



THE BUSINESS OF BOBWHITES

Supporting thriving quail numbers, ranching opportunities.

Story by Jaclyn Roberts Parrish

Photos by Jonathan Vail, courtesy of East Foundation

Every building on a ranch must earn its keep. That's how an old horse barn at Fall Creek Ranch became a quail hatchery.

"We're always trying to come up with new ways to make a dollar and keep the ranch going," says Kelly Langdon, a Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association member.

The Hood County ranch already supports a cattle operation, high-fence deer enterprise and wedding venue. The quail project became another way to diversify the family's income.

"We had this vacant horse barn with 20 stalls, and each stall had a 50-foot run," Langdon says. "So I thought, let's turn one of those into a flight pen."

Armed with chicken wire, a welder and 100 bobwhite quail, Langdon converted a stall himself.

The experiment multiplied quickly as his chicks began laying eggs. With 70 to 80 eggs laid at week's end, Kelly would move these to an incubator that kept conditions optimal for hatching.

"I would have over a 70% hatch rate. I was getting about 50 chicks a week," Langdon says. "The eggs have to stay right between 99 and 101 degrees. You've got to have the right humidity, and the eggs have to be rocked back and forth."

Hatching eggs was one thing. Raising chicks he could use for put-and-take hunts was another.

Langdon placed brooders under heat lamps to keep them warm and away from the adult birds. Even starter feed proved too dense for quail chicks. Langdon improvised, buying a coffee grinder to provide a more easily consumable feed for them in the first week.

"When you look at everything you have to do to raise pen-raised birds, as finicky as they are, it's incredible how many of the native birds actually survive," he says.

Quail were once commonly found across the family operation.

"My dad says back in the '60s, we had tons of quail here. You could drive around and flush 10 or 12 coveys easily," he says. "Now I might see a covey once a month."

Langdon says he has no illusion that his pen-raised birds will restore wild quail to North Texas. They have poor post-release survival rates due largely to predation, dispersal and lack of wild instinctive behaviors. His released birds are intended to provide hunting experiences, not rebuild self-sustaining wild populations.

They don't replace the native coveys his father remembers. Instead, they represent one way the ranch has adapted, creating a new enterprise for the operation.

Bobwhite quail depend on a patchwork of native grasses, shrubs and bare ground. That mix provides nesting cover, protection from predators, abundant insects for growing chicks and room for birds to move through the landscape.

BOOM-AND-BUST CYCLE

Bobwhite quail are known in part for their distinctive whistle call. The sound is unmistakable for those who remember flourishing populations.

In many parts of the state, hearing a bobwhite has become the exception rather than the rule. Throughout the last 35 years, Texas bobwhite populations have declined by more than 75%, mainly driven by habitat loss, changing land use, brush encroachment and weather extremes.

But in southern portions of the Lone Star State, quail numbers are thriving.

More than 10 million acres of native rangeland in South Texas support wild bobwhite populations, earning the region designation as a Legacy Landscape by the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative in 2014. Expansive working ranches provide the patchwork of native grasses, scattered brush and open ground bobwhites need to survive, making South Texas one of the last places where researchers can study thriving wild populations on a meaningful scale.

"There are ups and downs, good years and bad years, but South Texas has been able to bounce back," says Abe Woodard, Ph.D., range and wildlife scientist with the East Foundation. "Our ability to produce quail in South Texas is really tied to rainfall; as long as the habitat remains the same, numbers will fluctuate annually with rainfall."



Abe Woodard

Woodard's research specializes in population ecology and sustainable management of game species, with a primary focus on upland game birds. He studies quail across 217,000 acres of native South Texas rangeland.

Woodard says rainfall drives the environmental conditions impacting food, nesting, chicks and brood success for quail. Consequently, bobwhite populations can appear to dissipate during prolonged drought, only to rebound quickly after favorable rainfall.

This relationship is often described as a boom-and-bust cycle. When rainfall triggers a boom, the landscape must be prepared through proactive management to respond.

Properly managed cattle grazing complements quail management. Grazing creates needed disturbance of grass, providing access to soil bobwhites depend on. Chicks require bare ground to move freely and capture insects, their primary source of protein during the first weeks of life, while shrubs provide escape cover and nesting habitat.

