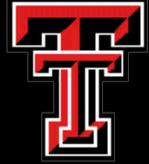




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2017 “FALL” COVEY COUNT “AVERAGE”

By: Matthew McEwen and Brad Dabbert

“It is in the ‘in-between’, average years that the best opportunity exists to do something towards increasing bobwhites.”—A.J. Jackson 1963



This year marks the 7th year the Quail-Tech Alliance has conducted fall bobwhite covey call counts on Anchor Ranches across the Rolling Plains. We now occupy over 150 points before daylight from mid-October to mid-November listening for the hallowed “koilee” call. When the inaugural QT fall covey counts began in 2010, the average across the anchor ranches was almost 4 coveys per point. During 2011 the average dropped to less than 2. We were lucky to hear those few coveys weren’t we? Then, slowly the Rolling Plains edged its way out

Though average quail population abundance is down, quality hunting is still readily available in the Rolling Plains of Texas.

of one of the worst droughts in modern record, and our Alliance average reflected a recovered average of 2-3 coveys in 2012-2013 before increasing to 4-5 in 2014, then to 7-8 in 2015-2016, respectively (Figure 2). How fortunate were we to have witnessed the past two years in the bobwhite world? Personally, I recall one area last year where scaled quail and bobwhites cohabitate and coveys were flushing like popcorn across the prairie.

So, here we are in 2017, looking at the cycle that fulfills that feared decline. The overall QT Alliance 2017 average is down 20% from the phenomenal 8 coveys last year to 6.47 this year (Figure 2). But, did they have anywhere to go but down and should this decline from historic highs really be unexpected? With the Alliance wide average still holding above 6 coveys per point this year, it remains a far cry from the 2011-2013 period. Let’s recall from the iconic “A Handbook for Bobwhite Quail Management in the West Texas Rolling Plains” A.S. Jackson (1963) regarding the boom of 1958 as if he was speaking on the last two years of 2015 or 2016: *“If every opening season found bobwhites as abundant in the Rolling Plains as they were in 1958 there would be no management problem except that of encouraging enough harvest to prevent a great waste.”* However, he also reminds us, *“bobwhites seldom hold at such numbers for more than a year—rarely two.”* The last two “bumper crop” years found bobwhites so abundant they were seen in areas not normally associated with bobwhite habitat, such as barren fields of cotton stalks and vacant lots near Wal-Mart parking lots. But, it’s really hard to win a championship (in this case a quail numbers championship) 2 years in a row.

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This may be an “average” year, which after the last two years means the number has fallen, but as Jackson suggests, this is the time for best management practices. What’s the best-case scenario for next year to look like, another average year? What’s the worst, 2011-2012? Now is the time to do good work. Is this the year that we harvest conservatively, or implement a drought proof stocking rate to save 2018’s nesting cover or will we only be at the mercy of the weather? Food will become limiting for quail in many areas. Now is the time to adopt

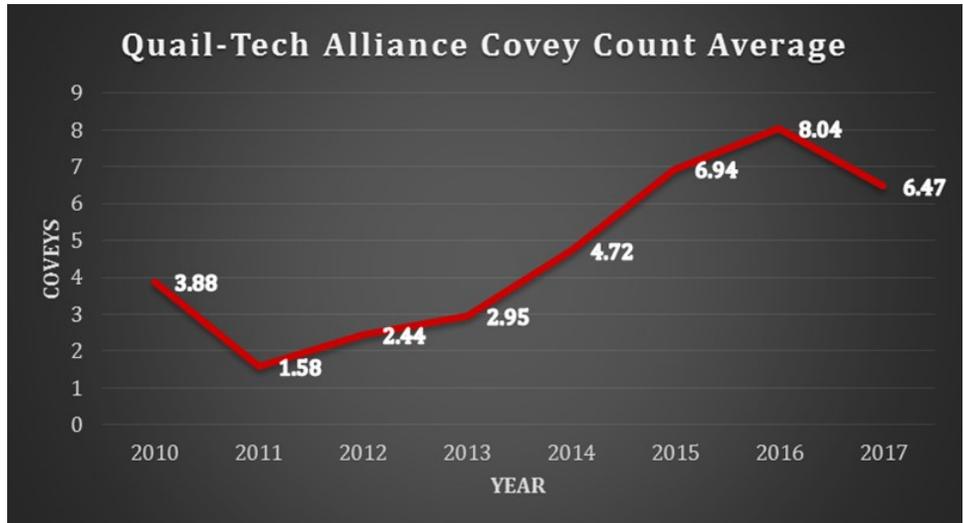


Figure 2. QT Alliance covey count average 2010-2017.

the broadcast supplemental feeding techniques (see previous e-bulletins) that we have developed over the past 5 years that increased average adult overwinter survival by 22% and increased nest output per hen even during the dry weather. Generally, our anchor ranches that are broadcasting supplemental feed into the roadside vegetation are currently moving 20+ pointed coveys per day. Management practices can be used to soften the blow of the harsh environment.

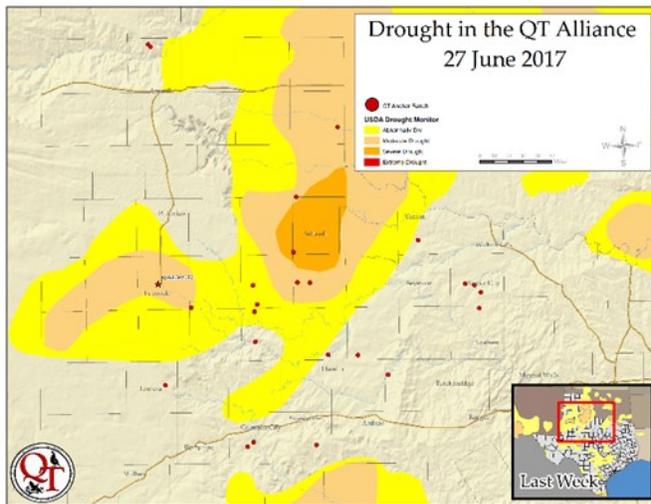


Figure 3. Drought in the Quail-Tech Alliance June 27, 2017.

Let’s hope that this dry weather does not portend a sustained drought and corresponding quail decline that will bottom out at 1-3 coveys per point in the coming years; fulfilling the dismal bust cycle all over again. This summer was harsh for much of the breeding season (nest success down 28% from 2016) across many parts of the region (Figure 3), while other areas were spared the extended dry and hot spell. We may not have had the warning that 2011 and 2012 were going to be the terrible drought of rain and quail that they were, but we can expect that quail numbers may decrease even more this year and the next, if nothing is done. Therefore, let us work to be proactive in management for bobwhites, and pursue the best-case scenario for the birds even if unfavorable environmental factors continue to occur across the region.

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As unfortunate as it was to hear fewer birds this year, we are always thankful for the sturdy work/volunteer force that sacrificed sleep and weekends out of town during those months when we must be on a ranch, and on point an hour before sunrise (Figure 4). We were fortunate to have many bluebird mornings as well. Last but not least, we couldn't do this without the support from the Anchor Ranches, especially during hunting season. We look forward to hearing back about your respective seasons, and for those of you interested, we welcome your crops and wings for food habit studies and age ratio analysis.

Thanks always for your continued support.

Figure 4. Sunrise at a bobwhite covey call count point in King County, TX.

Reference: "A Handbook for Bobwhite Quail Management in the West Texas Rolling Plains" A.S. Jackson (1963)
https://baylor.agrilife.org/files/2011/06/Quail_Management_Handbook_for_West_Texas_Rolling_Plains_21.pdf