

2008-'09 Quail Forecast Looks Average

AUSTIN, Texas -- Late quail production due to dry and hot range conditions has set the stage for an average hunting season, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologists.

The statewide quail season runs Oct. 25-Feb. 22. The daily bag limit is 15, with 45 in possession. Legal shooting hours for all non-migratory game birds are 30 minutes before sunrise to 30 minutes after sunset. The bag limit is the maximum number that may be killed during the legal shooting hours in one day.

"For South Texas, production came late and history tells us when you get these late hatches, they tend to be less productive so right out of the box we're going to have less birds," said Robert Perez, TPWD upland game bird program director. "I would encourage hunters to go early in the season, as soon as hunting conditions are favorable for dog work."

About this time a year ago, most of the Texas quail country was lush with vegetation after great late summer rains, but the winter that followed was one of the driest on record.

"The quail season was about average and there were plenty of birds surviving into late winter," Perez noted. "But the lack of moisture, combined with heavy ground cover, may have made it difficult for bobs to find late winter and early spring greens; a very important part of the diet. Hunters reported difficulty finding birds in their usual haunts."

Because quail production is "density dependent" as birds are striving to recover from hard times in recent years, Perez noted hens typically will make as many nesting attempts as conditions allow until they are successful or run out of time.

This year, most of the state experienced a dry summer with above-normal summer temperatures. For these reasons quail production was spotty in some areas as evidenced by reports of differing size classes of chicks observed by biologists during the summer census survey.

Statewide surveys were initiated in 1978 to monitor quail populations. This index uses randomly selected, 20-mile roadside survey lines to determine annual quail population trends by ecological region. This trend information helps determine relative quail populations among the regions of Texas.

Comparisons can be made between the mean (average) number of quail observed per route this year and the long term mean (LTM) for quail seen within an ecological region. The quail survey was not

designed to predict relative abundance for any area smaller than the ecological region.

Below is a summary of quail production around the state, based on annual census surveys conducted by TPWD and what hunters can expect to find this season.

Gulf Prairies

TPWD surveys indicate bobwhite numbers in the Gulf Prairies are up considerably from last year. Hunters should focus on the central and lower coast in native prairie habitats.

"The dry spring actually benefits quail and turkey in most of my country," offered David Forrester, TPWD wildlife district biologist in LaGrange. "This spring saw good turkey production and quail production seemed to be good also. Those places with good quail numbers and habitat should have good hunting opportunities."

Rolling Plains

This region was not as dry this

past winter as some other areas of the state and scattered spring and summer rains resulted in some early production but the bulk of the reproductive effort appears to have been later in the summer. Field reports indicate differing size classes of chicks with plenty of late hatching.

Survey results and field staff observations predict a slightly below-average to average year. Due to the variation in weather conditions across this region it's a good idea to scout ahead to be sure hunting areas are holding birds.

The average number of bobwhites observed per route was 18.7 compared to 21 last year. This is slightly below the LTM of 22.5. Despite perceived low carry-over through the winter, enough young birds have been produced to offer good bobwhite hunter opportunity, especially in areas under proper range management. Public hunting opportunities can be found at

the Matador and the Gene Howe Wildlife Management Areas.

South Texas Plains

For South Texas, surveys predict a below-average year, but at the time biologists ran these routes the bulk of hatching had no yet occurred. There will likely be a whole lot of small birds at the beginning of the season and plenty of hunter opportunity.

Unfortunately spring rains were lacking over most of the range, which delayed nesting attempts by those birds that survived the winter. Quail are very adaptable when it comes to timing of the nesting season and can wait until

the rains come, even if it's late in the summer. And that's exactly what happened in South Texas. July rains spurred pairing and nesting and September field reports indicate broods of small chicks.

"We had an extremely dry year, with some rains last September, but less than we normally receive, and then essentially little or no rain until this past July. During July, we received about eight inches the first half of the month, and then received up to a foot of rainfall with Hurricane Dolly," said Stephen Benn, area manager at the Las Palomas Wildlife Management Area.





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