

More Than a
Memory





Quail Songs for the Future

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by Clarke C. Jones

The aroma of grandmother's homemade rolls slipped through her kitchen window and onto the screened-in back porch. As I sat on the glider watching the big wooden paddles of the ceiling fan try to cool an August sunset, I could hear the clinking of a spoon, emptying out a jar of her homemade strawberry preserves.

"What's on the menu tonight?" my grandfather inquired.

"Hot rolls, dripping with butter and strawberry preserves, sliced tomatoes, ham, mashed potatoes, tea, and chocolate cake with white icing—and nothing green," I declared, feeling very important. One of the great things about spending the night with my grandparents was that I got to pick what we would eat for supper.

"Do you mind if we eat 'alfresco' tonight? We have some great entertainment planned for your visit," said my grandfather.

He was always throwing words like "alfresco" at me, but at ten years old, I thought I was already grown up and didn't want him to

know that I didn't know what the word meant. Besides, I knew I could ask my grandmother later.

"What entertainment?" I questioned. "There's no entertainment in Midlothian!" Midlothian at that time was a patchwork of homes, small gardens, and weedy fields of broom straw and beggar lice, dirt or tar-and-gravel roads. Midlothian Turnpike, near where I lived, was still two lanes and the closest entertainment was a drive-in theater nine miles away. It would be a few years before I even heard the word "subdivision."

"Ah, my young skeptic, you are wrong about that," corrected my grandfather. "Mr. Bobby White, the master of ceremonies, should be starting the show any time now. He will be announcing that it's time for the rest of the birds to start their evening songs, and then the crickets and cicadas will join in. The grand finale is the light show put on by the lightning bugs—first-class entertainment for the price, if you ask me."

Later that night as I was just about ready to turn off the bedroom light, my grandfather came into my room to check on me. "What did you think of tonight's show?" he asked.

"Pretty good," I replied. "Does the bobwhite really start things off every evening?"

"In a manner of speaking," answered my grandfather. "What he is really doing is calling his family, telling them it's time to gather 'round for the night."

"Like dad—when he comes home from work and announces 'Hello, I'm home!'," I agreed.

"Sort of like that," said my grandfather. "He is telling his covey, 'Hello, I'm home', but I don't hear him as often as I used to. I think maybe he might be telling you and me good-bye."

Two years later the quail and the grandparents had all said good-bye and, about that same time, biologists and quail hunters started working on ways to halt the decline of the quail population, not only in Virginia but throughout the South and Midwest. For the next fifty years, various ideas, studies, and initiatives were developed to bring back quail, and yet the quail population still dropped steadily. Some folks eventually began to realize that if you keep doing what you have always done, and the results still come up negative, then perhaps a change is in order.



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On a trip to Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy near Tallahassee, Florida, in January, I was able to review some of the current quail studies firsthand and

learn what new ideas were in the works. Tall Timbers, according to their literature, is the oldest and largest bobwhite research program in the country. I met with game biologist



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Top, a quail hen incubates her eggs. Bottom, land management at Tall Timbers focuses on creating prime quail habitat.

Shane Wellendorf, who gave me a tour of the facility. I arrived there during the last week of banding season, when a half-dozen scientists were banding and attaching transmitters to the quail. The weight, age, and sex of each bird was recorded before returning it to the exact location where it was captured the night before.

Wellendorf and I drove through some of the 115,000 acres under easement in what is known as the Greater Red Hills Region. As we rode along, Shane pointed out some of the complexities of quail restoration.

“Think of the quail as a 6- to 8-ounce turkey that is at the bottom of the food chain. Just about every predator that walks, crawls, or flies wants to eat it. The quail would rather walk than fly, and it cannot move well through thick grass, like fescue. It needs cover to protect it from avian predators, plants that attract bugs in the spring to give the chicks much-needed protein, and plants that produce seeds in the fall and winter to carry it through those lean months.”

The Red Hills area of Georgia, according to Shane, is comprised of over 350,000 acres and is one of the last great bastions for the bobwhite. A large number of private plantations are linked together in the area and have been for decades. “We now know that quail will not make it very long on small amounts of acreage. You need at least 500 acres to maintain a sustainable covey population. The exception is if you can get a number of smaller, adjoining landowners to put in quail restoration programs, then you have a chance to improve the quail population,” stated Wellendorf.

I told Shane that Marc Puckett, a small game biologist with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, was working on a program in Virginia similar to what he just described. “We know Marc and his work in Virginia,” Shane replied, adding, “He is a well-respected biologist.”

Upon my return, I called Marc and asked him how the new quail restoration plan in Virginia was progressing. Marc suggested I speak with some people who have been involved in the program for a few years now: Phil Bain in Southampton County and Dennis Owens, who has a farm just outside of Blackstone.

Help Us Keep Quail Songs Alive!

