideration of funding include impacts of parasites, toxins and even various predators that affect quail hatches through maturity, and field work addressing health factors as influenced by the environment.

Targeted work in genomics that considers infectious diseases and parasites is part of the whole picture, Cathey said. There is also some need to further consider bird translocation for repopulation with monitoring of survival data.

"The quail decline of bobwhites and scaled or 'blue' quail over most of West and South Texas has become critical since 2008," said Dr. Dale Rollins, state coordinator for this AgriLife Extension initiative. "The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's latest quail surveys reported their lowest counts on record for the third consecutive year."

Rollins concedes while some areas have observed an uptick in quail numbers this fall, most are still well below long-term averages.

Cathey and Rollins are working closely with the funding agency, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and within AgriLife Extension to lead and coordinate both the education and research activities. This is all in a state where hunters are the champions for wildlife, they noted, explaining that the excise taxes on firearms and ammunition, license sales and particularly the Upland Game Bird Stamp funds represent direct investments in the management, research and education aspects of this effort.

AgriLife Extension educational programs and demonstration work are significant in addressing current and future quail populations, Rollins said. One major demonstration effort will be the Texas Quail Index, which he said empowers landowners and other stakeholders to better understand local quail dynamics and how their land and livestock management affects quail habitat, both good and bad. In 2014, AgriLife Extension will work with landowners via the agency's network of county Extension agents to expand educational programs such as Quail Appreciation Days and Quail Brigades to cover best management practices for habitat that foster quail survival and growth.

Steele is a firm believer that "good stewardship is one of the keys to improving quail numbers and the Texas Quail Index is a great way for AgriLife Extension agents to interact with landowners in gathering data and assessing how well quail are doing in local areas." The research, which will be conducted at various universities in the state, is intended to provide support where the research capabilities and focus already exist. Collaboration among all interested parties can do nothing but help in an effort to stop the downward decline of quail populations, officials said.

Provided by Texas A&M University

Citation: Reversing the decline of Texas quails (2013, November 25) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-reversing-decline-texas-quails.html>

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