Can anyone else feel that? The break in the one hundred degree temperature days. Rainfall is starting to become more frequent. Tree leaves are beginning to change color, well in some parts of Texas at least. That is right, the beginning of fall is almost here as we start to feel some much needed cooler weather, days become shorter and white-tailed deer begin to rut! For some however, the fall marks an even more exciting time period as early morning are filled with the sound of rapid wing beats and covey calls from elusive quail. With the opening of quail season on the 28th of October, 2017 hunters are beginning to gear up for what looks to be a great hunting season across Texas.

Historically, Texas has held some of the best quail populations in the country. With so much habitat diversity across the nine different ecoregions of Texas, four different species of quail can be found in the state. The most common and known species is the bobwhite quail followed by scaled or “blue” quail, Gamble’s quail and Montezuma quail. However, over the past 50 years Texas has seen a steadily declining trend in population abundances across ecoregions. Below are population estimates of Bobwhite quail in ten year increments across Texas recorded by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

![Picture 1. Bobwhite populations have declined over most of their range in Texas over the last 25 years. The darker areas indicate a greater abundance of bobwhites (adapted from Peterson et al. 2002).](image)

There are many factors that have contribute to the decline in quail numbers across the state. No other factor is more important than habitat loss and fragmentation. Due to development from urban sprawl, conversion of native habitat to agriculture production fields and energy exploration such as the oil and gas industry, which South Texas knows about all too well, necessary habitat that quail species need to thrive and reproduce is removed or fragmented. Other factors that have not helped in the quail’s favor include introduction of exotic invasive species, climate change and mismanagement of wildlife habitat.

Even with so much acting against quail and their sustainable populations, there is a lot of positive sentiment around increasing quail numbers in certain ecoregions of Texas. I have been approached by many landowners and property managers around the state that would argue that these past two or three years have been some of the best quail production years in decades. A bird per acre or acre and a half is not uncommon to hear from managers in South Texas or in the Rolling Plains ecoregion. A decline in quail abundance is the furthest thought from their mind. This sentiment does not go unjustified and for good reason given the increase in proper habitat management in the past century and ample rainfall that they’ve received over the past 2-3 spring and summer periods. However one must understand the scope at which quail once thrived in the Texas to fully understand where Texas quail numbers are headed. In early to mid-1900’s it was not uncommon to flush multiple coveys of bobwhite quail in the Edwards Plateau or even as far East as the Blackland Prairie, Post Oak
Savannah or the Pineywoods ecoregions. Today quail sited in any of these areas is a rare site and a true testament to major habitat restoration/habitat conservation effort in their respected region. Urban development, agriculture field cultivation and mismanagement of habitat has significantly decreased areas in which quail would likely thrive. Furthermore areas that do remain are fragmented and have greatly been reduced in size to be able to sustain a breeding population of quail.

With many factors acting against the increase in quail numbers statewide, there are many wildlife management strategies that landowners can do and are doing to assist in increasing quail habitat and abundance. The most important is to conserve native habitat and decrease habitat fragmentation on your property. To do so you first must understand what proper quail habitat looks like. Bobwhite quail habitat is characterized by a combination of open grasslands and woody covered areas. This habitat encompasses approximately 10-25% bare ground which allows birds to move throughout the range with ease and forage freely. Suitable habitat also encompasses bunch grass species like Little Bluestem that are necessary for building nests and laying eggs. Finally, they are commonly characterized with having a mix of woody shrub species like granjeno, lotebush and mesquite that are used to conceal birds from predators and for loafing cover when temperatures rise and birds try to cool down. Obtaining such suitable quail habitat is not always easy but can be reached by utilizing the five major tools of wildlife management; axe, cow, fire, plow and gun. To further explain, we’ll consider cattle and fire and further explore how these tools can hinder and help quail habitat.

