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TEXANS CLAMORED FOR QUAIL IN THE 1930S

by Rollin H. Baker

In your mind's eye picture yourself back in the rather ancient 1930s. Jobs and money were scarce, drought wrought havoc on crops, particles from dust storms made many an eye bleary, and prospects in every direction were dim.

In those mean, lean days there was not much to heighten one's spirits. Certainly watching movie actors cavort in frivolous roles depicting the monied set, an assortment of comics and soap operas on radio shows, and assorted sporting events may have helped Texans and others forget the troubled economy.

The Texas Game, Fish & Oyster Commission (now Texas Parks & Wildlife Department), also did its best to encourage citizens to forget their urban and farm/ranch problems and learn to enjoy the out-of-doors by becoming acquainted with the diverse array of the state's wildlife resources.

Promoting Texas's Wildlife and Fisheries Resources

Through the exceptional oratory of Executive Secretary William J. Tucker at public meetings, news stories and bulletins ably prepared by Publicist J.G. Burr, and articles by popular outdoor writers for major newspapers, Texas hunters, fishermen, trappers, nature lovers, outdoor enthusiasts, and political supporters were kept abreast of the ups and downs of game, fur-bearing animals, fish, and shellfish.

And the public responded. In the summer of 1939, this scribe was in the audience when Tucker spoke about the Commission's fish program to an overflow crowd of several hundred sportsmen at a meeting of the Beaumont Rod and Reel Club. Tucker's booming delivery had been cultivated when he had to yell commands loudly to his troops during noisy trench warfare when he was a captain in the Rainbow Division in WWI.

Law Enforcement Alone Insufficient to Sustain these Resources

The basic policy of the Commission in the early days of the decade was to enforce laws then regarded as adequate to regulate the harvest of game, fur bearers, fish, and shellfish so that sufficient breeding populations were preserved – sometimes augmented with stocking and predatory animal control – to nurture another shootable, trappable, fishable, or nettable surplus the next year.

By the middle of the decade, conservation (and restoration) of renewable wildlife resources was emerging as more than just a fantastic dream initiated in part by a growing national leadership of such stalwarts as A. Leopold, H. Stoddard, R. Bennett, S. Gordon, Ding Darling, I. Bode, O. Murie, and I. Gabrielson. In response to this national awakening, the embryonic science of wildlife research, ecology, and management in Texas evolved in 1935 with Texas A&M in a major leadership role. Dr. Walter P. Taylor, a highly reputable

vertebrate ecologist, was dispatched from Arizona to College Station to head the newly-created and partly federally funded Texas Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit.

This action, plus monies made available later through the Pitman-Robertson Federal Aid to Wildlife Act and the Dingle-Johnson Federal Aid to Fisheries Act, enabled the TGF&OC to hire a scientific staff, trained at Texas A&M and elsewhere, and trigger the beginnings of our modern philosophic and action programs for using, but not abusing, these important resources.

By 1936-1937, the readjusting of old values and the addition of new ones came about. The system of just protecting game surpluses by law enforcement, enhanced by game-and-fish stockings and predator control, became inter-married with the necessity to look not only at the species of game, fur bearers, or fish themselves, but also at the environments in which these resources actually lived.

One could write a thick volume filled with hard-to-believe accounts about how pioneering pre-WWII Commission biologists and other personnel brought beaver and turkey back to East Texas, pronghorn back to West Texas, and severely limited the decades-old practice of unwise predator control. However, for now let us recount some of the highlights of the attention given to bobwhite quail during those eventful years.

Upland Game's Darling - The Bobwhite Quail

In the 1930s, the bobwhite quail was Texas' most widespread and behaviorally-exciting upland game bird. It was treasured by thousands of avid sportsmen in eastern, central, and southern Texas.

