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Quail Groups Share Latest Info About Rolling Plains Research

By Colleen Schreiber

DALLAS — A group of concerned quail enthusiasts and research entities gathered here recently to discuss ongoing quail restoration efforts in the Rolling Plains.

Joe Crafton, chairman of Park Cities Quail, opened with a rallying cry of sorts. Park Cities Quail is a Dallas-based organization formed about five years by a group of concerned sportsmen to raise money for quail research. Over the last five years the organization has raised almost \$3 million.

“We really started more as a social club,” Crafton admitted, “but then we realized that we’re in the middle of a crisis, and so we turned from a social club into a group of activist sportsmen concerned about the future of bobwhite quail.”

Crafton offered some statistics. In the 1960s, there were an estimated 40 million quail in the U.S., and quail hunters in Texas numbered an estimated 350,000. Today quail numbers are estimated to be fewer than five million throughout the U.S. and the number of Texas quail hunters has dropped to an estimated 50,000.

The sport of quail hunting in Texas has long been an economic driver, a big engine revving on all cylinders; today, not so much. As Crafton pointed out, the entire quail infrastructure is being impacted — everything from the bird dog breeders and trainers to the makers of the dog boxes and dog trailers, to the local restaurants, sporting good stores, gas stations and the like.

“Syndicated writer Tom Davis calls the decline of wild quail ‘our greatest wildlife tragedy.’ He used another phrase that really hit me between the eyes,” Crafton told listeners. “He said bobwhite quail are ‘recreationally extinct.’

“So this is a call to action,” stated Crafton. “This is our sport ... It really comes down to the sportsmen, the

government doesn't have a lot of excess money, and Texas Parks and Wildlife is no exception, so the push really needs to come from people in this room, the people who really care, who are willing to put their time and money where their mouth is to find a solution."

He closed with two quotes, the first from Theodore Roosevelt, who said, "In a civilized and cultivated country wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen."

"That is absolutely true and true today."

The second was from Aldo Leopold, who said, "There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot."

"I expect the people here cannot live without wild things. What we are doing is important," Crafton stressed. "We can't make it rain, but we can get organized. We can communicate; we can collaborate and not fight among ourselves."

He likened all the entities in the Rolling Plains involved in the restoration efforts to being at the roulette wheel. Each research entity has its own research agenda and ideas, thus instead of just betting on one square, bets are placed on several different squares.

"Get involved where you can," Crafton encouraged. "Put your land in one of the programs or just share information back and forth, but be engaged."

With that the primary cooperators in the Rolling Plains quail restoration effort each followed with a short presentation.

Dr. Dale Rollins, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension wildlife specialist and director of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, told listeners that the quail population on the quail research ranch, unfortunately, is just as depressed as it is on other properties throughout the Rolling Plains and West Texas.

"It makes me sad, but I pick up my spirits by saying we're doing everything humanly possible to get our habitat right. I call it cocking the hammer, so when we do have rain there will be opportunity to maximize the returns."

He briefly discussed some of the ongoing research

and talked a bit more in-depth about some projects that are about to get underway.

Operation Idiopathic Decline is a comprehensive study of quail diseases and parasites initiated in August 2011. The last comprehensive disease study in bobwhites, he noted, was done in the 1920s by Herbert Stoddard.

It's no small project; the RPQR Foundation committed \$2.5 million to the effort. Four universities are cooperating on the three-year project.

Already scientists are documenting some "intriguing" findings. Primarily they're finding high numbers of two parasitic worms in many of the harvested birds. The eyeworm, specifically, has received a tremendous amount of ink by mainstream media.

"We're not saying they're causing the decline," Rollins told listeners, "but it is an intriguing story."

The newest effort, dubbed "Operation Transfusion," is a translocation project of wild bobwhites into an area that was once the historic epicenter for bobwhites in the Rolling Plains but has in recent years experienced low densities of quail. Specifically, the initial project will take place on properties near the Stephens and Shackelford county line. The study areas are known to be prime quail habitat and are located in an area not considered to have fragmentation issues.

Rollins acknowledged some of the other translocation efforts done in Texas, all largely unsuccessful, but he sounded the horn again, saying, "We're in desperate times."

Operation Transfusion calls for "super stocking" of 300 wild birds per year over three consecutive years.

"I already know what your question is going to be. Where are you going to get 300 wild quail a year? It is a hurdle," Rollins admitted.

