

# THE CASE FOR PEN-RAISED QUAIL: DISTINGUISHING WHEAT FROM CHAFF

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*Abstract:* Pen-raised quail have been used and abused by biologist and manager alike. Many biologists have a **philosophical bias** against the use of captive reared birds in the scheme of today's resource management. Because of this bias, attempts are made to use biological arguments which discredit their use. The two main arguments used are genetic contamination and disease. The purpose of this paper is to show that these arguments are not biologically sound as well as to clear up much of the misinformation often propounded about "pen-reared" quail. I will also show that when properly understood pen-reared quail are a viable option for many present and (more important) future quail management opportunities.

## Introduction

The modern day quail hunter is up against numerous obstacles that were not present just a few decades ago. Smaller tracts of land, ecological fragmentation, legal restrictions on burning, absentee landownership, out of control predator populations, and modern farming practices ( to name only a few) have stacked the deck against both hunter and bird. If we do not get accurate information and innovative ideas to today's sportsmen, I expect to see this great tradition of quail hunting slips beyond the grasp of the next generation. It is imperative that today's desperate quail managers are given the truth about this misrepresented, misunderstood, and overlooked option – *the captive reared quail*.

*The modern quail hunter is indeed an endangered species.*

Before I begin this discourse, it is essential to first define a few terms and lay out the context in which I believe released quail can be a sound management option. My investigations began while managing commercial quail preserves in the late 80's. I conducted surveys by marking and banding several thousand birds each season. These were quail released for "put and take" hunts. Two things became apparent to me from this effort.

1) The better my habitat the better my bottom line return was for money spent on quail versus money returned from quail.

2) The longer quail were in the field, the more

impressive their performance. This may seem like common sense now, but everything I had been taught prior to this implied that the birds would not live more than a few days after release, regardless of habitat.

Next, I began to put this knowledge to work in solving one of my management problems - how to raise the flight and flushing quality of quail in my early season hunts to the level I observed in my mid-season hunts.

I tried various early release techniques in attempts to establish coveys of released quail four to six weeks before my opening season. I found that I had to overcome the hurdles of aesthetics, predation, and feeding. It would take volumes to cover this and time does not allow me to be exhaustive here. However, I will say that as an outcome of this investigation, I developed what I call the Anchor Covey Release Technique, which consists of **four key elements**.

**1) Habitat Management** - This is the foundation of any responsible bird management effort.

**2) Technical Information** - This includes an understanding of how important such factors as the time of year, the age of quail, method of release, and proper site location are in obtaining achieving success.

**3) Designed Equipment ( Covey Base Camp)** - This consists of a feeder and watering system suspended inside a camouflaged brush frame. It is designed to be inaccessible to most rodents. The goal here is to reduce activity at the site that

would attract avian and mammalian predators. A "call back" bird is also used during the initial phase of the release. This unit serves as a "survival kit" during the first four to six weeks after the quail are introduced to the habitat. I call this the "boot camp" period. Later in the season this unit serves more as a "convenience store."

**4) Quality Birds** - Birds raised with minimal human contact in flight pens with good cover.

As a private consultant, I put this principle to work on smaller tracts of land and found that by mixing a wild bird / released bird program, I could provide superior hunting for my clients each year. Through further banding it became evident that one by-product of this effort was an increase of birds being raised on the property as well (Evans 1997). This made it much easier to motivate the land owner to spend more of his financial resources on further habitat needs.

**The following comments should not be taken out of the context of these four key elements. In other words, I am not talking about just dumping out quail and expecting results.**

### **Distinguishing Wheat from Chaff**

Last summer the state of North Carolina published a newsletter in which one of its main articles was entitled "*The Pen-raised Bird Issue*" (The Upland Gazette, Vol. 2, Issue 1.1997). The article made the statement that, "the greatest threats to wild quail are pen-raised birds," then proceeded to state a collage of misinformation concerning captive reared quail and as well as our companies preseason release technique. We will now take these and other common statements to task, separating the wheat from the chaff.

