

COVEY RISE®



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FEATURES

36 *Los Laureles*

The treasure of Argentina

46 *Wildrose Revisited*

Training, transition, and trust

54 *Timeless Victorian Inventions*

History's hand on today's sporting guns

62 *Fresh Fare and a Side of History*

Hudson Valley's Stissing House

70 *Perfect Imperfection*

Tangible connections to history through artisan furnishings

80 *Unanswered Questions*

Bobwhite harvest research in South Texas

Correspondence: page 18

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Bobwhite harvest research in South Texas

STORY BY ABE WOODARD OF THE EAST FOUNDATION







If I mention “pheasant hunting,” most upland hunters will imagine a CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) field somewhere in Kansas, Nebraska, or South Dakota. Likewise, at the mention of “quail hunting,” people typically think of pine savannas in the Southeast or a vast ranch in Texas, specifically South Texas.

Although many regions have quail populations, South Texas is ranked as the best quail hunting in the world—hands down. The reason is simple, South Texas bobwhite populations have remained stable for decades—with annual fluctuations—while all other regions’ quail populations have declined. Despite the stability of bobwhites in South Texas, many folks have reservations regarding the harvest of a species suffering from widespread decline—and rightfully so. The sustainability of hunted populations is a primary concern for landowners and hunters in the region.

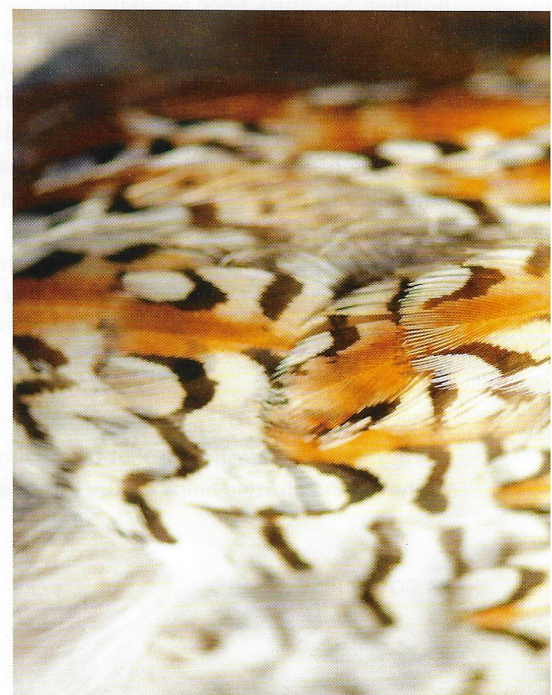
With these concerns in mind, the East Foundation began strategically planning the future direction of their quail research efforts in 2018. The East Foundation is an agricultural research organization that owns and manages over 217,000 acres in South Texas, and its mission is to promote the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. Therefore, the vision for their quail research was to investigate

unexplored fundamental principles and unanswered scientific questions in quail management that still need to be addressed, specifically on tracts of land greater than 5,000 acres and for durations of more than 5 to 10 years, scales not possible for most research projects.

What was developed is now known as the Sustainable Bobwhite Harvest Project. The aim of the project is to address unanswered questions related to harvest and the effects of harvest pressure on bobwhite populations. The investigations began on 30,000 acres but have now expanded to include over 70,000 acres in Jim Hogg and Kenedy Counties in South Texas.

Some of the critical questions being addressed are:

- › Is the 20 percent harvest rate recommendation for South Texas sustainable?
- › What is a viable spring density (a.k.a. breeding population) for bobwhites?
- › Does hunting impact bobwhite distributions and the use of available space?
- › What are the dynamics of bobwhite hunts in South Texas?
- › Does road baiting affect bobwhite distributions and harvest efficiency?
- › How many bobwhites are unknowingly crippled during hunts?





The following are highlights and interesting facts uncovered throughout the first 5 years of the project.

EVALUATING SUSTAINABLE HARVEST PRESCRIPTIONS Despite a century of quail research, there is still ample debate regarding annual harvest rates and the persistence of northern bobwhite populations exposed to hunting. Scientists have recommended various harvest rates ranging from 0 percent to 70 percent of fall populations, but the current recommendation for South Texas is a 20 percent harvest, including factoring in crippling losses (i.e., 16 percent retrieved and 4 percent crippled). However, the feasibility of implementing a 20 percent harvest and the sustainability of the remaining spring populations were untested before this project.

We incorporate the use of helicopter surveys to estimate bobwhite density over time and calculate harvest prescriptions. We survey our study sites in November, mid-December,

BOBS AND BARRELS

Asking research questions about the health and well-being of the upland lifestyle helps ensure future days afield.

late January, and March, with our harvest prescription calculated from our November bobwhite abundance estimate. Hunting cooperators are given these prescriptions at the onset of quail-hunting season, and hunts are ongoing until harvest prescriptions are met.

We found that from November to March, population declines in bobwhites varied seasonally between hunted (54 percent \pm 3 percent SE) and nonhunted sites (46 percent \pm 5 percent SE), with spring densities that were comparable between hunted and non-hunted sites most years, but diverged in others, such as in 2021 when spring density was 129 percent higher on nonhunted land after a February freeze.

