

Bobwhite Quail Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

The Northern Bobwhite Quail (*Colinus virginianus*) occurs throughout all or parts of 38 states and is a particularly prominent game bird in the South. In Georgia, bobwhites are present from the mountains to the coast and occupy a special place in the state's wildlife heritage, having been designated as the State Game Bird in 1970. However, due to large-scale changes in land use, quail populations have been declining since the early 1900's. The quail decline has primarily resulted from the loss of adequate nesting cover, brood range and escape thickets. In Georgia and across the South major efforts are underway to restore and maintain bobwhite habitat and populations.

LIFE HISTORY

Wildlife biologists classify bobwhites as a grassland forb-shrub habitat dependent species. In the Southeast this type of habitat is often referred to as early succession. To prosper, bobwhites need large expanses of clumped native warm season grasses mixed with annual weeds, legumes, briars and other woody thickets that are thick above but open underneath. The average annual home range size is around 40 acres, but depending on habitat quality, home range size can vary from 10 acres to more than 200 acres.

Bobwhites are relatively small ground dwelling gallinaceous (chicken-like) birds. Adults stand six to seven inches in height and typically weigh about six ounces. The male can be most easily identified by a prominent white stripe above the eye, whereas hens (females) have cream or buff colored head stripes.

The bobwhite nesting season extends from March through October with the peak occurring during May through August. Bobwhites nest on the ground using the previous year's dead vegetation, with both hens and cocks (males) collecting materials for nest construction. The average clutch size is 12 eggs with an incubation period of 23 days. Chicks are precocial, meaning they leave the nest with the adult shortly after hatching.

During the early fall bobwhite adults and broods form into social groupings called coveys, with an average covey size of 12 birds. Coveys roost or spend the night on the ground, in a circle with their heads pointed outward, which allows them to conserve heat and more easily escape nocturnal predators. As mortality occurs throughout the winter and covey size decreases, the remaining birds often join with other coveys for the remainder of the winter. Quail remain in coveys until the "spring breakup" at which time they disperse to begin the mating season. Males then begin to make the familiar "bob-bob-white" call to attract hens for breeding.

Bobwhites are what ecologists refer to as an r-selected species, which means they are subject to high annual mortality rates but are able to offset this mortality with high reproductive rates. Annual mortality rates may reach 70 to 80 percent depending on habitat quality, weather, predator densities, hunting pressure and other variables. Providing high quality habitat at all seasons of the year best controls predation on bobwhites.

REASONS FOR THE QUAIL DECLINE

Intensification of agriculture and forestry coupled with increased urbanization are the primary factors responsible for the decline in bobwhite quail and a number of other early successional wildlife species.

RESTORATION EFFORTS

At present, efforts are underway to improve habitat for bobwhites and other declining early successional wildlife. Georgia's Bobwhite Quail Initiative and a number of federal programs promote habitat restoration practices, including establishing early successional habitat around and across agricultural fields and pine forests.

ADDITIONAL WRD PUBLICATIONS:

- Bobwhite Quail In Georgia: History, Biology and Management
- Small Game Management In Georgia
- Bobwhite Quail Initiative Management Notes