

BOBWHITE

Facts & Fantasies



by Horace Gore and Don Wilson

Many interesting and popular beliefs and legends surround the bobwhite quail. Most of these beliefs are traditional in that they are observations, opinions, and doctrines handed down through successive generations, as from father to son. Some of these cherished theories are actually guilty of hampering an adequate harvest of the birds, and others do little to promote the general welfare of bobwhite.

As Herbert Stoddard, noted quail expert, wrote in 1931, "The number of such beliefs is indicative of the popular interest in these birds and the general human weakness to treasure strange and weird ideas in regard to the habits and doings of the denizens of the wild."

One needs only to bring up the subject of bobwhite quail at the local gathering place for sportsmen, farmers or ranchers to begin a flurry of questions and stories concerning the welfare of this well-liked game bird.

A popular belief is that a pair of bobwhite will rear more than one brood in a year under ideal conditions. There are two basic schools of thought—both questionable. One opinion is that the hen will build two nests, lay two clutches of eggs, and then incubate one while the cock incubates the other clutch. The other supposition is that the pair will incubate and hatch one clutch of eggs which the cock will care for while the hen lays and incubates another, and then

the entire family will get together for the upbringing of the young birds.

It is easy to see how these misconceptions came into being. In an area of good nesting cover, a person may flush a hen from a nest and in the same general cover flush a cock from a nest. The first conclusion could be that they are a pair, each incubating a separate nest. It is also a rather common sight to see two ages of young quail with a pair of adults. This makes one think that the pair hatched two broods of young. The point not so obvious is that the young birds' ages are normally less than three weeks apart, thus making it impossible for them to be offspring of the same pair.

Actually, the sighting of what is believed to be a covey with two age classes of young is the result of close association of more than one covey at places such as feeding or resting areas. A disturbance can cause young birds to mix with another covey for a period of time, sometimes permanently. Since it is natural for quail to seek covey companions, it is not unusual for two sizes of birds to be found together.

However, it would be phenomenal for a pair of birds to raise two or more clutches a year. Quail are gallinaceous birds—that is, they scratch the ground for food, are rather long-legged for rapid mobility, and brood their young. This last characteristic is the key factor in discounting the second hatch of young.

Once a gallinaceous bird has successfully incubated a clutch of eggs (they may re-nest several times if disturbed), their only objective is to teach their young, to furnish protection, and provide them with food. When this is accomplished, even for a single chick, their instinctive desire has been fulfilled for the season and their attention reverts to other activities.

Wild house cats are said to be notorious for killing quail and there are multitudes of sportsmen and landowners who are constantly on the alert for these feral felines. But if we explore the possible effects of house cats on the quail population as a whole, we can readily see that feral cats have no greater role in the 70 to 80 percent annual turnover in quail populations than automobiles, fire, weather, food shortages, lack of cover, and other factors.



Releasing pen-raised quail, such as this fledgling, will not effectively bolster populations.

It is ironic that we should become so alarmed about predators such as house cats, skunks, snakes, hawks, and owls catching a few birds and be so passive about brush clearing, over-grazing, indiscriminate use of herbicides, and other activities which can literally annihilate quail through habitat destruction. It is questionable which is the greater predator—man or beast. With regard to "beastly" predators, we should remember that if their habitat is adequate, quail can thrive very well.

To coin (and add to) a phrase, three things are sure-death, taxes, and a high annual turnover in quail populations. "Turnover" means that about 70 to 80 of every 100 birds die during their first year after hatching. There are many causes which contribute to quail mortality, and the quail hunter is among the least significant of these. Bobwhite are an annual product of the land and the numbers of quail present each year are directly proportional to adequate food and cover requirements.

Closing of the hunting season and releasing pen raised broodstock have both been discredited as solutions to strengthening quail populations. If a quail population becomes low, neither closing the area to hunting nor restocking will make any appreciable difference in the next year's quail crop. As the carrying capacity of the land for



Predators, such as skunks and snakes, are well-known causes of quail mortality, while little thought is given to the more serious problems of brush clearing, over-grazing, and herbicides.

quail diminishes, the number of birds also will diminish, whether hunted or not. The old theory that all unhunted birds will be around to nest and reproduce next spring should be forgotten.

The "shoot'em up to prevent inbreeding" idea is as old as quail hunting. This misconception was probably formulated by an urbanized quail hunter as an argument to give to landowners who would not permit hunting on their property. This time-worn idea has been unconditionally disproven. There is nothing wrong with the breeding ability of an unshot covey. If a covey's size remains stable and there is no multiplication of additional coveys nearby, this indicates that there is nothing to support additional quail.

