EFFICIENCY OF BIRD DOGS IN LOCATING BOBWHITE COVEYS

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Abstract: Over the course of the last 4 hunting seasons (1992-93 through 95-96), the field staff of Auburn University's "Albany Area Game Management Project" has radio-tracked wild bobwhite coveys while they were being hunted on two private Plantations in southwest Georgia. During this time period, 150 hunts were monitored that provided data on 735 "encounters" with 223 radio-tagged coveys. Hunters averaged seeing just over half (53%) and pointing and shooting into about one-third (32%) of the radio-tagged coveys they encountered. Not all coveys seen were located by the dogs nor were all unseen coveys missed by the dogs. These two average out so that the percentage of coveys located by the dogs (53%) is actually the same as the percentage seen by hunters. This paper will discuss in detail the efficiency of pointing dogs in locating bobwhite coveys and hopefully provide some insights on how to hunt wild bobwhites more effectively.

Introduction

In the spring of 1992 personnel from Auburn University's Department of Zoology/Wildlife Science began an extensive investigation of bobwhite quail life history, management, and hunting on Pineland Plantation near the town of Albany in southwest Georgia. This project was expanded both in size and scope in the fall of 1993 at which time the name "Albany Area Game Management Project" was adopted. During this four year period, over 1,300 bobwhites have been radio-tagged for field studies of nesting and brood habitat, supplemental feeding, prescribed burning, seasonal survival, and other aspects of bobwhite quail ecology and management. Another important aspect of this project has been an extensive examination of encounters between hunters and wild bobwhite coveys. This paper provides the results of that study as well as suggestions for hunting bobwhites more efficiently.

Methods

Hunting studies were carried out on Pineland and Nilo Plantations in Baker and Doughtery Counties near Albany in southwest Georgia. Four hunting courses averaging 750 acres in size were chosen for study on each of these two plantations. Just prior to each of the 4 hunting seasons studied wild bobwhites were trapped and fitted with miniature radio transmitters on each of these 8 courses. Four or five individuals from each of 8-10 coveys were radio-tagged on each course. Each time one of these courses was

hunted, one or two of our field staff would go along and monitor the events of the hunt taking care not to influence whether or not the covey was located. At no time was any aid given to the hunting party in finding the radio-tagged coveys.

Hunting on these plantations is a very traditional, southern plantation style procession. The dogs are handled off horseback while the owners and their guests follow along either on horseback or a mule drawn wagon which also serves to carry the extra dogs. A typical hunt lasts 2-3 hours and covers about 500 acres of ground. Each course gets hunted about once every 10 days to 2 weeks. Most of our radio-tracking was done off horseback from the rear of this procession with an occasional hunt tracked from the wagon. Each time a radio-tagged covey was "encountered" by the hunt a record was made of whether the covey was "seen" or "not seen". Coveys that were seen were further broken down as to whether they were pointed and shot, pointed but wild flushed before they could be shot, or wild flushed without being pointed. Unseen coveys were broken down into wild flushes, passed by and missed due to running, passed and held, pointed but ran, or pointed and held unflushed.

Results and Discussion

During the 4 hunting seasons studied our staff monitored 150 hunts which provided data on a total of 735 "encounters" with 223 radio-tagged coveys. Hunting parties averaged seeing just over half (53%) of the radio-tagged coveys that were encountered (Table 1). This included 32.1% that were pointed and shot, 8.8% that were pointed but flushed wild before they could be shot, and 12% that were seen wild flushing but not pointed. Forty-seven percent of all encounters resulted in coveys that were never seen. This included 24.2% that held tight and were passed by, 7.6% that ran out of the way as the party came through, 6.9% that were pointed but ran away before the could be flushed, 6.3% that flushed wild without being seen, and 2.1% that were pointed and unable to be flushed.

Not all coveys that were recorded as seen were located by the dogs. Likewise, not all coveys recorded as unseen were missed by the dogs. These two actually balance out so that the same percentage as was seen by hunters (53%) was located by pointing dogs (Table 2). Of the 53% located by dogs, only 41% were seen by hunters. The other 12% were coveys that were pointed and either ran off, flushed unseen, or held and refused to be flushed. On the other hand, 12% of the coveys that were seen were not located by dogs. These were mostly coveys that flushed out ahead of the hunting party or were "rode up" by one of the horses or the wagon.