Our preliminary results suggest that harvest is a sustainable element of management in South Texas. However, we encourage managers to consider the challenge associated with estimating bobwhite density (number of bobwhites) and the variation within a density estimate (i.e., confidence intervals), along with other factors influencing survival like food availability, cover, etc. Our current recommendation is to apply a conservative approach when calculating a harvest prescription, such as a reduced harvest rate of 15 percent or calculating harvest prescriptions using the lower confidence intervals of your density estimates.





TWO BIRDS PER COVEY: ANALYZING A QUAIL-HUNTING TRADITION

If you look at hunting cultures across the world, you will see many interesting dynamics. The quail-hunting culture in South Texas is no different. You must follow many unwritten traditions and rules or you will wear out your welcome at many hunting camps.

One of these traditions is a maximum harvest limit per covey found. For example, when a typical quail-hunting party locates a covey, hunters will stop shooting after two individual bobwhites have been harvested. Other camps may limit the total harvest per covey to three bobwhites, but it may include any crippled or unrecovered birds. In a similar fashion, some camps will not pursue coveys that are less than a certain number of individual birds.

Although these self-imposed limits aim to be conservative or reduce total harvest, the actual effect is often difficult to determine. A benefit of the Sustainable Bobwhite Harvest Project is that we set no limit to the number of harvests-per-covey. In fact, hunting cooperators were encouraged to maximize harvest per covey encounter and total daily harvest. The *only* limit we place on the harvest is the total harvest quota for the year. This quota represents 20 percent of the peak fall population, as determined by helicopter surveys.

QUESTION THE ASSUMPTIONS

Asking questions about our collective assumptions helps move the conversation along in substantive ways, even if the questions don't focus on conservation.

Therefore, with the data we recorded for each covey interaction—covey size, shots fired, harvest, crippled—we analyzed the magnitude that self-imposed limits would have had on total harvest per interaction, total daily harvest, and total harvest per season.

In total, we analyzed 4,465 individual covey interactions that occurred during 555 hunts over the last five hunting seasons. On average, hunters fired approximately four-and-a-half gunshots per encounter, harvested one bobwhite, and crippled an additional third of a bobwhite. Only 10 percent of the covey interactions resulted in more than two bobwhites harvested, and only 6 percent resulted in more than three bobwhites harvested or crippled.

If hunters followed standard tradition and limited harvest to two bobwhites per covey: The average harvest-per-covey interaction would have been reduced by 10 percent, the average daily harvest would have been reduced by 15 percent, and the total annual harvest would be reduced by 14 percent on average, ranging from 6 to 19 percent across the nine samples. If hunters limited harvest to three bobwhites per covey, including crippled birds: The average harvest per interaction would have been reduced by 8 percent, the average daily harvest would have been reduced by 8 percent, and the total annual harvest would be reduced by 7 percent on average, ranging between 2 to 12 percent across the nine samples.

Our results show that a two- or three-bird limit reduces total harvest per interaction, total harvest per day, and total harvest per year. However, our comparison is also with a finite number of total hunts, which is often an uncontrollable dynamic to manage. For instance, a two-bird limit per covey may not account for the length of the season, total hunts, and the total number of encounters. Or the fact that a covey is often fluid, with bobwhites travelling among and between coveys, which limits the ability to preserve individual covey groups.

We recommend that managers strategically plan hunts and total harvest according to annual densities. Nevertheless, managers can still use various strategies and traditions, such as two birds per covey or 20 birds per truck day, to distribute hunting pressure and the prescribed harvest densities across long seasons.

BATTLE OF THE SEXES: ENGLISH POINTER EDITION

Upland hunting comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. This can also be said about the four-legged companions we use to pursue upland gamebirds. Which breed is superior? That's an argument for another day. Which gender, however,







is a question we may have an answer for. Although most gender preferences are based on personal bias, the Sustainable Bobwhite Harvest Project has provided a relatively large, unbiased dataset that allows us to compare male and female performance metrics within the English pointer breed.

We have analyzed the spatial and temporal aspects of northern bobwhite hunts by tracking hunting dogs via GPS units and detailed hunting logs, which included breed, brace times, covey finds, false points, etc., during the 2018, 2019, and 2020 statewide quail hunting seasons. During these hunts, we recorded tracklogs and hunting parameters from 143 English pointers. The guides slightly favored males, with 63 females versus 80 males recorded. To compare the genders, we looked at the total time spent hunting, velocity, endurance, coveys found, and false points.

PERSONAL OPINION INFORMED

Male or female dog? Obviously personal choice drives the decision, but data can inform and refine those choices.

The performance metrics we measured were relatively similar across genders. Generally speaking, we found that the average male was slightly faster, covered 5 acres more per hour, but had lower endurance when measuring for velocity and run time.

To really separate and compare the genders, we had to look at the top 10 males versus the top 10 females. In this comparison, we found that the top 10 males had higher endurance metrics (travelled 185 yards further) and a statistically significant difference in the number of productive points per hour, which happens to be the only significant difference we found. Males pointed 2.3 coveys an hour while females pointed 1.8 coveys per hour. But this does not consider the other facets of dog work that dictate an excellent hunting performance. For instance, we only credited the dog that initially pointed the covey, but there is value in bird dogs who will hunt close, honor another dog's point, and find the downed game.

So, if you are looking for a dog with higher performance, your odds are greater if you stick with male dogs. If you are like me and appreciate all aspects of dog work, you should get a few of each! 🍀