Trained bird dogs were a necessity for the successful hunt. Kennels housing pointers and setters were commonplace and conspicuous even in the smallest Texas communities. Escapees from their wire-mesh enclosures were carefully avoided by thoughtful motorists when the blooded and highly-trained animals wandered aimlessly along highway rights-of-way to the consternation of their less than vigilant owners. Sometimes these escapees were picked up or the dogs were stolen out of kennels by unsavory persons just before the opening of the season in November. What could be lower than to acquire another's pointer or setter just for the autumn hunt and afterwards either turn the animal loose or sneak it back in its home kennel.

A lesser number of bird dogs were trained solely to compete in field-trials. Owners and handlers entered their highly-bred animals in such events held annually in specially designed and extensive field-trial courses both locally, such as at one near Blessing and out-of-state. These field-trial dogs, skilled in far-ranging action, should not be confused at all with those close-working pointers and setters preferred by local connoisseurs of just good quail hunting dogs.

The popularity of the bobwhite quail as both a sporting target and an insect- and weed seed-eating friend of the farmer gained notice among lawmakers in Austin. For officials of the TGF&OC this could be worrisome.

For example, a newly-elected and zealous member of the legislature, without consulting the Commission but anxious to impress the folks in his home county, might author a bill to close the hunting season on bobwhites for two years and get obliging colleagues to pass it without fanfare. He might lose a few votes to angry and law-abiding hunters but could proudly boast to farmer friends and even bird-watchers that he had not only written but "skillfully" led his very first bill through the complicated legislative process. However, on one occasion in Polk County local bobwhite quail enthusiasts helped get such a law passed in order to discourage "big city" sportsmen from invading their county to hunt. As a result many locals might conceivably hunt with legal barriers less demanding than in the case of hunters who were penalized according to the law because their dog-carrying vehicles had out-of-county license plates.

At War with Armadillos and Foxes

Sportsmen specializing in raising bird dogs and hunting bobwhites were fairly-well organized. This gave them clout in badgering officials of the TGF&OC to consider declaring war on such alleged bobwhite predators as the newly-arrived (and expanding its range northward), and poorly-understood, nine-banded armadillo and "bird-hungry" foxes. As for the latter, the fox-hunting "lobby" fought back successfully, but the lowly armadillo had no knight-in-armor champion to speak in its defense.

What happened to subdue at least some of the hue-and-cry for the armadillo's demise were studies to convince the public that there was nary a shred of evidence that armadillos were dyed-in-the-wool nest destroyers. Certainly an armadillo might indeed disrupt a quail nest were the rooting creature to encounter one accidentally. However, this rather inoffensive animal did not "purposely" spend all of its foraging time during the quail-nesting season "specifically" seeking out nests in order to get a daily ration of edible eggs.

These findings were backed by investigators who found that: (1) monitored dummy nests filled with quail eggs were untouched by armadillos even in areas where they were abundant; and (2) no quail egg contents or tell-tale shell remains were found in the stomach contents of armadillos obtained from high-density quail country in May and June. Even so, many quail hunters remained skeptical and continued in those days to shoot the lowly armadillo on every occasion.

The Scientific Approach to Better Quail Hunting

By 1936, game biologist Valgene W. Lehmann, first hired by the TA&M Unit and later by the Pitman-Robertson Federal Aid to Wildlife Program of the TGF&OC, stepped boldly into the middle of the controversy about bobwhite quail productivity. By field demonstrations, numerous service and sportsmen club talks, and published bulletins and news articles, Lehmann and associates broadcast convincingly that places where Texas bobwhites would flourish required a year-around food supply (variable as to season), quality woody

winter cover – especially in open lands at which coveys could establish their territorial headquarters, and a prescribed open season and bag limit to regulate the kill. This three-fold suggestion was a new but logical concept. It was sold publicly through an excellent public relations program with tremendous assistance from newspapers' outdoor writers.

In addition, actual demonstrations of the effectiveness of planted food patches and cover plantings as bobwhite attractants where these environmental features were in short supply were convincing.