Grazing has historically been a cornerstone in Texas as a tool for economic gain and rangeland management. In the late 1800’s and into the early to mid-1900’s, land managers greatly over exploited grazing as a management tool and consistently overstocked their rangelands with more grazing animals than their properties could support. Consequently
overgrazed rangelands indefinitely removed native grassland habitat that quail need for life processes such as nesting, loafing and foraging and in turn encourage invasive exotic species to take their place while also increasing erosion. Through the mistakes made then and the vast amount of research investigating the interaction between grazing systems and rangelands, managers today are able to mitigate against these negative impacts by lowering stocking rates to adequate levels and implementing different forms of rotation grazing systems. Landowners utilize rotation grazing systems by moving cattle frequently from pasture to pasture as to not damage the habitat. Doing so retains those native bunchgrasses and forbs on the rangeland for regrowth. Furthermore research has shown that light to moderate grazing will actually stimulate regrowth in forb and grass species. This essential vegetation needed by quail can then be retained and utilized by not only quail but future grazing as well. Lastly reducing or completely removing cattle from those important habitat types during nesting periods can also decrease nest destruction as well.

Now let’s take a look at fire and how it has historically been viewed and also how we can manipulate the tool today to help improve habitat for quail. Historically, before man came along and began placing cross fences as far as the eye could see and deeming fire as a “bad” thing, rangelands in Texas naturally burned about every 3-10 years, depending upon which ecoregion you were in. Fast forward a ways and place human sentiment in the mix and rangelands begin to burn at much more infrequent intervals. The threat of a wildfire and the misunderstanding surrounding prescribed burning struck fear into most land managers. Quite frankly, the fear is still apparent today for those who are not familiar or comfortable with the management tool. The threat of a fire uncontrollably breaking rank and escaping to your neighbor’s property or unwanted parts of your own property is all too real and a risk some are not willing to take. Furthermore, fire presented what some would consider an even great risk to cattle ranchers who made their living from fat and happy cows. “If I burn my range, what will all my cows eat? And when I do burn, when will it rain again so I can put my cows back on it to graze?” All of these concerns assisted in greatly reducing burning across Texas. Today and again through in-depth research, a more holistic understanding of the interaction between burning regimes and rangelands, and proper education into prescribed burning procedures to mitigate wildlife risk, we are able to use fire as a positive tool to assist in returning rangelands to their historic burning regimes that benefit the flora and fauna communities within them.

Most importantly for quail, fire opens up the ground floor on rangelands that can encompass years of senescent growth that quail cannot move in and use for foraging or nesting. Fire removes this old growth, encourages new regrowth, and opens up the ground floor. This new growth also benefits quail for those chicks as new growth attracts many different protein filled insects that chicks need in the early juvenile stage. Furthermore, cattle benefit too as highly protein rich regrowth of grasses and forbs means fat and happy cows. A landowner can set up a rotational burning regime where one would burn sections of their property in different season or in different years depending on preference and goals. However, prescribed burning systems are recommended to somewhat mirror historic burning intervals if the end result is to try and restore the range’s historic vegetative community. Rotational burning is also great to promote a more holistic management approach on your property. With sections of the ranch being burned at different times, your property is now staggered

![Prescribed fire greatly assists in removing old vegetation and stimulates regrowth that is more suitable for quail.](image)
at different habitat successional stages which can be used by different wildlife depending upon species’ needs. The last point I would like to make about prescribed burning is the risk of spreading exotic/invasive vegetation. Because of the increased introduction of exotic vegetation over the past 100 years, our rangelands today are filled with species that come from all different parts of the world. On top of not being native, these exotic species are also quite invasive meaning they tend to outcompete our natives for resources and displace them and/or sometimes completely remove them from our ecosystems. Disturbance such as fire or grazing can be the catalyst to allow these species to take off and spread like “wildfire”… no pun intended. Management strategies like individual plant treatment using herbicide or a form of intense rotational disking can assist to keep these species at a manageable level.

Though many different factors are working to decrease quail populations across the state, many groups and universities are actively meeting the problem head on as they work to conserve habitat and find solutions for quail species. Because of research and active management, Texas still has great population numbers where suitable habitat exists and have actually seen increases in local populations. For the 2017-18 quail season, hunting should be above average for those areas that have quail. The amount of rain that Texas received during the spring and throughout the summer has allowed those birds to nest in what should not have been lacking native bunchgrasses. The ample amount of rain should have also given young chicks a good food supply of insects to feed on once hatched and adults plenty of seeds to forage throughout the spring and summer. Hope everyone has a great fall and an even better hunting season!
SEPTEMBER, 2017

HIGHLIGHTED PROPERTY

BY: NICHOLAS R. KOLBE M.S., WILDLIFE CONSULTANT/REAL ESTATE AGENT

2,880 Acres in Duval County, TX

OVERVIEW

Spectacular ranch located approximately 17 miles South of Freer, TX.

