Long-term trends of northern bobwhite populations and hunting success on private shooting plantations in northern Florida and southern Georgia

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Abstract

Nearly all broad-scale assessments (U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service [USDI-FWS], Breeding Bird Surveys, Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts, and state game agency harvest surveys) of northern bobwhite (Colinus virginianus) population trends during the past 30 to 50 years point to widespread declines at local, regional, and national scales. Long-term records of populations that do not show long-term bobwhite declines are rare. Landowners and managers in the shooting plantation country between Tallahassee, Florida and Thomasville, Georgia have been recording quail hunting and bag records for many years. Such information can provide valuable insight into the long-term trends of bobwhite populations. We therefore analyzed bag records from 5 different properties where data had been collected for periods ranging from 14 to 80+ years. Trends from these data were completely opposite from long-term trends shown from other sources such as Breeding Bird Survey and Christmas Bird Count data. These data indicate that a long-term, continuous approach to habitat management (primarily burning with prescribed fire, and frequent soil disturbance from disk) can sustain abundant bobwhite populations and high-quality shooting. These data also call into question alternative hypotheses such as invasion of the red imported fire ant and range expansion of the coyote as being responsible for the long-term bobwhite decline. Both fire ants and coyotes are common in the Thomasville-Tallahassee area, yet, abundant bobwhite populations persist, presumably as a function of high-quality habitat management.

Recommended Citation

In the Red Hills of northern Florida and southern Georgia, plantation owners maintain detailed records of hunting success, some of which span nearly 100 years (Brennan et al. 2000). While statewide indices of bobwhite abundance have been linked to statewide harvests (Schwartz 1974, Peterson and Perez 2000), the value of using hunting success as an index of bobwhite abundance on a managed area has not been assessed. 2000. Long-term trends of northern bobwhite populations and hunting success on private shooting plantations in northern Florida and southern Georgia. Proceedings of the National Quail Symposium 4:75–77. Chapman, D. G. 1951. Quail hunting in Wayne County, Georgia. I come from a long line of bird hunters. The reason the man from Illinois knew who my great-great uncle Tom was because he was a well-known breeder of top-of-the-line English Pointers. The Colonel hunted and competed in field trials all over the country, and even had a dog reach Hall of Fame status. The Northern Bobwhite AKA "quail" is a small species of upland gamebird that depends on a specific set of habitat parameters to thrive. First and foremost, quail need large, contiguous expanses of suitable habitat to produce sustainable populations. However, there are also many extremely nice plantations and hunting outfitters in the state that utilize pen-reared birds. Jase Brooks hunting quail. Photo by Tyler Gagat, @gagat_goes_adventuring.