

# LONE STAR OUTDOOR NEWS

## Increased precipitation increases odds for next season

By **Bill Miller** for Lone Star Outdoor news  
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State biologists predicted this quail season would be average to downright lousy across Texas, and they were right.

Last summer's drought prevented bobwhite populations from making a rebound in South Texas — a grim leftover from a decade that was mostly dry.

Success this season has been "spotty" in other regions, said Robert Perez, the upland game program leader for Texas Parks and Wildlife.

"South Texas surveys didn't look good as the season started," Perez said. "Private ranchers told me early on that they're skipping this year.

"The vast majority are light hunting, or they're not hunting at all."

State managers have done likewise. A public hunt scheduled for early January at Chaparral Wildlife Management Area, southwest of San Antonio, was limited to dove only.

"The Rolling Plains has been kind of a mixed bag," Perez added. "It did a lot better than South Texas because they had some rain. But it was real spotty."

All was bleak as the state entered February — the final month of the upland game season.

But that's not the whole story.

It may take another year, but conditions are improving for a possible bobwhite resurgence in Texas.

One is environmental, the other is mental.

Recent rainfall and a little snow contributed to the first factor. A green up will provide weeds that the little birds like to eat and cover for them to hide and nest.

"We know at least we got winter moisture for the birds we have now," Perez said. "If we can get some spring moisture, we'll set them up nicely for breeding across the summer.

"They have the ability to reproduce very quickly if conditions are right. But even with all that in place, it still generally takes two years of good weather, back to back."

The mental component refers to new attitudes among landowners who are seeking ways to improve quail habitat.

TPW, along with non-profit groups and universities, are ready to help them.

"Ranching for quail" provides income from hunting operations, but it also sets up an ecosystem that benefits other birds and wildlife, biologists say.

Perez noted that areas with strong quail numbers this season are typically ranches that are taking steps to protect habitat.

"If you have good management, you're making proactive decisions to leave some cover for these birds," he said. "You may still have some declines, but they're not going to disappear."

Take, for example, Dallas businessman Charles Hodges who has begun several quail-friendly practices on his Rolling Plains ranch in Dickens County. Included are supplemental feeding, deferred grazing and reduced bag limits while hunting.

"Our best day we saw 17 coveys," Hodges said. "We feel that what we're doing helps."

Hodges, an alum of Texas Tech University, drives nearly four hours from Dallas to reach his ranch near Spur, but his commitment to quail is much wider than that.

He is one of the co-founders of the Quail-Tech Alliance, a partnership between the nonprofit Quail First and Texas Tech's natural resources management department.

The alliance aims to create a wide range of quail research projects on "anchor ranches" across the Rolling Plains, looking at the many reasons why quail numbers are down, and how to reverse those trends.

Issues include "fragmented" habitat, genetics and disease, to name a few.

Hodges and other Tech alums came up with the idea during a meeting last March of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Growers Association in Fort Worth.

They soon recruited 40 anchor ranches, and they hope to add more. Projects involving Tech students began Jan. 1.

The researchers are tasked with developing multiple "best practices" for quail management, said Dr. Brad Dabbert, research project director and associate chairman of Tech's Department of Natural Resources Management.

"We're not telling landowners what to do," Dabbert said, "but we will be giving them recommendations."

In five years the researchers plan to compile their findings in an easy-to-read handbook for landowners.

Dabbert said the prognosis is good for Texas bobwhites, but not just because of Quail-Tech's fledgling efforts.

He said other groups have already been working on these problems. He credited the efforts of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville and the Quail & Grassland Bird Project of Audubon Texas.

"That's good," Hodges said. "The more soldiers we have in the field, the greater our chances are of unlocking the code of resilient quail genetics, which can benefit the entire gene pool."

#### **Quail-Tech Alliance**

[www.quail-tech.org/](http://www.quail-tech.org/)

#### **Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute**

[Ckwri.tamuk.edu/](http://Ckwri.tamuk.edu/)

#### **Quail & Grassland Bird Project of Audubon Texas**

[www.sabalpalmaudubon.org/quail.html](http://www.sabalpalmaudubon.org/quail.html)

#### **Texas Parks and Wildlife**

[www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/hunt/planning/quail\\_forecast/forecast/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/hunt/planning/quail_forecast/forecast/)