If you own rural land and think your property might be suitable habitat for the bobwhite, contact one of the offices nearest you:

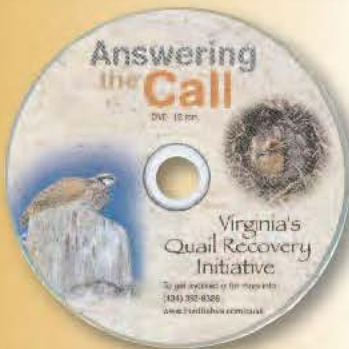
Smithfield: (757) 357-7004, ext. 126
Fredericksburg: (540) 899-9492, ext. 101
Farmville: (434) 392-4171, ext. 106
Verona: (540) 248-6218, ext. 108
Christiansburg: (540) 381-4221, ext. 128
Project Leader, Marc Puckett:
(434) 392-8328

A member of our team will discuss your property with you and determine that it is a good fit for the quail recovery program. We are currently concentrating our efforts in the counties of Bland, Wythe, Augusta, Halifax, Greene, Madison, Rappahannock, Culpeper, Orange, Essex, King & Queen, King William, Greensville, Sussex, and Southampton.

What's in it for you?

- ◆ On-site visits from a quail biologist
- ◆ Financial assistance for habitat improvement
- ◆ A management packet, including a DVD and quail booklet
- ◆ A certificate suitable for framing
- ◆ Attractive property signs

And finally, what you can't put a price-tag on: the satisfaction of helping in the statewide effort to keep quail songs alive.



For anyone interested in improving habitat for quail, this video offers plenty of food for thought and resources to help you do so. Free. Contact Marc Puckett at marc.puckett@dgif.virginia.gov.



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Here, a scientist bands a bobwhite. Below, a young chick symbolizes the success of Tall Timbers research efforts.

Phil Bain manages approximately 9,000 acres of timber and farmland for his family. He began working with Marc Puckett in the early 1990s. "When we first started, we put only a small amount of our land in quail habitat, and I have had to learn the hard way that to get any significant results, I needed to put a lot more land in habitat production. I realize not everyone has large tracts of land, but if they can do something on their land and their adjoining neighbor has good habitat, then they can feed off that situation," stated Phil.

"I would encourage people—from the

start—to utilize as many acres as you can, and from the beginning you need to realize the importance of burning your fields or other proposed quail habitat. We are on a three-year rotation for controlled burns in our pine stands. One thing that a fire does is help promote warm-season grasses, which are another part of the equation in restoring quail," continued Bain.

He also pointed out that warm-season grasses are what help quail survive by giving them nesting cover and seeds to eat in the fall, and that these grasses also attract bugs in the



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The ultimate goal, as shown here, is to return banded quail back to their natural habitat and behaviors (below).

spring for the chicks to eat. Thinning your pine forest also helps, but how much you thin will often depend on how the financial numbers work for each individual. “Don’t expect tremendous improvement in your quail population the first year, but after the third year, the quail population should really ramp up. I would say that since I started with Marc’s program, I now have three times as many quail on our property than before we started,” Bain added.

Landowner Dennis Owens has a 235-acre farm outside Blackstone and after work-

ing with Marc Puckett for at least eight years is pleased with his quail restoration efforts, as well. “One of the nice things that has happened after getting quail habitat established and having several coveys on my property is that my neighbors now have quail on their properties—and that is something that had not happened before. Some of my neighbors have gotten on board with their own programs. They are doing some tree removal, some burning, and planting lespedeza,” explained Dennis.

Owens agreed about the need for controlled burns, as well, and suggested that you hire a contractor with liability insurance to do the burns and that you include yourself as a named insured. The reader has probably realized that the use of fire to kill fescue, unwanted cool-season grasses, invasive trees, and to clean forest understory is an extremely important tool in bringing back quail.

Bill Palmer, a Virginia Tech graduate in the 1980s, and now Senior Scientist and Associate Research Director at Tall Timbers, was quoted in the May 2005 issue of *Shooting Sportsman* magazine as saying that, “Quail populations begin to blink out after a two-year lapse in burning. If you go past three, you lose almost all the benefits.”

Dennis Owens noted, “After about two years, I began to see some of the results of my work. Based on the amount of property you have, there will be a leveling-out of the number of coveys.” An essential part of quail management is planting shrubs. “There are a

number of shrubs that will work, but if you were only going to do one type of shrub, I would plant VA-70 lespedeza,” said Owens. He also pointed out that there are a number of cost-share programs available at this writing and landowners should evaluate which program works best for them.

Both Phil Bain and Dennis Owens have been pleased with the successes they have had with quail restoration but both point out that it is not a one-shot deal. It takes a long-term commitment to keep a quail population viable on your property. If you think quail restoration is a lot of work for a little bird, you are correct. But to bring back a species that has been in decline for over a half-century is going to take some work. Consider, however, that improving the environment for quail aids other species of songbirds and animals which prefer a similar habitat. So it is not just quail that you are assisting, and as my grandfather used to say, “Anything worth having is worth working for.”

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time with his black lab, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can read more by Clarke at his website, www.clarkecjones.com.

To learn more about quail restoration and management, visit these websites:

- Getting Started with Virginia’s Quail Action Plan: www.dgif.virginia.gov/quail/
- Tall Timbers: www.talltimbers.org

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