The Decline of the Bobwhite Quail in Georgia

Good job

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Importance of Quail to the Environment:

Georgia and the bobwhite quail have been linked together for as long as there has been hunting. The bobwhite quail is the official Georgia State Game Bird. According to the Georgia Sportsman Magazine's November edition “the state's quail population has declined more than 70% since the 1960's.” (K. Dallmier, 2000) Quail are ecologically and economically important to the environment. The plight of the bobwhite quail in Georgia has become so important, that it has gotten the attention of the Georgia General Assembly. The General Assembly has worked with Game Management Services to develop and fund the “Bobwhite Quail Initiative.” (K. Dallmier, 2000). This pilot program was begun in July 1999 and was designed to restore the quail population to Georgia. This initiative has gotten the interest of landowners and hunters all over Georgia.

Texas has also adopted initiatives like Georgia to help with the plight of the bobwhite quail. Dr. Dale Rollins of Texas A&M University was part of a symposium held on quail information. Dr. Rollins predicts that “bobwhites will be extinct in the Southeastern United States by the year 2005”. (Statewide Symposium, Steve Byrns 1999). The trend is moving westward and that's why Texas is taking steps to protect bobwhite quail. According to Dr. Rollins, “quail serve as a barometer of changes in other grassland populations.” Land management that improves quail populations will also benefit other declining birds. Other birds in the ecosystem will improve if steps are taken to improve land, food, and breeding areas for bobwhite quail.
Causes of Quail Decline since the 1960’s

In the 1950’s, Georgia was known as the quail capital of the world. Quail hunting was a family tradition. There were plenty of shrubs and field fencerows to protect the quail. The story of the decline of the bobwhite quail in Georgia is a sad one. No single villain is to blame, just a gradual changing of the times to which we are all to blame. (K. Dallmier, November 2000). Quail populations can recover if improvements are made to their habitats quickly. According to Today's Ag News, “Urban sprawl and new farming techniques, including more reliance on pesticides, reduced the bird’s habitat and food supply”. Reggie Thaxton, senior wildlife biologists with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Division in Forsyth, “believes quail are a part of our heritage”. (Today’s Ag News, July 1999). Mr. Thaxton also wants farmers and landowners to develop land management programs to help increase the number of bobwhite quail in Georgia.

The Georgia Department of Agriculture has been investigating the use of pesticides that harm quail in Georgia for several years now. According to Tommy Irvin, Commissioner of Agriculture in Georgia, “Furadan is classified as a restricted use pesticide and is leading to the damage of the quail population”. This pesticide has been misused to try and kill predators that prey on quail. Used as bait, it has lead to the death of not only the predator of quail, but other animals as well. (Georgia Department of Agriculture Press Release, August 1999). Also, new farming techniques have lead to the decline of quail. More farmers use pesticides and aerial spraying that mist into the feeding and drinking areas of quail.
Different farming interest and techniques have contributed greatly to the demise of the bobwhite quail in Georgia. In order for farmers to make money, they have to grow specific crops and raise certain livestock. The practice of having timber and cattle land just does not produce many quail. Quail need “weedy fields, and open pine forest laced with shrub thickets”. (K. Dallmier, November 2000). Many farmers have chosen to have row crops that are cleared regularly. Quail usually move through thick underbrush and old fencerows. Also, farmers today raise large amounts of grazing animals. These animals, such as cattle leave no vegetation for quail to eat and live in.

As we build more houses and subdivisions, we are destroying precious natural resources for quail habitat. More and more people today are moving to the country to escape city life. This is the reason for clashes between animals and people. You hear of bears in people’s trash and deer in their garages. It’s because animal habitation and humans have merged together. But, with bobwhite quail, this urbanization totally destroys the breed. Quail are so fragile, they will not blend in with people and modern urbanization. Quail are also declining because of highways and cars. Quail cross roads to look for more suitable grounds and get killed. According to local quail enthusiasts, these are all reasons for quail decline in Georgia. Local quail hunters, such as Bobby Moore said, “it is a joy to see covey’s of quail in their natural habitat.” Mr. Moore prefers to take pictures of quail instead of shooting them anymore. He realizes the importance of preserving a natural species. There are lots of organizations, such as Quail Unlimited that are taking many steps to help save this precious breed of birds.
Ways to Increase Bobwhite Quail Mortality and Reproduction

A bill passed by the Georgia House of Representatives in March of 1999, designed special license plates for Georgia motorists. A fee of twenty-five dollars to car owners would buy them a special quail edition license plate. The revenue from the tag sales would go directly to the restoration of the bobwhite quail population. There was a 46 to 2 vote in the senate in favor of the bill. This is a great way for quail enthusiasts to contribute to their favorite game bird. There is a picture of the bobwhite quail on the left side of these license plates.

