

The Northern Bobwhite

by Jerry A. De Bin



The northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) was dubbed “Prince of the Game Birds” by Charles Elliot in his book of the same title. It’s a fitting title seldom disputed by bird watchers and bird hunters alike. However, because of habitat loss, the once vast bobwhite quail kingdom has been reduced to remnant fields, cutover woodlands and abandoned homesites in rural Arkansas.

Description

The bobwhite’s plumage is a lesson in camouflage. This plump little bird is a potpourri of brown, black and white feathers. Adult bobwhites are about 10 inches tall. Male and female bobwhites can be separated by the color of the throat patch and eyebrow-like band extending to the back of the head. Males (cocks) display a distinct white throat-patch and eye band, while females (hens) have a less-contrasting golden-brown throat patch and eye-band.

Distribution

Prior to the white man’s arrival, bobwhites were present in isolated pockets throughout the state but vast, dense forests held population growth to a slow pace.

Once settlers entered Arkansas, the pace of converting forest to farm quickened. Fire was frequently used to aid in converting woodlands to fields and croplands, a practice widely used in bobwhite management today. As Arkansas forests became farmlands, bobwhite habitat grew. And the hearty little bird expanded its population and range.

Habitat

Bobwhites prefer a combination of open woods, thickets, tall weeds and short grasses creating an understory of ankle- to waist-high vegetation. The understory provides food and shelter, and open woods allow fast escape by flight.

Bobwhites require little space to survive, seldom ranging more than a quarter-mile in suitable habitat. Feeding ranges of coveys may overlap, explaining the presence of numerous coveys on small tracts of land.

Bobwhites eat a variety of seeds and insects. During spring, a potpourri of seeds is the bobwhite's primary food source. Insects, berries and seeds are eaten throughout the summer and early autumn. Bobwhites depend heavily on hard mast such as acorns and pine seeds gleaned from the ground for winter survival.

Water is seldom a problem for bobwhites to obtain, but severe drought and heat can stress local populations, reducing the number of young hatched.

Habits

A group of quail is called a covey. Depending on location and season, a covey may number six to 25 birds with an average of 15. Coveys contain

birds of both sexes and various ages.

Different coveys usually don't mix for any significant length of time.

Coveys exist throughout autumn and winter but break down in spring when birds break off to seek mates. It's not known exactly when coveys begin to reform.

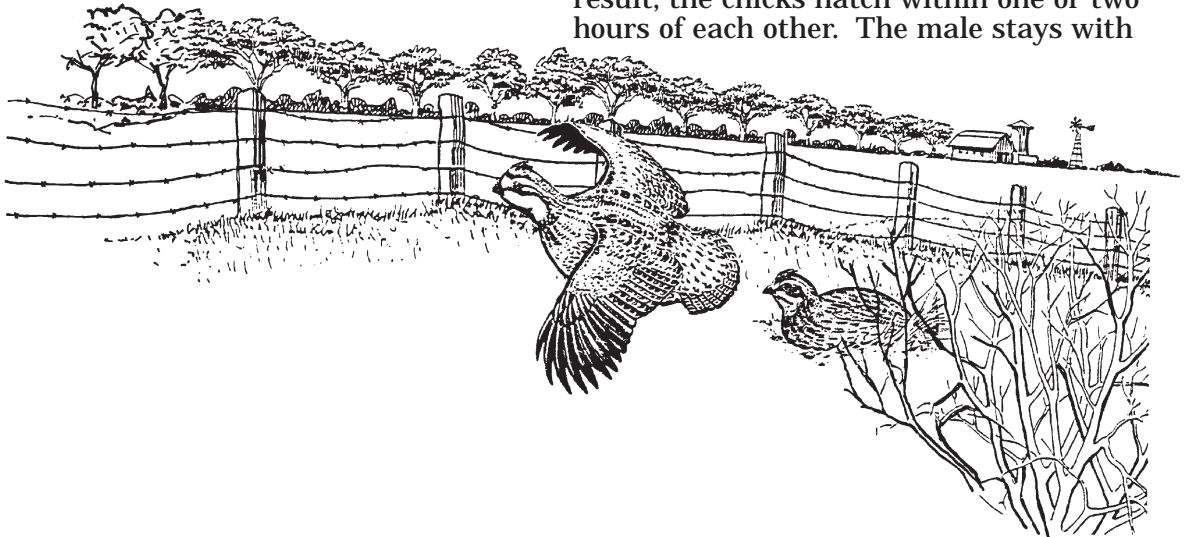
Bobwhites roost on the ground in a configuration known as a "roosting disk." The circular disk formation allows the birds to trap and transfer body heat under their overlapped wings. This is especially important during inclement weather.

Annual bobwhite numbers are at their lowest in spring, and peak in autumn. Bobwhites don't live long. Only 20 percent exceed one year of age.

Reproduction

Mating may occur from March through August, but peaks in May and June. During this time, the air is filled with the bird's melodious "Bob-Bob-White" call. Male birds compete for a mate through a series of war-like dances and aggressive displays, most of which are bluffs.

A mated pair constructs a nest on the ground, where the hen lays one egg daily for 13-16 days. The hen delays incubating the eggs until the clutch is complete. As a result, the chicks hatch within one or two hours of each other. The male stays with



the hen throughout incubation, often sharing the egg-warming chore. Once the chicks hatch, the pair remains together until the brood is raised.

Importance

Improvements in firearms and a steadily increasing quail population made this little bird popular with hunters. Hunting bobwhites became a gentleman's sport but was by no means restricted to the wealthy or socially elite.

Today, more than 30,000 Arkansans annually pursue "partridge" or "pottidge" as quail were often called during the early glory days. In the eyes of most wing-shooting sportsmen, this elusive and explosive bird has indeed earned its noble title.

Management

Wildlife management efforts can be summed up in three words: habitat, habitat, and habitat. This is especially true with bobwhites. The battle to increase Arkansas's bobwhite quail population will be won or lost through habitat manipulation.

Various timber management techniques and controlled burns are used to create quail habitat. Stocking pen-reared bobwhites in the wild has proven unsuccessful,

because most birds quickly succumb to a variety of factors.

The Arkansas Game & Fish Commission invites landowners to participate in its **Acres For Wildlife** program. The program assists landowners in improving wildlife habitat on their property. Qualified applicants are given a bag of mixed seeds, along with valuable information on when, where and how to establish wildlife food plots.

Other federal programs encourage farmers not to plant or graze livestock on marginal land. This allows natural bobwhite cover and food to grow back creating tangled brushlands. Hunters can also help by paying landowners for hunting privileges, thus encouraging them to set aside more land for bobwhites.

Game & Fish Commission biologists monitor the size of the state's breeding bobwhite population by conducting call counts each spring. Peak calling takes place just prior to and during nesting. Call counts in Arkansas are usually taken during the last two weeks of May and the first two weeks of June.

Who will ultimately engineer the rebound or demise of Arkansas's bobwhite quail? Consider the fact that some 90 percent of our Natural State's land is privately owned, and the solution becomes fairly obvious.



Arkansas Game & Fish Commission

2 Natural Resources Drive
Little Rock, Arkansas 72205

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