

## TEXAS QUAIL HUNTING



Ray Sasser/Staff

Scientists suspect disease may be a factor in the Texas quail decline. The most consistent hunting this season has been in southern Texas. The director of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch said the initial focus will be to sample quail during the late summer.

# Puzzling decline

Experts piece together why West Texas quail numbers don't prosper

Here's a medical term best appreciated by anyone who's been sick lately and the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. The term is "idiopathic" and it means a disease for which no cause is known.

At a loss as to why West Texas quail populations weren't much improved this season, given nearly ideal nesting conditions last spring and summer, the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch has begun a project they call Operation Idiopathic Decline to see if the once abundant game birds are being decimated by disease.

Trout suffer from whirling disease. Quail seem well beyond the initial stages of "circling disease," as in these wonderful birds are circling the drain, heading for another

buzzword — recreational extinction. That means there's a remnant population that's too small to support recreational hunting.

How far the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department intends to let the quail population drop before restricting the season length and/or daily bag limit remains to be seen. Nobody thinks hunting pressure is a problem for quail, but hunting is the only factor that can be controlled by the state agency. Texas has one of the longest hunting seasons and the most liberal quail limits in the country.

RPQRR is not the first quail research group to focus on disease. Quail-Tech, the Texas Tech-based quail researchers who've signed up research ranches all across West Texas, have already diagnosed West Nile Virus. Early last fall, Quail-Tech researchers identified the disease in both blue and bobwhite quail in levels

that suggested past exposure as well as current exposure.

One bird may develop resistance to WNV and still be a carrier for the disease. Anyone who knows the life cycle of quail, which gather in coveys that usually range from 10 to 25 birds, understands the risk.

At night, when mosquitoes are active, quail back into a tight, circular formation so they can flee outward if attacked by a bobcat or other nocturnal predator. The covey roost is an ideal place for an infected mosquito to bite multiple birds in the same covey, thereby spreading WNV.

"We hope to be able to gain much more information regarding how quail species in this region might be involved in the WNV maintenance and transmission cycle," said Steve Presley, leader of the Quail-Tech Alliance disease surveillance team.

Texas quail are famous for boom and bust cycles, but

those cycles are generally associated with weather. A drought signals a quail bust while abundant rains in the spring and summer produce a boom. At least they once did.

Rick Snipes is such a serious quail hunter that he bought a ranch in Stonewall County and moved to Texas just to pursue bobwhites. Like many others, Snipes is not hunting this season because there just aren't enough birds.

Snipes, president of the RPQRR, said the board of directors has committed \$2 million to the disease initiative.

"That's 100 percent private dollars made possible by donations from concerned quail hunters," Snipes said. The Dallas-based Park Cities Quail Coalition has raised more than \$1.3 million for the research ranch since 2008.

Dale Rollins, director of the RPQRR, said the decline in West Texas birds cannot be adequately explained by weather

patterns or habitat changes.

"The pattern most people are observing is good quail numbers until after Labor Day, then something seems to happen between then and opening day" of quail season, said Rollins. "This has happened the last two years."

RPQRR is assembling a team of quail experts that includes members of Quail-Tech, Texas A&M, the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Audubon Texas and state wildlife agencies from Texas and Oklahoma.

Here's hoping for a diagnosis that's not idiopathic. Between 1967 and 2007, the American population of northern bobwhite quail declined from 31 million to 5.5 million. Most of the remaining wild birds occur in Texas and Oklahoma, but it's obvious we're not exempt from the quail decline.

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