According to Highlights of Agricultural Research Magazine’s article on Bobwhite Quail Mortality, “knowing the causes of mortality in a quail population and how this mortality is distributed over the course of a year is critical to proper management of that population.” (H. Lee Stribling and D. Clay Sisson). The field staff of Auburn University’s Albany Area Quail Management has tagged and tracked a large number of quail over the last six years. The results according to the Bobwhite Quail Mortality article indicate that both management and environmental factors play a significant role in populations of quail. In the Albany study the birds that had “large blocks of good quail habitat, abundant feed, protection from predators, and mild winters to endure, had 40 to 50% of the fall population to survive.” (H. Lee Stribling and D. Clay Sisson, Fall 1998). The survival of the male quail is lower during the breeding season. This is because of the male are calling females and making themselves vulnerable to predators. The biggest predator in the south is the canebrake rattlesnake.
There are many ways to help repopulate the quail population, not only in Georgia, but throughout the Southern United States. In the 1998 *Journal of Wildlife Management* an article written by F. S. Guthery and W. P. Kuvlesky Jr., discusses ways to improve multiple brooding of quail. Quail can be bred in captivity to increase population and then released into the wild. These birds can be tagged and followed for research purposes. (Guthery and Kuvlesky, 1998). Quail can also be trapped and relocated to more suitable habitats. When quail are moved only short distances, research has shown that they will stay and be productive. (John Alderson, J. W. Eubanks, 2000).

Farmers, quail enthusiasts, and landowners can all contribute so much to the survival of this precious natural resource. Farmers can keep some land available for quail by not burning it off every year. This allows for underbrush to grow and thickets for quail habitats. Quail love old fencerows that have grown up. They can hide their young while moving to feeding areas and water. This is also prime habitat for breeding quail. The male can whistle that famous “Bobwhite Mating Call”. Growing hedgerows and field borders will definitely attract quail to the area. (Sole, J.D., 1995).

Quail live on weed seeds, native fruits, and insects during the summer months. Farmers who grow fruit in a natural way will attract quail. Quail usually like vegetation that is only knee high. They like beggerweed and ragweed seeds. By not harrowing fields, farmers can let these types of vegetation grow for quail food. (Ag News, 1999). Quail also need vegetation to hide from predators. They can stay quiet under a hedgerow or underbrush.
Most of the time, you do not know you are close to quail until they flutter and fly before your very eyes. Many a horse and rider, including myself have been scared by a covey of quail. Quail are hard to spot, because they move so quickly. That is why they prefer low underbrush to move in. Even when quail are using the mating call, they are difficult to follow. They will whistle and then move very quickly.

Predators can be very damaging to a covey of quail, especially young chicks. Foxes, owls, and snakes are main quail predators in the south. Farmers and landowners can try and trap foxes to relocate them. Owls and snakes are hard to control on a farm. Some quail are going to be victims of predators regardless of how we try to protect them. Many quail used today on quail hunting plantations are pen-raised quail. They are raised in large numbers for the purpose of hunting expeditions. Quail that are pen raised and turned loose for hunters and then re-trapped, get used to people and hunting dogs. They are less likely to fly like the wild bobwhite quail will. But, because of the decline of wild quail, plantation owners use pen-raised birds for large hunting groups. Some of the few plantations that have wild quail are around Thomasville, Albany, Georgia, and Tallahassee, Florida. The Tall Timbers Research Station in Tallahassee, Florida, has an ongoing research effort to promote and preserve the bobwhite quail. (Rose Rodriquez, Tall Timbers Research Station, 2000). This is similar to the Bobwhite Quail Initiative started in Georgia in 1999. The BQI in Georgia is a voluntary and experimental program designed to restore habitat for quail. The BQI will provide assistance to landowners and in some cases financial incentives will be paid for habitat restoration. (The Bobwhite Quail Initiative, 1999).
Georgia residents can call the Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Division for information about participating in the program. This organization has also implemented restrictions on hunting quail certain times of the year. With controlled hunts, the bobwhite quail can be given time to recover and repopulate.

In closing, feel very strongly about preserving the bobwhite quail in the state of Georgia. We have left old fencerows and underbrush available to quail on our farm. In the last two years I have seen one covey of quail in the summer months, and one pair of quail this fall. This is far below what we are used to seeing and hearing on our farm since moving here in 1978. Years ago, almost on a weekly basis we would see numerous quail crossing the edge of the fields to get water in the pond across the road.

I have learned a great deal in researching this paper. I hope others can benefit from this information and will help in the effort to save The Bobwhite Quail Population.

Nice job!

I would have liked to see a map of the quail distribution perhaps a table that summarizes what things can be done to protect/improve the Bobwhite Quail population.
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