- Highly managed White-tailed deer herd with trophies taken in the 2000’s B&C.
- Great population of native game species including White-tailed deer, Bobwhite quail, Rio Grande turkey, and Javelina.
- Great vegetation including diversity of browse and food species like Texas Kidneywood, Grapages and Flame flower, Prickly pear, and Bush sunflower, respectively.
- Beautiful camp house, living quarters and spacious shop area with cold storage.
- High fenced on all sides.
- Deep water well supplies camp house and water sources across the ranch (520 ft. deep).
- 9 and 20 ton silos, corn and protein feeders, and all blinds are included in ranch purchase.

Gorgeous piece of property that has been highly managed with an abundance of native wildlife to prove it.

$2150/acre = $6,195,000

Nicholas Kolbe
Turnkey Ranch/Wildlife Biological
Turnkey Ranch Road Freer
(830) 719-2951
nikolkolbe@ymail.com
Located in Duval county, this exceptional South Texas ranch property produces some of the highest quality deer and quail populations not only in the county but probably in the state of Texas. This ranch encompasses 2,880 acres of native South Texas scrub brush with native grasslands and planted food plots mixed within. There are numerous different watering sources located on the property including 2 tanks and other watering pillas. From a wildlife enthusiast or cattle ranch operator perspective, this South Texas ranch is ready for hunting, recreational use or cattle stocking if desired.

Location - This spectacular 2,880 acre ranch is located approximately 16 miles South of Freer, TX and then 3.5 miles down the ranch's private road to gated entrance in Duval County.

Habitat - The Ranch is located in the South Texas Plains ecoregion. The majority of the property is made up of high quality mixed South Texas scrub brush browse species like Texas Kidneywood, Granjeno, Lime Prickly Ash and Coma. With the lack of cattle grazing on the ranch, native protein rich forb species such as Dalea, Bundleflower, Scarlet Pea, Widow’s Tear and Orange Zexmenia are abundant throughout the property. Furthermore, from lack of cattle stocking, there is very little encroachment by invasive species like Buffelgrass and Silver bluestem. The abundance of native wildlife and proper wildlife management has allowed native vegetation to thrive, and simultaneously, has allowed wildlife populations to expand.

Wildlife - The ranch has been a highly managed white-tailed deer property for years. Deer in the 200” B&C have been taken off of the property. Through property management strategies, native South Texas bucks are still abundant on the property. Moreover, with the proper management of white-tailed deer habitat, upland game birds such as bobwhite quail, rio grande turkey and dove species are commonly seen. Quail coveys can be seen moving in between open grassland senderos and thicker brush mottes. With the La Parrilla creek running on the West side of the ranch as well, riparian habitat makes this part of the ranch exceptional for turkey roosting in old growth bottom land. Lastly, soils in the area mainly consist of sandy to sandy loam.

Infrastructure - There are two different living quarters on the ranch. The main lodge is located on the West boundary. The two main lodging areas are connected by a central kitchen and dining area. The other house is located in the center of the ranch and is more suited living quarters for a ranch manager/biologist. The ranch also has a large shop area for working and has cold storage for keeping game. Roads traverse the property throughout and senderos have been cut every quarter mile throughout the property for deer and quail hunting lanes. The ranch is enclosed by an 8 foot high fence.

Water - The ranch buildings, water pillas, ponds, and living quarters are supplied by a 520 foot well. The Parrilla creek also flows when rainfall is abundant.

Minerals - Only surface rights are being sold with this property. There has been little surface disturbance from energy companies as well.

Other - All blinds, corn and protein feeders are to be sold with the property. Two 9 ton and one 20 ton silos are being sold with the property as well.

Please contact TurnKey Ranch Real Estate Agent NICHOLAS KOLBE at the contact information below for more information.
Nicholas Kolbe
Agent/Wildlife Biologist
(830) 708-9065