**Chaff:** The use of released quail discourages habitat management.

**Wheat:** As stated, it has been my experience as well as the experience of other biologists in our consulting network that **just the opposite is true**. In all of my seminars, videos, and newsletters, I emphasize that there is no "quick fix" and that nothing will work in a parking lot. I always stress the four key elements in our early release process of which the first is habitat management. When a landowner begins seeing his dog point coveys and experiencing good flushing birds, his passion to improve habitat gains

significant altitude. There are now real quail on his land - not just hope for a future population. Currently we have projects in over thirty-eight states where clients are motivated to spend money on converting fescue pastures and hardwood brush into mosaics of warm season grasses, cover patches, and feed strips.

**Chaff:** Though pen-raised birds survive the winter, few have ever been documented to nest successfully.

**Wheat:** I see this statement frequently and must say that I view it as intellectually deceptive and without basis in fact. Besides the observations I have documented through hundreds of hours of remote video and the banding of some 10,000 plus quail since 1987, there have been three independent studies, DeVos (1995), Sisson (1997), and Mueller (1997), which all documented successful nesting by early released quail that survived the hunting season.

**Chaff:** Pen-raised quail will spread disease to wild bird populations.

**Wheat:** Dr. Thomas H. Eleaser is a gamebird disease consultant at present, and previously served for 30 years on the staff of Clemson University. He has articles published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* and the *Journal of Avian Diseases* and was responsible for the development of the quail pox vaccine that is still used by bird growers across the country today. Dr. Eleaser also serves on the advisory board for the Institute of Wildlife and Environmental Toxicology. In a panel discussion held at the August 97 Quail Unlimited Convention in Springfield, Missouri, Dr. Eleaser made two points clear - one, that we have a moral obligation to release the healthiest birds possible, and two that if you are obtaining your birds from a reputable grower, the odds are that you are releasing a "cleaner bird" than exists in the wild. Upon finishing his statement concerning released quail spreading disease, Dr. Eleaser made this comment, "If you don't like the idea [of preseason releasing quail] and you are looking for a reason to put it aside - you need to look somewhere else."

**Chaff:** Released quail will contaminate the gene pool of the wild quail.

**Wheat:** Studies performed on the biochemical and behavioral differences in wild versus game farm quail (Ellsworth et al. 1988, Roseberry et al. 1987) show no

significant difference between two groups raised genetically and suggest that the behavioral differences are more related to rearing technique than genetics.

**Chaff:** All pen-raised birds are alike.

**Wheat:** I always stress to my clients that they “need to be a detective” when it comes to obtaining a good quality bird. Most reputable growers are tied to professional organizations such as the North American Gamebird Association or the Southeastern

Gamebird and Hunting Preserve Association . These organizations network with wildlife

and poultry disease specialists which help monitor flock health. Most of the suppliers I deal with stress minimal human contact with the birds during rearing. Many even go to the expense of installing auger systems, which allow the feeders to be filled from outside the flight pens. Birds used for pre-season release are also raised in pens full of cover which allow the young birds to feed on insects and greenery . Tame “meat birds” will not cut the grade.

## Summary

The **idealists** insist that we must wait for the mystical tree of “ecological landscaping” to bring forth a fruit of utopian changes, because then and only then will quail management and quail hunting be viable again. However, as a private consultant I must function as a **realist**, and realistically, we cannot expect our farm and forestry industries to change what they do on their own property until quail become more economically beneficial than pine trees or crops. It would be great to see us go back to the days of small patch work farms across the countryside, but this is forever gone.

In conclusion, I am convinced that the greatest threat to wild quail is not the pen-raised bird, but rather it is the loss of interest in managing for

quail. We must get people back into quail hunting to revitalize this interest. A biologically sound use of released quail will serve as a mechanism to accomplish this goal.

**Note:** A panel discussion on the role of released quail was held at the Quail Unlimited convention August 1997. If you would like a copy of this hour and twenty minute video , our company will make it available at our shipping and handling cost of \$5.00. Call 1-877-242-2482 and ask for the Quail Panel Discussion Video.

## Literature Cited

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