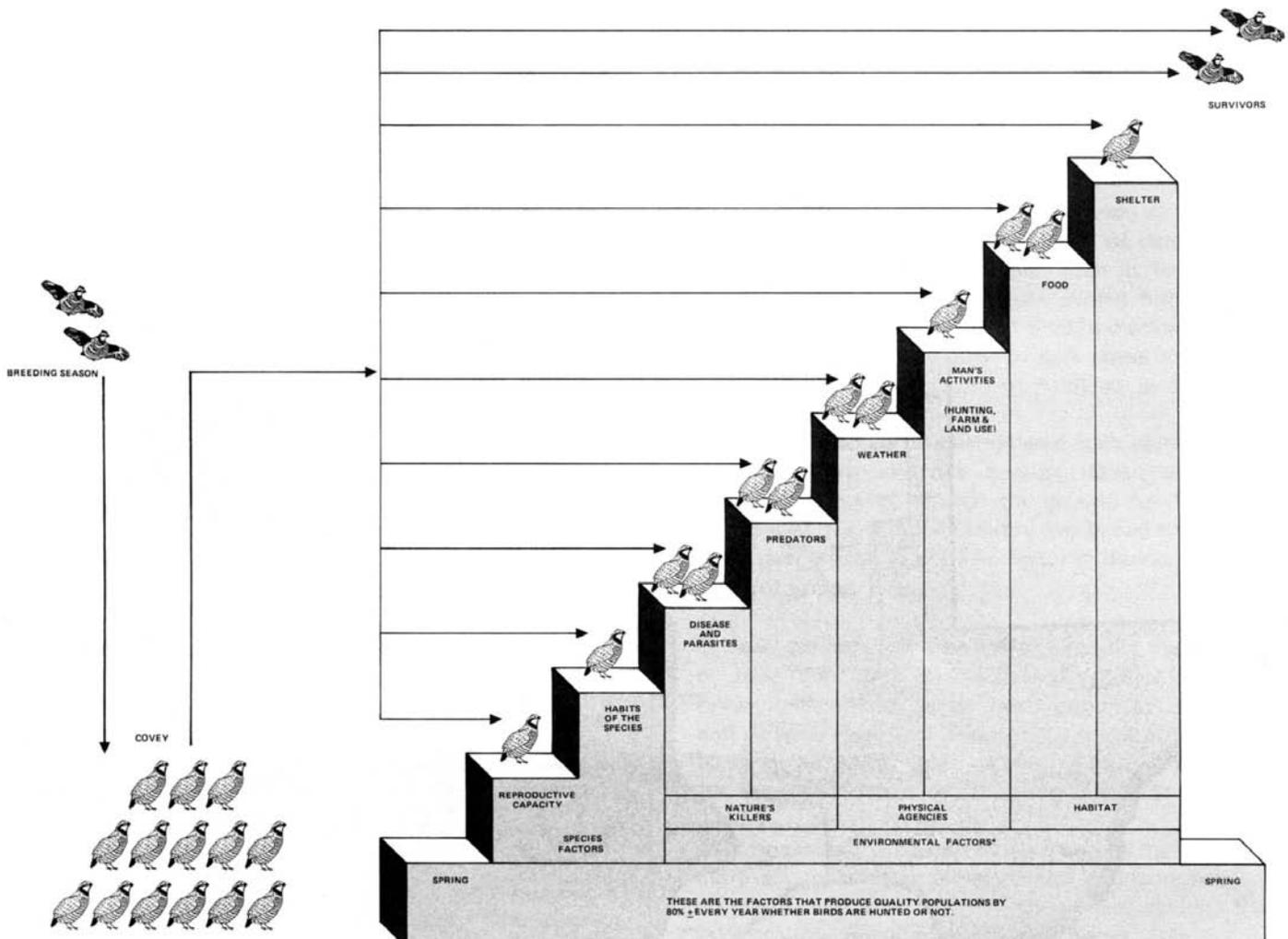
Trapping and banding studies have shown that a covey of quail is nothing more than a group of individuals clustered together at a given time. There is a constant interchange of quail between coveys. Although a covey of birds may continually occupy an area, the individual birds in the covey may change many times during the year. This mixing of birds, which is only a minor point, prevents inbreeding.

"Road hunters must have shot the covey in the garden (or near the house). We haven't seen them since dove season opened." This is a remark often heard when speaking with landowners about quail management, but there is no truth to this theory. Although a road hunter could seriously deplete a covey with a "skillet" or ground shot, it is unlikely that this happens as often as such conversations would indicate. Bobwhite nesting activities often take them far from their normal winter cover. During the fall, they tend to move from their summer haunts to the more protective wintering range. The covey "in the garden" may move several hundred yards to dense thickets or suitable protective cover. This "disappearance" of a covey often leads to the false notion that they have been shot.

Quail enthusiasts are often misled to assume that a good hatch of quail in the summer guarantees good hunting during the following fall and winter. This is not always true, because the type of open habitat used by family units (adults and their young) in the summer will often sustain a higher number of birds than can be carried by the conditions and food supply of their fall and winter range. Adults and young spend much of their summer on relatively open areas with good protective cover. They feed mainly on insects and green material. As fall approaches, the availability of summer food and cover diminishes and at the same time, the small family units join to form larger, more socially oriented coveys. These fall coveys also must rely heavily on a food source made up of seeds from matured grasses and weeds. Occasionally, drought and over-grazing by livestock will result in poor protective cover and a shortage of weed and grass seeds. This combination can cause a rather sudden decline in the number of quail which can survive on a given area.

