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PANEL SESSION I

TRENDS IN PRINCIPAL MANAGEMENT THEMES

Moderator -- William F. Brown, Editor
The American Field

BOBWHITE QUAIL ON SHOOTING PRESERVES

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Let there be no doubt that the bobwhite quail is king among game birds south of the Mason-Dixon line, whether found in the wild or on shooting preserves. No one can accurately estimate the number of bobwhite quail being shot annually on the shooting preserves; however, a conservative indication would put the annual increase in harvest at about 10%.

Quality quail hunting on shooting preserves is not easily achieved. It requires attention to a multitude of details, as contrasted to the flighting of pheasants, chukars, and mallards. Yet quality birds on a shooting preserve can so closely simulate wild hunting of bobwhites that you have to blink your eyes to tell the difference.

As with all animals, the behavior of bobwhite quail depends on heredity and environment, and it is difficult to tell which of these factors is more important. Quail are delicate and can lose an ounce of weight within 1 or 2 days. And we know that good, wild, pen-reared stock can, in a matter of a few weeks, perform in an unsatisfactory manner in the field. Birds that yesterday or last week were a challenge to any hunter now are poor flyers, run in the open ahead of the dog, and hesitate to flush.

I wish it were possible to define exactly what we mean by "wild stock," but it isn't. I do know that there is a difference between strains of bobwhite quail produced by various game bird breeders-- some have a wild spark and some don't. And I have yet to see a thoroughly domesticated strain of bobwhite quail perform well in the field. Efforts to provide optimum quail environment simply will not compensate for a lack of "wildness" in a bobwhite quail; it is essential to start with good wild stock.

Our experience at Nilo Farms indicates that isolation of the birds from human disturbance is important. We permit no visitors at our quail-holding pens; and as much as possible, only 1 man takes care of feeding and watering these birds.

Overhead cover apparently affects the birds' behavior in the field. Our present holding pens were constructed in a timbered area, and the quail behaved beautifully in front of the bird dogs and hunters until frost removed the leaf cover from the trees. To correct the situation, we attached some sheet metal roofing over about 0.75 of the pen. It did the trick--at least, our released birds no longer sought an open spot when released in the field.

There are few things on a shooting preserve more embarrassing than a covey of birds milling around in an opening in the vegetation when a dog is on point. Providing overhead cover, either natural or artificial, has virtually eliminated this for us.

Weather conditioning is also important. Our birds are maintained in the open in standard holding pens--not in an enclosed brooder house--since this helps to develop proper feathering which, in turn, results in good flyers and quail which can survive the elements following release.

Bobwhites are quite fastidious, and it's essential that dust pans be available, and that the dirt in the pans be changed every few days. And they cannot be crowded. We provide a minimum of 2 sq ft per bird to prevent cannibalism.

Feed conditioning is another critical factor. We maintain the birds on the same rations used by the game breeder from whom they were purchased, but supplement their diet with baled millet. This accustoms the bird to the grain they will find on the shooting areas and keeps them occupied and contented while in the holding pen. Naturally, fresh water must be available at all times, including periods of subfreezing weather.

The greatest scourge of pen-reared bobwhite quail is ulcerative enteritis, a disease which has been the bane of existence to many a game breeder and shooting preserve operator over the years. Our holding pens have a wire floor, and this may be the reason we have had only 2 minor outbreaks of the disease during the past 15 years.

We were lucky. Both outbreaks were diagnosed quickly and the following medication promptly administered: 5 cc of streptomycin added to each gallon of water for 5 days, then 1 cc to each gallon for at least 5 more days. I have a hunch that the speed with which treatment for ulcerative enteritis is started is a deciding factor in its control. I say "hunch" since we dare not risk allowing the disease to gain momentum before administering the streptomycin.

Ten years ago we constructed a flight pen for conditioning bobwhite quail. It was the "thing to do." However, we soon learned that good-quality bobwhites, isolated from human disturbance and not overly crowded, get abundant exercise in a pen 8 ft wide by 28 ft long and 3 ft high. Our former quail pen has now been converted to a chukar-holding pen.

There are probably almost as many ways to release bobwhite quail on shooting preserves as there are preserves. We still adhere to the technique outlined in our book, "Shooting Preserve Management--The Nilo System." The birds are handled by man only once between the holding pen and the field--when they are taken out of the catch box and put into the release crate. Again, experience has shown that a knowledgeable birdhandler quickly learns to distinguish between a potentially good or poor flyer by the reaction of the quail when he has it in his hand.

