

DEMAND FOR QUAIL HUNTING IN TEXAS

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Introduction

The last two decades have seen drastic decreases in bobwhite quail populations in many parts of the United States. While quail numbers in most areas of Texas have held fairly steady compared to long term averages, we are still not immune to annual population fluctuations that result from drought/wet cycles.

The purpose of this article is to recap the demand for Texas quail hunting over the last twelve years, and to examine possible trends and issues that might effect demand for quail hunting in the future.

A Migration of Quail Hunters from 1987 to Present

1987 - A Season To Remember

Most hunters will remember 1987 as one of the finest quail hunting seasons of the last twenty years. Avid quail hunters (good wingshots) were limiting out by lunch and watching football in the afternoons. Those who needed more coveys and more time to bag their fifteen birds were routinely tallying numbers as high as 30 to 35 coveys per day.

These numbers were not limited to just a few areas of the state. 1986 and 1987 were both wet years and the quail explosion had reached practically every acre of suitable quail habitat in Texas. By the end of that fabulous 1987 season, Texas was poised on the edge of a huge boom in quail hunting. Word traveled fast among residents and out of state hunters alike. All of the locals rebooked their deer (quail) leases for the next season, mostly at an increase in dollars per acre.

Magazine articles touting "30 coveys per day" were written at a staggering pace over the next couple of years, and those pages subsequently sparked the interest of quail hunters from around the country; especially in the Southeast - a hotbed of quail hunting tradition that had seen their bird numbers dwindle dramatically since the early 1980's.

Most folks in Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia and other southern states had been out of birds for several

years and they had no idea why. Not much had been written about changes in land use at that time; so most died-in-the-wool bird shots from the Southeast just assumed that they were experiencing a downturn in their quail cycle. Texas looked like a gold mine of quail hunting, and at the time both lease rates per acre, and guided quail hunts were quite reasonable in our state.

The avid southern bird hunters came to Texas first. Most of them initially booked a guided hunt, so they could get a feel for the Texas experience. Others actually came out during the summer and found themselves a lease. Come November, they were packing into the motels with dog trailers in tow.

1988 through 1990 - Return to Drought

Booms lead to busts, especially when it comes to quail hunting. 1988-1990 were dry years. The '88 season was still a good one as most ranches were still living off the huge 1987 quail hatch. The next two years, however, were poor hatch years, and by the end of 1990, most Texas quail hunters were moping around and threatening to abandon their leases and sell their dogs. Limits before lunch were no longer possible.

The out-of-staters, however, were still very excited about Texas. Their quail numbers at home were still spiraling downward. Ten coveys per day in Texas was still much better than ten coveys per week back home.

As soon as a Texan dropped his quail lease, their was a non-resident waiting to snatch it up. At the same time, many of the lodges offering guided hunts, were still doing quite well as the word spread among more and more non-resident hunters.

1991 through 1993 - Booming Again

The rains returned in 1991 and so did the quail. Lease prices went back up. Dog prices went back up, and a few of the lodges began quoting the unheard of price of \$500 per day for a fully guided hunt.

The thirty covey days were back statewide by

1992, and the great quail hunting boom had now reached a lofty peak. Texans were back into the quail in a big way; especially the big corporations who were leasing up thousands of acres and investing huge amounts of money in lodges, trucks, dogs and guides.

The out-of-state migration was also stronger than ever. By now most southerners had figured out that their birds were not coming back anytime soon. Changes in land use had destroyed their quail habitat; and pen raised plantation hunts were springing up all over the south.

Texas had finally reached a point where the demand for quail hunting was ahead of the supply. Leases were impossible to find. The lodges were booked solid. And any Texan with a bird dog and a truck could hang his shingle as a "quail guide" and his phone would ring off the wall.

By now it appeared that quail hunting in Texas was following a fairly predictable pattern: a couple of wet years with great hunting, followed by a couple of lean dry years where the casual sports stayed home, but the avid quail hunters stayed at it.

1994 through Present - A Roller Coaster Ride

Were we ever wrong about that predictable pattern. Since 1994, Mother Nature has really kept us guessing. 1994 and 1995 were dry statewide with a poor hatch. 1996 was terribly dry in South Texas with no hatch, but the Rolling Plains up north fared a little better. In 1997 the rains returned statewide and quail fever peaked once again. However, brood stocks were at very low levels, so many areas of the state did not see the recovery they had hoped for. A few hunters found twenty coveys per day in the Rolling Plains, but South Texas as a whole was still struggling to recover in 1997.

In March of 1998 it quit raining again statewide. By midsummer Texas was in a death grip of drought and oppressive heat. South Texas hatched a lot of birds after the tropical floods in late summer, but the Rolling Plains saw their numbers fall off the charts.