The translocation work, he noted, will be done with the blessing of Texas Parks and Wildlife in that the plan is to evaluate a "Triple T" (Trap, Tag, and Transport) permit from the Department. The Triple T has been widely used to relocate white-tailed deer and wild turkey from areas that are overpopulated to areas that are not, but Rollins said he's not aware of such a permit ever being granted for bobwhite

quail.

“That may be a chastisement of the process, or it may be that nobody has applied,” he commented.

RPQRR is actively recruiting covey donors, and a meeting of 40 invited ranchers is scheduled to take place in San Angelo.

“If there is a sweet spot for quail this year in West Texas, it’s on a line from Ballinger to Big Lake — Hwy. 67. Those landowners have more quail than most, and so that’s where we are saturating our ‘ask’ this year.”

Already he has permission to trap on the Muleshoe Wildlife Refuge, and he’s had four other properties volunteer to be “blood donors.”

Researchers intend to examine the entire translocation process by looking at several different metrics, such as survival, movement and reproduction, to name a few. Success, Rollins said, is defined as an increase in quail abundance greater than 40 percent on the release site relative to the control site after three years.

“We hope for a thorough evaluation of the Triple T. If this works, how many people will be standing in line wanting to be second? A lot.”

Charles Hodges, chairman of the Quail-Tech Alliance, followed with a quick overview of their program and their ongoing research. Founded in 2009, a group of concerned landowner quail enthusiasts, approached researchers at Texas Tech University about developing a quail research program. The goal was to establish an “anchor ranch” in a 38-county wide area. Ranches make a five-year commitment to contribute \$3500 annually, and Texas Tech is given the opportunity to conduct uninterrupted research. Initially, 24 landowners stepped up to the plate. Today approximately 2.2 million acres are in the system with ranches varying in size from 500,000 acres to 600 acres.

Some of the deliverables to the cooperating Quail-Tech ranches include population surveys, GIS mapping and habitat recommendations. Participating ranches are ranked each year based on the number of birds.

“On my place in Dickens County this year I was averaging six calls per stop in the north section of the ranch

and zero calls per stop in the south section of the ranch, so I know where my habitat improvement work needs to be done,” Hodges told listeners.

One of the first research topics that Quail-Tech initiated was the efficacy of supplemental feeding. They have now gathered and compiled data from year two of a three-year project.

“We wanted to just answer the question finally about supplemental feeding so that we could just quit spending any more money or time on it,” Hodges told listeners. “Basically, we wanted to prove or dispel the conventional wisdom that we heard at most quail seminars that feeding was neutral or maybe slightly positive.”

The work was done on the 6666 headquarters ranch. An 8000-acre block was divided into eight, 1000-acre blocks with some blocks designated as fed sites and others as controls.

For the first year, October 2010 through September 2011 through the teeth of a historic drouth, survival rates of hens on the fed versus unfed site were two to one. The second year also showed a similar two to one survival ratio for fed versus unfed.

Supplemental feeding did not have an impact on nesting success in either of the years. However, more nests were found on the fed site in both years. In 2011 in the fed pasture there were 31 nests compared to only four nests in the unfed pastures. Furthermore, on the fed sites in 2011 there were five re-nesting attempts and zero in the control pastures.

In 2012, a more normal year in terms of precipitation, there were 33 nests and 14 second nest attempts and five third nest attempts. On the unfed sites there were only 19 nests, three second nest attempts and zero third nest attempts.

“There’s just no point in spending a whole lot more time and money on this,” Hodges insisted. “Tall Timbers has shown the same thing.

“I can tell you this from a real world application, in 2010 my ranch in Dickens County was ranked as the number five ranch in the Quail-Tech Alliance. I fed 37,000 pounds of milo over about 14,000 acres. In 2011 I did not feed and the ranch fell from the fifth ranked position in our

system to the 18th ranked ranch. I got religion again and fed last year and moved from 18th back to 10th, so I still have some work to do. I did more than one year's damage to my ranch by not feeding, particularly through the teeth of the drouth.

“Feed your birds,” he reiterated. “If you learn nothing else, feed them through the nesting season or feed them year round, but feed your birds. Please let us take more birds into the nesting season.”

Quail-Tech is now beginning an intensive genetics study.

“There's no reason we can't breed a stronger, more disease resistant, more heat tolerant bird and get those genetics instilled in the wild flock. We are interested in studying these traits and how they influence survival in the wild. Genetic strain is possibly an important factor,” Hodges insisted.

To begin this effort the group started what Hodges called their “alpha flock.” Eight clutches of eggs were taken from his ranch at Spur.