"Quail like their feet on the ground," Woodard says. "They need some bare ground out in that landscape. A thick wall of grass is not quail habitat. They need some disturbance. They need some grazing."

Under ideal conditions, a covey of roughly a dozen birds occupies only a few dozen acres. Because they spend their entire lives within such a small area,



Kelly Langdon converted a vacant horse stall into a 50-foot flight pen where bobwhite quail are raised for put-and-take hunts. Chicks spend their first weeks under heat lamps in brooders before moving into the flight pen to mature. Top left and top right photos courtesy of Langdon.

bobwhites quickly reflect changes in rangeland health. Researchers often describe them as an indicator species, meaning if quail are thriving, the habitat is usually supporting other diverse wildlife species, as well.

BEFORE THE HUNT BEGINS

Expenses arrive every year for landowners. Quail do not. Before landowners can market a hunt, they must understand what the land can realistically support.

A profitable quail operation depends on more than just having birds. A ranch must support enough coveys to provide consistent encounters throughout an entire hunting season. While bred populations can create this consistency, ranches relying on wild quail populations cannot. That scarcity is why hunters travel far and wide to South Texas for quail hunts.

"There are very few places where you can see several coveys, harvest a good number of birds and maintain that across the hunting season," Woodard says.

He also speaks to the importance of harvesting appropriate numbers of quail for management.

"When we talk about quail declining and these rural economies living off the money generated by hunters coming in from all over, it's pretty critical that the harvest rate is actually sustainable," he says.

The first step is developing a reliable picture of the population. The most rigorous approach in South Texas is often a helicopter survey, which allows managers to cover large areas and estimate the number and distribution of coveys.

Woodard says landowners can gather information without such a formal survey. What matters is using a repeatable method consistently. He points to simple

methods, like roadside counts, listening for calling birds, tracking covey sightings and even recording quail numbers observed during hunts.

"Having those long-term trends is extremely valuable," Woodard said. "Even if it's driving the same pasture once or twice every year and counting the coveys you see, that gives you the ability to track those ups and downs."

Woodard also encourages landowners to maintain detailed hunting records, including the number of hours hunted, coveys encountered, birds retrieved and potentially crippled birds. Recording the age and sex of harvested birds can provide additional insight into reproduction and the condition of the population.

"Your harvest records are almost as valuable as your population trends," he says.

Those records create a feedback loop.

A landowner selling hunts is not simply selling access to acreage. The product is the likelihood of finding birds, the quality of the experience and the ranch's ability to deliver that consistently. This is a message Woodard drives home with students through his lectureship series on hunting enterprise management through the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management.

"When you're selling these hunts, whether it's on the open market or you're dealing with corporate camps, having records of what you've harvested and what's occurred — and how good or how bad the hunting is — is valuable," Woodard says. "It helps with assessing the value of the hunting on your property."

Once a landowner understands what the landscape can support, the next question becomes how to market it. He suggests asking how many hunts a property can withstand, how to package these hunts, and whether to

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— Abe Woodard, *East Foundation*



contract out hunts, provide lodging and guides, or lease by the acre.

"There are operations we call day hunts where they pay by the day or by the trip, maybe two or three days," Woodard says. "Usually those go from around \$2,000 a day up to \$10,000 for a two- or three-day trip. It can be highly variable depending on what is included."

Fall Creek Ranch leverages this day trip through a put-and-take model. Langdon releases birds on the property from his bred population. This complements the property's wedding venue. Because bred populations are not restricted to hunting season like wild populations, Langdon plans to leverage the hunting enterprise for morning activities for wedding parties.

THE FUTURE

Pen-raised quail won't bring back the wild coveys that once whistled across North Texas. For that, there is no substitute for healthy native rangeland.

Yet, Langdon's operation faces the same reality as many ranches across the state. Working lands must also work economically. Whether income comes from pen-raised hunts, carefully managed wild quail or another enterprise, financial viability helps keep ranches intact and creates the opportunity for long-term thriving quail populations.



East Foundation researchers tag and monitor wild quail populations across South Texas.

This depends on native grasses for nesting, shrubs for cover, insects to feed chicks and enough bare ground to move freely. Maintaining those conditions requires thoughtful management, and thoughtful management is only possible when working ranches remain economically sustainable.

In that way, as working ranches endure, so does the promise of wild quail. 🦋

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