

Northern Bobwhite quail: habitat basics

Despite being one of the most popular and most-studied species of wildlife, the northern bobwhite quail population has been in a downward spiral for the past 30 years. Experts say it comes down to habitat and changing land use patterns. Knowing their habitat basics can help turn quail numbers around.

Food preferences. For the first six weeks of their life, quail chicks eat small beetles, bees, spiders, wasps, flies and other insects almost exclusively. They then gradually switch to grass and weed seeds and green plant leaves. In general, grass and fruit seeds, especially those along field margins, are common in summer. Legume seeds as well as ragweed seeds and oak and pine mast are strong fall and winter foods. Waste corn, soybeans and wheat are also eaten in fall and winter. Other important food plants for quail include lespedeza, partridge pea, clovers, dogwoods, honeysuckle, crab grass and beggarweeds.

Since chicks need insects and grass and weed seeds, “early successional” plants are key to their habitat. That’s also why disturbance of vegetation by disking or burning is an important component in habitat development. Prescribed burning is an underused but valuable tool.

Nesting and brood cover. Nests are built on the ground, typically within 20 yards of a field opening such as a disked strip or road. Quail will move their brood from moderately dense nesting cover to more open “bugging” areas, where bare ground is interspersed with upright plants, including native “bunch” grass and forb mixtures. Overhead cover protects quail from avian predators above; open pathways underneath allow a running escape. Known as an “edge” species, quail like field borders and any other gradual edge between crop fields and woodlands, hay lands, pastures or abandoned lands. The absence of edge cover can, by itself, make an area unsuitable to quail.

Winter cover. Quail like small fields surrounded by brushy draws, dense brushy cover or wood lots. In winter, look for them in a thicket of trees, brush and vines. Warm season grasses at least 8 inches high offer winter cover, too, as do uncut hay fields and moderately grazed grass/brush rangeland.

For more information visit the web at www.qu.org or visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute at www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov

Wildlife researchers have documented 650 seed foods in the bobwhite quail diet, including ragweed, a favorite.

Wildlife Ways

Did you know....

It’s called the Northern Bobwhite, but the quail’s range extends from Pennsylvania to southern Mexico, all across the southeastern United States, and as far west as Colorado.

It’s one of North America’s most important game birds.