The reasons coveys were not seen as well as frequency of "false" pointing was evaluated more closely by examining the 346 encounters with radio-tagged coveys that resulted in no birds being seen (Table 3). Most instances of coveys being missed (51.4%)

were simply because they were passed by and not smelled by the dogs or moved by a member of the hunting party; they simply held their ground and let the hunting party pass. Many of these were coveys that were not out feeding which made it harder for the dogs to encounter their scent. It was not unusual to see the entire hunting party pass within only a few yards of a covey without knowing it. The next most common reason that coveys were not seen (31%) was because of birds running. About half of these were coveys that simply ran out of the way of the hunting party as they approached and the other half were coveys that ran away after having been pointed by dogs. The style of hunting on these plantations most likely accentuates this problem due to the amount of noise associated with the hunting party as well as the delay in getting the shooters to the point. Running becomes more and more common as the season progresses. Thirteen percent of the coveys that were not seen were a result of wild flushes. About half of these were pointed and the other half were not. Some were pointed after the birds had already flown and some were coveys that were pointed but flushed wild before anyone could see the point. This wild flushing behavior also gets progressively worse as the season progresses. The remaining 4% of the coveys that were not seen were actually pointed but refused to be flushed.

Table 3 also provides some insights into the causes of "false" points. In 91 of the 346 encounters with radio-tagged birds in which no covey was seen there was an unproductive point. Most (51) of these were a result of the birds running away from a pointing dog so that by the time a flushing attempt was made the birds were long gone. This table actually greatly underestimates the frequency of this occurrence as many of these coveys are eventually recorded as being seen after as many as 2 or 3 re-locations of the dogs. Coveys running 100 yards or more were common and one incidence was recorded in which a whole covey ran for 500 yards before eventually being seen flushing wild. Twenty-five unproductive points were a result of wild flushes not seen by any of the hunting party and the remaining 15 were coveys that were there and just would not get up. In all, 12% of all encounters with radio-tagged coveys resulted in "false" pointing.

No data was recorded for encounters with single birds but some general observations were made. The most notable of these was the birds ability to "screw in" the groundcover and avoid detection as well as flushing attempts. Undoubtedly a single bird that has just flown and "wingwashed" itself is harder for a dog to detect than an entire covey. Even when pointed their resistance to flushing is amazing which actually makes allot of sense from a survival standpoint. A single bird flushing alone is much more vulnerable to the gun or the predator than he would be flushing amidst the confusion of a covey rise. It is not unusual for the birds to hold tight unless literally being threatened with being stepped on. Many single birds are left behind undetected.

Increasing Hunting Efficiency

Many factors work together that influence a dogs ability to locate bobwhite coveys.

The effects of weather on feeding patterns and scenting conditions surely plays a major role. While not covered in this paper, we are currently working to try and determine more about how weather effects quail behavior and a pointing dogs ability to find them. The condition of the cover as well as amount of hunting pressure has a pronounced effect on behavior of coveys and therefore performance of dogs. Overly jumpy birds can make any dog look bad. Also, there is a great deal of variability in individual dogs ability and/or desire to hunt. Even the best dogs have bad days and visa versa. Some days are better then others as are some seasons.

Overall, bobwhite coveys showed a remarkable ability to evade hunting parties with some coveys seeming to be better at it than others. Individual coveys seem to develop their own personality and "learn" over the course of the season the best way to survive the hunt. Taking all this into account, we have documented some trends as to how bobwhites evade hunters over a wide range of conditions over the last four hunting seasons in south Georgia. Following is a list of recommendations for improving your hunting success based on these experiences.

1. **Trust Your Dogs**
   Their nose tells them things you have no way of knowing. Our data shows that in 1 out of 4 encounters in which coveys are not seen there was what was considered a "false" point. When good dogs point there usually just has been (or still is) quail activity at that spot.