We try to provide our guests with a covey rise of 5 to 6 birds, and then follow up any singles which we're able to mark down. For a good covey rise, the birds should be released in appropriate cover. We look for thick ground cover such as a brome grass or a harvested wheat field with an understory of Korean lespedeza and little overhead cover. Birds planted in heavy overhead cover that's open at ground level will run ahead of the dog and go out as singles. May I suggest that you pay particular attention to the cover when you view "The Show-Me Hunter" following the banquet Tuesday evening.

Precipitation presents special problems in handling shooting preserve quail north of the Mason-Dixon line. Bobwhite quail don't perform at their best during snowfall, or even when an inch or 2 of snow is on the ground. Nor do they fly in a satisfactory manner on rainy days. Rather than be embarrassed by subquality behavior of birds before guests, we do not flight bobwhite quail under such conditions; we substitute either pheasants or chukars.

Contrary to popular opinion, pen-reared quail are not always warmly welcomed into coveys of wild birds. We have 12 to 15 coveys of wild quail on our 700 acres at Nilo Farms, but those birds seldom accept pen-reared quail that are not harvested by our hunters. More often than not, they are unwelcome--and we have had very few observations of pen-reared birds within the wild coveys.

So much for the birds; let's discuss the shooting preserve industry.

Shooting preserve operators need the patience and understanding of the public. Though many people think so, operating a shooting preserve is no Golconda. To a great extent, it's a labor of love though it does provide a fair return on the operator's investment, providing he and his family have a compassion for the general public and are willing to work long hours.

It is essential that state game departments work closely with preserve operators; the state people can be of immense help for they are in an excellent position to provide publicity for the concept and to enforce minimum quality standards for shooting preserves.

Everyone loses when even one individual operates a substandard shooting preserve. Granted, it's only a question of time before he goes out of business. But until he does, he creates a terrible public

image for the good shooting preserve operator and leaves a trail of disillusioned hunters. Eventually the state game departments will insist on minimum standards; and when they do, they will have the cooperation and backing of the majority of shooting preserve operators.

There's been a lot said about quality hunting on shooting preserves. But quality isn't entirely a matter of management. Frankly, I've reached the conclusion that the quality of hunting also depends on the type of customer. During the years I've been at Nilo Farms we have had both quail and pheasants so difficult to bag that some hunting parties were embarrassed by their poor shooting. Had these hunters been paying for only birds bagged, we would have gone broke. Unfortunately, our supply of supercharged quail disappeared; however, the birds now available allow our guests to come back from the field happy and full of pride in their shooting prowess.

For the last 3 years we have worked with a cross of the usual pen-reared pheasant and the Korean strain--a small, wild and touchy bird. It soon became apparent that these Korean crosses were too wild for some of our guests, and now we have wild pheasants and not-so-wild pheasants to accommodate the good shooters and not-so-good shooters.

What I'm driving at is the fact that the shooting preserve operator has to cater to his customers. Actually, he can provide hunting just about as difficult as anyone wants.

It's also been my observation that most hunters are more interested in action than communing with nature.

It is indeed unfortunate that shooting preserve operators have had to guarantee bags to attract patrons since, in reality, they are in the business of outdoor recreation--selling a sporting chance to harvest a given number of birds, not carcasses. So the next time you feel like criticizing a shooting preserve operator--remember that he is trying to earn a living, and that "the customer is always right." If he doesn't supply an acceptable product at a reasonable price, his competition will.

THE TRADITIONAL SOUTHERN BOBWHITE QUAIL PLANTATIONS

Leon Neel, Tall Timbers Research Station, Thomasville, Ga.

The private shooting plantations of the southeast occupy a most interesting place in the history and development of wildlife management in our country. Dedicated principally to the classic sport of bobwhite quail shooting, these properties stretched from Virginia to Texas and ranged in size from a few hundred to thousands of acres of southern land.

In the Thomasville, Georgia - Tallahassee, Florida area, private ownership of land for recreational purposes, specifically quail shooting, began in the late nineteenth century. Prior to this the sport was exercised in varying degrees by local people as the need for food or