

Once again, pen-raised quail are not the answer!

I continue to get requests for information regarding pen-raised quail. Many people want to see more quail and reestablish populations of bobwhites. However, releasing pen-raised birds is not the answer! Years ago (1930's – 1950's), state wildlife agencies throughout the country hatched and pen-raised millions of bobwhites. Upon release, they were to bolster and reestablish quail populations. All of these efforts failed. Millions of dollars were spent. Wildlife managers learned a lot in the process. Since, much has been learned in the private sector about raising pen-raised bobwhites. However, **efforts to keep them "wild," feeding programs, soft-release techniques, etc. have not led to a single reestablished population.**

Pen-raised quail lack behavioral characteristics of wild birds, which should not be surprising as pen-raised birds are domesticated stock selected over time to be docile enough to survive in pens and raised in a most unnatural way. Many of these domesticated birds will not nest, and some that do will not incubate their clutch. It also has been noted for a pen-raised female to incubate her clutch and, upon hatching, simply walk off and leave the brood. Without the hen, chicks die quickly, either from exposure, starvation, or predation. Mortality among pen-raised bobwhites is **extraordinary**, which is understandable if the birds have not learned to avoid or escape predators by the proper rearing of a wild adult hen or cock bird. They are relying on innate instincts, which are obviously lacking after generations of domestication. In short, pen-raised quail never have been documented to sustain a population.

Although behavioral issues can be problematic, pen-raised bobwhites may breed with wild birds if they are released just prior to the nesting season where wild quail still persist. Pen-raised birds readily associate with wild birds, and research has shown the genetic integrity of the wild population (if there is one where pen-raised birds are released) may be compromised within 2 years of releasing pen-reared birds. Domesticated birds should not be released where wild birds still persist in hopes of bolstering the population. There is a reason why the bobwhite population has declined!

Another problem associated with pen-raised bobwhites is transmission of diseases into the local wild population (if one exists), which can lead to increased mortality for native birds. Domestic quail are raised under the same conditions as other poultry, such as chickens and turkeys, and are subject to many domestic poultry diseases.

Regardless of the problems associated with pen-raised bobwhites, these birds would not persist to re-establish a population even if reproduction and mortality were not a problem. The real problem is they do not have an adequate place to live; **that is, habitat is lacking.** Have you ever wondered why native birds are no longer there, or why the population is not increasing?!? If native birds are present, why would releasing domesticated birds cause the population to increase if the current wild population cannot increase on its own?!? The environmental pressures that are limiting population growth have not been removed. If the area does not currently support bobwhites, there is a reason.

Many factors have contributed to declining quail populations: 1) habitat destruction (quail can't live in urban areas, subdivisions, and small fields with houses all around, so there is less area available); 2) changing land-use practices (large "clean" farms with no suitable cover, conversion of row-crop farming to pastures and hayfields of tall fescue and bermudagrass, and woods that have replaced old-fields); and, yes, 3) increased numbers of predators (nobody traps anymore). We also have learned how the surrounding landscape is critical to population persistence. Bobwhite require an open landscape, not a forested landscape, and even if you work to improve quail habitat in a forested landscape, you should not expect to see a population response. That doesn't mean you should not try to improve habitat for bobwhite and other wildlife that use early successional plant communities, but it does accentuate the importance of working with your neighbors and trying to impact as large of an area as possible.

Over the past few years, several research projects have studied and identified what we need to do to bring quail back to appreciable numbers. **Every study points to habitat**—improving habitat conditions to once again favor the year-round needs of bobwhite is the key to restoring bobwhite populations. Not pen-raised birds.

For information on improving habitat for bobwhites and how to receive cost-share assistance, contact your county Extension office, regional TWRA office, or local NRCS office.

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