In the piney woods of East Texas, game biologists, notably Daniel W. Lay, demonstrated that bobwhite populations waxed and waned in the normal plant successions occurring when cut-over pine woodlands slowly re-established themselves. Also shown was that late-winter, controlled-ground-cover spot burning in longleaf pine woodlands removing sterile pine needles, old clumps of brooms edge, low shrubs, and other duff and encouraged the growth of desirable, seed-bearing plants as choice foods for both bobwhites and turkey.

The Mexican Quail Importation Program

One of the most popular bobwhite-related activities in the 1930s was the Mexican Quail Importation Program. In brief, the TGF&OC bought live-trapped birds from importers who obtained them from trappers located across the Rio Grande.

Each fall the importers shipped especially-constructed crates, each containing twenty-four live "Mexican" bobwhites, to buyers who joined with the TGF&OC in cooperatively splitting the modest costs – anywhere from seventy-seven cents to a dollar for each bird. The program was impressively large – in 1937, for example, the TGF&OC imported 10,000 birds and in 1940, 20,400 birds.

Everyone was completely satisfied. The trappers and the importers were happy to have their money; the sportsmen were happy to release the birds in their "favorite" areas; and the officials of the TGF&OC were happy at the favorable publicity obtained and that their quail fanciers were happy.

However, after the Pitman-Robertson Federal Aid biologists, hired beginning in 1938, had taken a careful look, they suggested to top TGF&OC officials that this quail liberation program was unjustified from a scientific standpoint and needed to be thoroughly examined. Late in the summer of 1939, Game Division Chief Phil Goodrum ordered your scribe and another field biologist, Paul Jones, to turn over their normal duties to others and draft a plan to evaluate the program.

Our strategy to address this problem was accepted, so we divided into equal numbers the counties where liberations had occurred in the autumn of 1939. Then, armed with names and addresses of the recipients of the shipments, we began a county-to-county survey of a sampling of these releases to examine the kinds of habitats in which the birds were released and whether these liberation sites already contained native bobwhite populations.

By the summer of 1940, after inspecting release sites, in my case from such temporary field bases as Lufkin, Amarillo, San Angelo, and Austin, the survey was completed. A report of findings was submitted to Goodrum and forwarded with his blessing to Executive Secretary William J. Tucker.

The field team cautiously had recommended that the "expensive" practice be discontinued. This was on the basis that almost every place where the crated birds were released already had abundant native bobwhite populations present. Further, even if the alien birds were to survive the rigors of habitat change, their presence was certainly not required to support or augment local populations.

To gain a more solid and convincing position, another liberation was proposed in which 4,000 of the 20,000 wild-trapped birds purchased in 1940 were banded before release. Only thirty of these banded birds were reported subsequent to their release by hunters. These birds, apparently unsettled, had also traveled an average of 6.3 miles from their release sites. For those release sites given careful study, only fifteen percent of the liberated birds apparently survived. This failure was expected, according to many experienced East Texas hunters, who thought the Mexican quail, when compared with native birds, were smaller, paler in color, poorly adapted to local conditions, and less spotty because they were more apt to run than hold in front of their dogs.

Tucker and the commissioners, after examining the evidence, adopted the recommendations and abolished the "Mexican" quail project in 1941. As expected, there was much hue-and-cry and threatening statements from legislators, dog trainers and handlers, individual hunters, and hunting clubs. Nevertheless, Tucker stood firm and in a year or two the public forgot – at least to complain publicly – about this interesting "experiment" in unnecessary and definitely unscientific wildlife propagation.

The report was not altogether a negative one. The authors did indicate for purposes of public and political relations that the live-bird-release program gained considerable favorable news coverage and public support for the TGF&OC. In fact, many of these crates of birds were eagerly purchased by local office-seekers who found them useful as campaign hand-outs to gain friends and influence people.

The glamorous bobwhite quail was a crown jewel amid the spectacular array of Texas' fauna and floral attractions offered to outdoor enthusiasts in the 1930s, and for many, it still is!