Surplus birds do not "migrate" to other areas of better food supply as doves often do. They simply succumb to the elements of nature. The result can be a rather short supply of quail during the hunting season, where an abundance of quail was seen the previous summer.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE QUAIL POPULATIONS



Texans are fortunate to have some of the best quail hunting in the habitat range of the bobwhite. Hunter-landowner relationships are important in Texas, as any quail hunter knows. The birds themselves belong to the people of the state, but most of the land on which they reside belongs to individuals. The bobwhite's potential as a game bird depends on land use practices carried out by these landowners. If we expect nature to provide for bobwhite, then we must be willing to accept what nature provides in quail numbers.

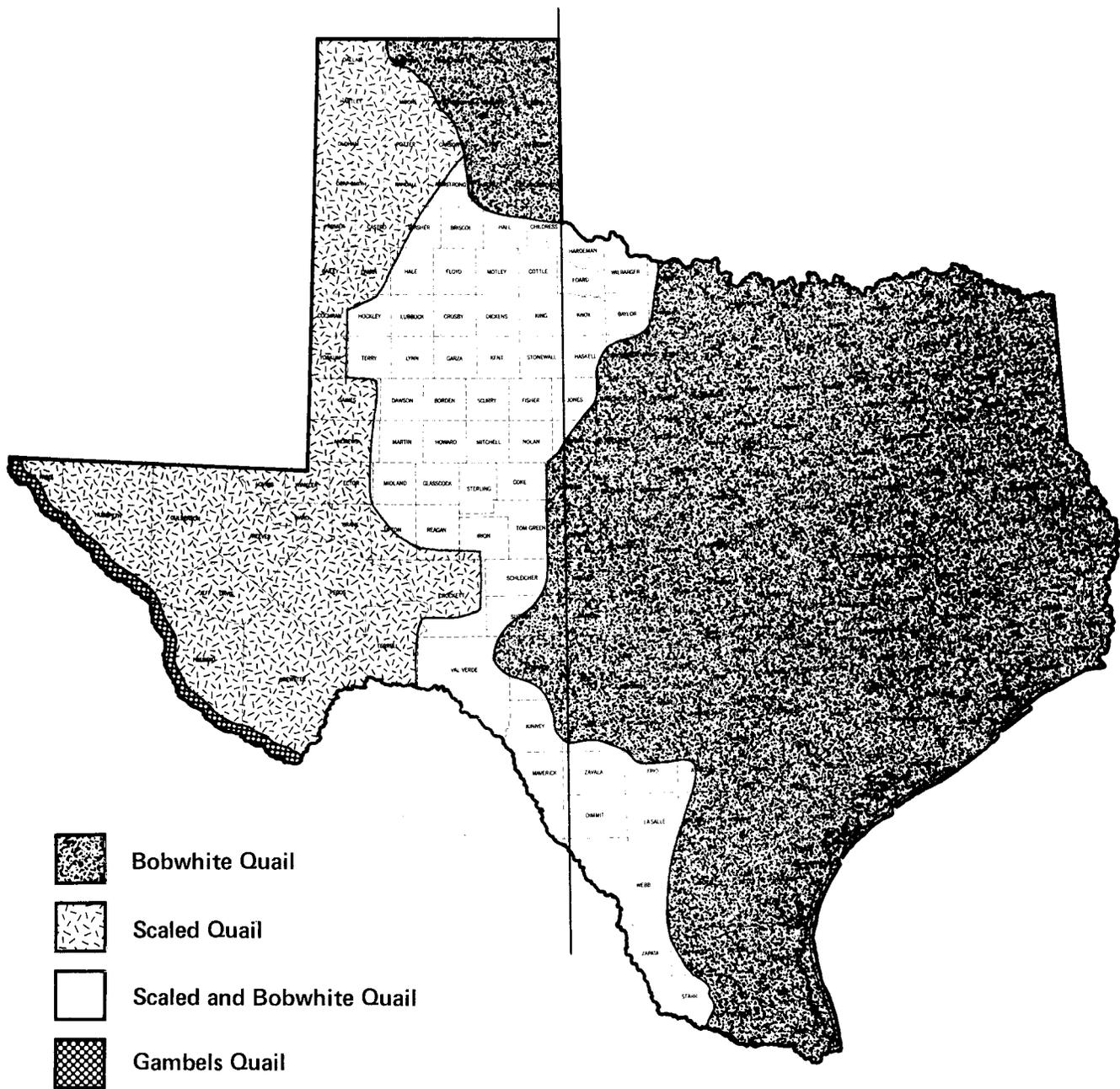
Hundreds of studies have been carried out to determine the potential and habitat needs of quail. These studies have been instrumental in establishing seasons and bag limits which have allowed substantial increases in the annual harvest of quail. Many facts have been brought to light which dispel traditional beliefs and fallacies in quail management, thereby giving game managers and sportsmen an increased appreciation for this fine game bird.



Hunters account for only a small percentage of the yearly turnover in quail numbers.

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