

## HUNTING

# Diseases may be culprits in quail losses



**QUAIL QUANDARY:** Researchers like Kurt Huffman, above, of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch, Texas Tech University and others have formed a consortium to look at diseases in quail. They wonder if West Nile Virus and Newcastle disease are contributing to smaller populations of bobwhite and blue quail. Photo by Lone Star Outdoor News.

By Bill Miller

LONE STAR OUTDOOR NEWS

Veteran quail hunters used to be great examples of optimism.

They've long known that robust populations of quail follow boom-and-bust cycles that depend on habitat. Wet years, like 2010, have coincided with a rebound in populations.

But hunters in West Texas are disappointed that they haven't seen bunches of new coveys of bobwhites during the four-month upland game season, which wraps up on Feb. 27.

And some of these hunters are reporting an alarming trend, said Dr. Dale Rollins, director of the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch near Roby in Fisher County.

They will see their dogs go on point, but nothing flushes. Then they'll find the bird that was giving scent — dead, with no marks from a predator's fangs, just dead.

"For years," Rollins said, "we've been stressing habitat, habitat, habitat. If we build it, they will come.

"In other words, if it rains, we have quail. Well, we've had rain and we don't.

"Something is happening outside the habitat-precipitation paradigm."

Rollins said he is at a loss to explain what that is.

But Rollins and other quail researchers are taking a new look at disease.

For example, Rollins said the research ranch is looking at the possibility of avian influenza in quail.

He also noted the work last fall of the Quail Tech Alliance at Texas Tech University, which last fall discovered a scaled quail with antibodies that fight West Nile Virus.

The Lubbock-based researchers proved that the little bird had, at some point, come in contact with WNV.

That was in October, and similar discoveries have been made in another scaled quail and a bobwhite, said Dr. Brad Dabbert, Quail Tech's leader.

The alliance, which is about a year old, also found Newcastle disease in quail, and now the researchers are looking for signs of fowl cholera, Dabbert said.

But the researchers have been

struck by Rollins' findings.

"Basically," Dabbert explained, "there have been a lot of landowners and some people on Dale's board who had populations of quail in the fall — and then they didn't.

"And because they had decent rainfall in the spring, some people were expecting more of a boom than what they got. So that is a concern."

But the research ranch and Quail Tech Alliance are not working in vacuums.

In late January they joined the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M-Kingsville for a meeting in Sweetwater to discuss quail diseases.

Rollins called the participants the "big three" in quail research, but other experts also attended.

They came from Texas A&M University, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Oklahoma

Department of Wildlife Conservation and Audubon Texas.

Rollins called this consortium "Operation Ideopathic Decline."

Ideopathic, he said, is a medical term that simply means, "The doctors don't know."

By meeting regularly to share information, the members hope they'll zero in on the disease hypothesis.

But Dabbert warned against ignoring other reasons for less quail.

No one, so far, is backing off the belief that urbanization and overgrazing have swept away native grasses that quail need to thrive.

"One thing that concerns me is seeing verbiage like 'smoking gun,'" Dabbert said. "I don't know if we'll find a single smoking gun.

"One of my greatest fears is that some people will let the pendulum swing so far that we will forget to keep looking at habitat."

Rollins agreed.

"The smoking gun, most likely, has more than one cylinder," he said. "It is not a muzzleloader."

But to say there are no quail whatsoever is not true. With about half a month of season left, hunters can find coveys on ranches that have managed for quail, Dabbert said.

For example, Sam McAlexander of Amarillo, who manages hunting operations in the Panhandle, reported good activity the last weekend of January.

"I found four coveys that averaged about 16 birds each in less than an hour," he said, "so I am very encouraged about this year's bird hunting."



### FACT BOX

■ If while cleaning harvested quail you notice something strange like spots on its liver or hemorrhaging around the heart, the bird might be diseased. If so, researchers at Texas Tech University may want to examine it. To learn how to ship the bird to Tech, call (806) 885-4567.

## Pronghorn relocation effort reaches fund-raising goal

An iconic species of the Trans-Pecos region soon will get a boost when 200 Panhandle pronghorn are released onto the Marfa Plateau in late February, thanks to West Texas conservationists.

The initial Pronghorn Restoration Benefit held Jan. 29 at the Granada Theatre in Alpine raised more than \$50,000 to match a challenge grant from the Dixon Water Foundation and The Horizon Foundation.

The \$100,000 was needed to fund the project that will trap 200 pronghorn antelope in the Panhandle and transport to them to the Trans-Pecos.

"The benefit was a huge success," said Dr. Louis Harveson, professor of Natural Resource Management and director of the Borderlands Research Institute at Sul Ross State University.

Harveson is also a member of the Trans-Pecos Pronghorn Working Group.

"The challenge grant the Dixon Water Foundation and The Horizon Foundation provided really helped propel our fund-raising efforts," he said. "We were able to meet that \$50,000 challenge which will net us an additional \$50,000 from the foundations.

"If everything goes well, we will release another 200 pronghorn in 2012."

More than 300 people attended the event in Alpine.

"Everyone came together to help return this iconic species to the grasslands," Harveson said. "I am proud to be a part of it."

—Staff report



**COMEBACK:** Thanks to the efforts of concerned conservationists, 200 pronghorn will be moved from the Panhandle to the area around Marfa in an effort to repopulate its native range. Photo by LSON.