The Future?

The first section of this analysis addressed the most basic principal of supply versus demand. In simple terms, so far, we have addressed only the actual quail populations and how they have varied from year

to year. Wet years...big hatches...lots of demand from hunters. Dry years...poor hatches...not as much demand.

Without a crystal ball to forecast weather and quail hatches over the next few years, we can now focus on other factors that might influence quail hunter demand in the future.

They Gotta Hunt Somewhere

Texas has wild quail. Most other states do not. That would lead us to believe that as long as we keep our birds that the world will beat a path to our door.

The focus in the old south quail belt seems to have shifted from "Woe is me we have no quail" to "Let's fix our habitat and bring them back". Many well managed southern plantations have already seen a rebound in quail numbers by restoring their habitat. However, those sacred acres for the most part are only open to the landowner and his invited guests. At this point there are very few places east of Texas where the general public can go and find wild birds. Most agree that it will take years to bring the quail back to the south. And some biologists are even predicting that the trend will never reverse itself... that quail will be extinct east of I-35 in a few short years.

The southern plantations that are releasing pen reared birds and hunting them over fine pointers and mule drawn wagons are enjoying a booming business. But, most of their clients are coming from out-of-state as well (northeast, midwest, etc.).

Factory quail just don't seem to be attractive to the local traditional southern quail hunters.

"My grand-daddy was born and raised in North Carolina and never shot a quail out of a box...and by golly I'm not going too either". That statement comes over my answering machine at least 20-30 times per year.

It appears that as long as we have wild birds in Texas there will be a significant demand from non resident hunters. In looking back at my telephone inquiries over the past few years, this seems to hold true even in the dry years when we don't hatch as many birds. The fact remains: a bad day of quail hunting in Texas usually beats a great day in most other states.

Discretionary Income

One might assume that four bad hatch years out of the last five might signal the death of our quail boom in Texas...apparently not?

Interest in quail hunting overall still seems to be on the rise. The lodges are still booked up. The corporations are still entertaining clients on their quail leases. And the individual looking for a good lease is facing rates as high as \$5 per acre for quail hunting only.

Throughout the last four years of crazy weather and low quail numbers, most Texans (individual and corporate) have hung onto their leases and their guided quail hunts. However, our country has enjoyed a very robust economy during this same time period. The stock market has vaulted to new heights and discretionary income is very high. With less emotion tied to their paychecks, many Texans are still willing to pay the high dollars to hunt quail - even if the covey numbers are very low.

Will Texans continue to pay for quail hunting if the economy goes south? That will depend on the quail hatch. If bird numbers are up, most Texas quail hunters will dig deeper into their pockets and find a way to go hunting.

However, if an economic bust comes along with a drought and a quail bust, my guess is that most Texans are going to switch back to deer stands and football games, and that only the hard core wingshots will still be out there following their pointers.

Is the same true for non-residents? My personal experiences indicate that the out-of-staters are a little less sensitive to pocket cash and covey numbers. Rain, drought, good economy or bad...they'll still call. Remember, they don't have many birds at home and six to eight coveys is still a good day for many out-of-staters.

Age Demographics

Over the last ten years of guided quail hunting in Texas, we have recognized three distinct classes of quail hunters, and these divisions apply to both Texas residents and out-of-staters alike.

The first group of hunters are the "Traditionals". These are older gentlemen from age 50 to 75 who have fond memories of the glory days of quail hunting. Their love for the sport goes back many years. They

have all owned dogs. They have had leases all over the place. And they reminisce fondly of the days when all you had to do was ask the landowner permission to hunt and then send him a little gift at Christmas time. These men for the most part will not hunt pen raised birds. They want the real thing. Most of them are very safe with their guns, they are excellent shots, and they understand bad weather, poor hatches, etc. Many of them are retired with lots of disposable income, and they are willing to pay for a good guided hunt or a quality lease.

The second group of hunters are the "Boomers", and according to a recent article that I read on US population dynamics, this set makes up 60% of our current population. These are the 35 to 50 year olds who have either already made their fortune, or they are well on their way right now. Most of them are young professionals with very little leisure time on their hands. Some of these men have strong feelings for wild quail that probably came from trips afield with their fathers (Traditionals).

Others in this group, have had very little hunting exposure in their younger years, and their entry into the sport came as an invitation to join a guided quail hunt or a corporate lease. These men will try the wild bird game once or twice. But they don't have the burning desire to stick with it. Unfortunately, they'll switch back to pen raised birds after a couple of long walks with very few coveys and lots of missed shots.