2. **Be Persistent**
   Most coveys are where they are supposed to be. It was rare for any of our coveys to move from their range because of hunting pressure or any other reason. Furthermore, more than half (51.4%) of the coveys that are missed were where they were supposed to be when they were just passed over. Another 16% had run from the hunting party but were still in the vicinity. Assume they are there before you look elsewhere.

3. **Get to the Point**
   The sooner you get the guns to the spot where the dogs are pointing the better your chances of seeing birds. Fifteen percent of coveys that go unseen had been pointed but ran away before they could be flushed. We have tracked wild bobwhites running down dirt roads at 10 mph which means they can run 300 yards in 1 minute! Furthermore, 9% of all encounters resulted in pointed coveys that flushed before they could be shot. Get there quick.

4. **Make a Good Flushing Attempt**
   Four percent of the coveys that were missed were left at the spot of the point. This figure would be much higher when considering single birds. Take a minute to make a good flushing attempt, especially upwind of the dog.

5. **Re-locate for Runners**
   If a good flushing attempt fails to produce birds, assume they are running and allow the dogs to re-locate. It sometimes takes 2 or 3 re-locations to catch up to a running covey. Remember, most false points are a result of birds running.

6. **Think like a Quail**
   If you believe the covey has run or flown try to predict where they have gone. Put yourself in their place and look for a likely escape route. Also, many coveys use the same tactic again and again (i.e. flying across a road or running into thick cover). Try and remember what they did to you last time and look for them there.

7. **Be Unpredictable**
   Don't always hunt the same route at the same time of day. Coveys quickly learn how to evade hunters if the encounters become routine and can sometimes be caught off guard by mixing things up.

8. **Don't Take it Personal**
   When all of your strategies fail and a covey or coveys outwit you; don't take it personal. Admire them for their ability to survive. Appreciate their desire to live long enough to reproduce and provide a crop of birds for next season.

Table 1. Results of encounters with radio-tagged bobwhite coveys on Pineland and Nilo Plantations for the 1992-93 through 1995-96 hunting season.

		Coveys Seen		Coveys Not Seen		
Hunting Season	Number Seen / Number Available	Pointed and Shot	Wild Flushes (Pointed/Not Pointed)	Wild Flushes	Passed by (Ran / Held)	Pointed (Ran/ Held)
92-93	45 / 112	24	11 / 10	4	25 / 27	9 / 2
93-94	142 / 286	96	20 / 26	17	18 / 76	25 / 8
94-95	112 / 194	67	17 / 28	14	4 / 49	11 / 4
95-96	90 / 143	49	17 / 24	11	9 / 26	6 / 1
TOTAL	389 / 735	236	65 / 88	46	56 / 178	51 / 15
PERCENT	53%	32.1%	8.8% / 12%	6.3%	7.6%/24.2%	6.9%/2.1%

Table 2. Percentage of radio-tagged coveys located by pointing dogs on Pineland and Nilo Plantations during the 1992-93 through 1995-96 hunting season.

COVEYS LOCATED BY DOGS 392 (53%)

POINTED & SHOT	POINTED WILD FLUSHES		POINTED	
	seen	unseen	ran	held
236 (32.1%)	65 (8.8%)	25 (3.4%)	51 (6.9%)	15 (2.1%)

COVEYS NOT LOCATED BY DOGS 343 (46.7%)

PASSED & HELD	UNPOINTED WILD FLUSHES		PASSED & RAN
	seen	unseen	
178 (24.2%)	88 (12%)	21 (2.9%)	56 (7.6%)

Table 3. Breakdown of 346 encounters in which coveys were not seen on Pineland and Nilo Plantations during the 1992-93 through 1995-96 hunting season.

Passed by & Held	Passed by & Ran	Pointed & Ran	Wild Flushes		Pointed & Held
			Pointed	Unpointed	
78	56	51*	25*	21	15*
(51.4%)	(16.2%)	(14.7%)	(7.2%)	(6.1%)	(4.3%)

* Indicates incidences of "false" pointing which occurred in 26.2% of the encounters when radio-tagged coveys were not seen and 12% of all encounters.