

What's a quail worth?

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SAN ANGELO – What's a quail worth? The short answer — as it relates to a wild Texas quail — is \$253 each, according to a recently completed survey of Texas quail hunters.



Drs. Dale Rollins, a Texas AgriLife Extension Service wildlife specialist at San Angelo, Jason Johnson, an AgriLife Extension economist at Stephenville, and Kelly Reyna with the department of biological science at the University of North Texas, conducted two surveys of quail hunters in 2000 and again in 2011. These surveys yielded response rates of 47 percent and 9 percent respectively.



“The dramatic drop in respondents to this latest survey reflects a difference in survey methodology—mail-out in 2000, electronic in 2011, but it's also indicative of what's happened to quail hunting in Texas,” Rollins said. “The number of resident quail hunters in 2010 has decreased by 79 percent since 1981, which was the first year records on hunter participation were collected by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.”

Rollins said the survey also revealed that 97 percent of Texas quail hunters are white males with reported household incomes of over \$100,000. Each averaged spending about \$8,606 for 8.8 days of quail hunting during the 2010-2011 season. Combined with harvest estimates the respondents provided, this resulted in the \$253 per bird bagged – or a dollar increase of 24 percent over the 10 years since the first survey. Those surveyed in the earlier work were all Quail Unlimited members who resided in Texas. The 2011 participants were members of the Quail Coalition, the former group's Texas successor.

“These surveys underscore the passion and commitment quail hunters have for their favorite game birds,” Rollins said. “Such commitment equates to the quail's high value and this segment of hunters' willingness to pay for a quality quail-hunting experience.”

Johnson said the dollars spent by those involved in the sport and the traditions surrounding it truly position quail as one of the most coveted hunted species in the U.S.

“The impact that these hunting expenditures have on quail-hunting destination counties and those communities within those counties is huge,” Johnson said. “The latest survey showed that 46 percent of the quail hunting dollars are spent at the hunting destination with another 18 percent going to communities located between the hunter's home and destination. This represents a tremendous economic impact to largely rural communities. In fact, it's one of the rare instances of money flowing from the urban areas where the hunters live to the rural areas where the quail are.”

Johnson said these expenditures come as merchandise sales, hotel stays, restaurant and fuel purchases and sales tax revenues.

Documenting those expenditures is important, but Johnson said detailing the location where those expenditures occur is even more so. The figures show the real value of a 'prime quail hunting destination' not only to the hunter, but also to those in the communities benefiting from the added hunting-dollar influx.

But there is one huge dark cloud weighing heavily over all hunters of wild quail and the communities they impact and that's the lack of birds, Rollins said.

“Today, bobwhite abundance is only a remnant of what it was just 30 years ago for most of the southeastern U.S.,” he said.

Rollins said bobwhite and scaled quail, the two most popular of Texas' four species of quails, declined to record lows in 2011.

"There are several more nuggets of bad news here. First is the increasing price and decreasing opportunity for quail hunting especially for anyone but the most affluent hunters. Second, there is a considerable disconnect between hunters and landowners about what factors are decreasing quail numbers, resulting in a sometimes weakened sense of trust between the two. Lastly, many economically-strapped rural West Texas communities who once realized a real economic boost from quail hunting have watched as that revenue steam has virtually dried up over just the past decade."

Rollins said quail hunters as a whole are discouraged about the future of their pastime. The mostly older group is increasingly losing hope that the quail situation is ever going to rebound.

"As a quail hunter myself, and as a researcher, I feel their pain," Rollins said. "But I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet."

"At the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch or RPQRR, which I direct near Roby, we are focused squarely on the quail decline which has held Texas in an ever-tightening grip since 2008. We are aggressively studying various phenomena that may be affecting quail abundance. Last year the RPQRR funded a \$2 million research effort that involves scientists from Texas Tech, Texas A&M and Texas A&M-Kingsville."

Rollins said the research effort, called 'Operation Idiopathic Decline' focuses on diseases and parasites possibly involved in the quail's widespread demise. He said "idiopathic" literally means the experts don't know what's causing quail populations to fade.

Rollins says habitat loss is the likely culprit in east Texas, but he's less certain in West Texas, leading his team question whether something else is involved.

"We're currently sampling quail from 21 counties across West Texas and ten sites in western Oklahoma and subjecting the birds to a battery of various tests. Initial results confirm quail from these areas are heavily parasitized, but additional results are pending."

For more information about the quail research ranch, see www.quailresearch.org .