And now for the "Youngsters", the third and final set. If you are a rancher with land for lease, a dog handler with a big investment, or a lodge owner...this is the group that should concern you the most. Now before I draw the line in the sand and make lots of people angry, let me first point out that there are lots of young hunters out there who are well on their way to becoming excellent outdoors people and fine stewards of our resources. Their fathers (Boomers) and their grandfathers (Traditionals) have trained them well. They are gun safe, they are courteous to fellow hunters, and they are true conservationists. These Youngsters are our best chance for the future. They are our torchbearers.

And now for the bad news: From my observations over the last several years, this group of great up and coming hunters makes up a very small percentage of *their* age class. Most young kids these days are not getting exposure to the outdoors. Many of their fathers (even the ones who hunt) are very busy, with little

leisure time available for their kids. Every guide or lodge owner in Texas probably has a horror story of a father who booked a hunt for his kid, and promised the lodge owner that he was a great hunter and very safe. But after their first day in the field, it became obvious that the father was more concerned about getting his own limit of birds, and his son had never held a gun before.

So as promoters of wild quail hunting in Texas, where does our challenge lay? The Emotionals are our best clients right now, but that set is dropping out as they advance in age. The Boomers will keep our lodges and leases booked up for many years, but we need to nurture their love for wild birds. Keep them interested in the sport, and we will all prosper. But if the Boomers switch en masse to pen raised birds, then our only choice is to buy an incubator and build some flight pens. The Youngsters are our biggest challenge. Unfortunately, many of them think right now that *all* quail come from a pen.

Our state agencies in Texas are currently doing a fine job of promoting the outdoors to our youngsters. The Texas Parks & Wildlife Expo and The Bobwhite Brigade are two of the most successful programs.

With respect to safety and gun training, however, our Hunter Education Classes are barely adequate. No classroom lecture can replace the value of a father training his child to be safe in an actual field setting. But unfortunately, only a small percentage of kids these days are getting the training that we received in our younger years.

In today's litigious society, we are all afraid of hunting accidents and lawsuits. So, unfortunately, we are caught between the veritable rock and a hard place. We need young hunters to carry on the tradition of quail hunting in Texas, but how can we afford the risk of a untrained hunter on our land? Should the guide or lodge owner have to shoulder the burden of teaching gun safety to young hunters? Those are tough questions...and I agonize over them each and every hunting season.

Paying To Play

The first guided quail hunt that I ever arranged for a client, set him back \$275 per day. That hunt included meals, lodging, guides, dogs and bird cleaning. That was in 1989 and I remember thinking to myself...*how can that lodge justify such an insane price tag?*

Just yesterday, I ran across a brochure for a Texas quail lodge that is currently charging \$2,250 per man/day for the same type of package hunt. Being a lodge owner myself, with two full time guides, a chef, thirty dogs, two trucks, liability insurance and 75,000 leased acres, I now know how he can command that daily rate.

Quail hunting in Texas has become a wealthy man's sport. Every year I tell myself that I am not going to raise rates this season. But when the smoke clears in February, I find myself having to raise rates again to cover my bottom line. And, unfortunately, every time I raise my rates, I price out a couple of long time friends and clients. After ten years in this business, I have finally realized that no matter how expensive the sport becomes, there will still be paying clients out there. Especially if the economy is good and the hatches are big. However, my fear for the future is that at some point, we will price out most of the traditional passionate quail hunters. And, that the ones left who can pay the freight will not be the type of hunters that we can trust to be safe, courteous and mindful of our resources.

A rancher that I spoke with last summer told me that he had leased to the same great group of quail hunters for nine straight years. They had become great friends and they took really good care of his ranch. But in 1996, the combined effect of drought and cattle forced him to raise his lease rates substantially. They couldn't afford his rate increase, and since that time he has had three different groups of lessees. Each of those groups has been kicked off the ranch after only one season. They had the money, but they cared nothing about his ranch or the future of his quail stock.

How high can we go?

Tell It Like It Is

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. That statement applies to nearly every industry in existence...and it especially holds true in guided hunting. We Texans love to brag about our quail...and I'm as guilty as the next guy! But, if it has not rained on your ranch in six months, and your cows have eaten all your cover, don't promise a quail hunter that he will find 30 coveys per day come November.

In my opinion, the fastest way to lose a hunter for good, is to oversell your operation. You might get him to sign up once by promising him the moon. But, he

won't be back next year...gauranteed! Quail hunters talk alot among themselves and they love to compare notes about their hunting. It won't take long for the quail hunting fraternity to redline your operation if you develop a reputation as an overpromoter.

is mounting, it is very tempting to go for the quick sale and then hope that things turn out OK when the season starts. However, I have learned over time that stating the facts will get you just as many bookings, and twice as much repeat business!

When the rains are not falling and your overhead