“We wanted a breeding colony of pure wild strain birds,” he explained.

This has now evolved into their wild strain parent-reared chick project, a method pioneered by Dr. Bill Palmer at Tall Timbers. In August, September and October, 160 chicks were released on seven ranches. Birds were released into habitat with existing wild bobwhites.

In the Quail-Tech winter newsletter Dr. Brad Dabbert reported that survival was highly variable. The worst case was that all radiomarked birds were depredated within two weeks of release. The best results were on the B&A Garcia Ranch in Palo Pinto County, right on I-20.

“I would bet you my Ford pickup that Palo Pinto County would not have been the star of that program,” Hodges told listeners. “Those birds were released in August and they sent us a video of a covey of those birds flushing two days before Christmas. There were nine released birds in that covey. That's our most extraordinary results from our wild-strain birds. We had other releases where the released birds were predated almost immediately. I blame it on the habitat ... but we have to see, and we're going at warp speed.”

Already plans are underway to double the size of their breeding pens, and they're building a second flight pen to do more studies such as flight testing and predator sensitivity.

Quail Tech is about to initiate a wild bird translocation study. They plan to take wild birds from a ranch in Webb and Zapata counties in South Texas and translocate them to a ranch in Collingsworth County in the eastern Panhandle.

"We want to see how those South Texas genetics pair up and adapt in the eastern Panhandle," said Hodges. "There will undoubtedly be genetic differences between these populations, and we will be measuring that variability. We may not be able to readily separate the influences of genetics and translocation issues if failure occurs. However, poor local adaptation would certainly be one hypothesis for failure if it occurs."

Finally, Quail-Tech is testing the viability of a thermal imaging camera for counting quail chicks. They're also involved in some disease-related research. Specifically, Quail-Tech is doing surveillance of West Nile virus in harvested birds.

Next up was Dr. Kelly Reyna, director of UNT-Quail, a fledgling program started in March 2012 at the University of North Texas in Denton. The vision of UNT-Quail, Reyna told listeners, is to foster sustainable quail populations through innovative research, conservation and education.

"We're about thinking outside the box; we don't want to be influenced by what's already been done before," said Reyna.

Habitat loss and fragmentation, he noted, is one of the biggest threats to quail. Thus, UNT-Quail has initiated the North Texas Quail Corridor program in which they work with landowners and landowners work with neighbors to create a contiguous corridor of quality bobwhite habitat.

The NT Quail Corridor extends from Archer, Clay, Montague, Cooke and out to Wise counties, curves around the Metroplex, and then below that to Ellis and Navarro counties.

"We started in March 2012 with 16,000 acres, and

we now have over 500,000 acres signed up. These landowners are ready to make a difference for quail by eliminating habitat-related issues,” Reyna told listeners.

UNT-Quail has also initiated a bobwhite restoration study. Like the RPQRR, Reyna is interested in evaluating the Triple T process by moving wild birds from high densities to places of low densities with pristine quail habitat. Reyna plans to evaluate survivorship, demographics, site fidelity, and reproduction.

Because Reyna has some concerns about the viability of such a program given the already low population of wild birds to draw from, he is also testing the viability of translocation of “wild bird surrogates.”

“I had a lady who kept calling me about these great birds she had and how she’s released them on all these ranches and how they were surviving for one or two years. She was very persistent, so I finally decided to check her out,” Reyna told listeners.

“I evaluated these birds, and they are a great genetic bird,” he continued. “She has great genetic diversity among her flock, and they have exceptional characteristics. Not only does she do some imprinting with these birds by taking them from the egg and sticking them with their mother right away, but in a pen they are able to develop good flight muscles. They have good predator avoidance; they have a lot of great wild characteristics,” Reyna insisted.

Given that, he decided to release some of the birds on a few sites for a pilot study.

“We had exceptional survivability, especially in Clay County, with over 50 percent of the birds released in June still alive today. That’s a really good indication that these are a hardy bird with the potential to be a good source for reintroductions, and it’s a testament to the way she raises them,” Reyna told listeners.

“The pilot study showed that they’re good survivors, but that’s not as important as intermixing,” he continued. “So we’re developing this new genetic technique using information from the bobwhite genome project to determine if the pen-reared birds are, in fact, mating with wild birds. If so, the birds are more important as ‘wild bird surrogates’ than long-term survivors.”

UNT-Quail is also investigating heat stress effects
on developing bobwhites.

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