



## Bobwhite Quail in Florida – Declines and Opportunities

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Figure 1: Early morning covey counts with Ken Harrison on the Sharp Ranch. (photo credit Raoul Boughton)

It is a clear cool night and the low glow on the eastern horizon signals the coming of the new day. An uptick in mosquitoes accompanies the coming splendor. That's Florida for you, late October and still plenty of the blood suckers about. With ears twitching we listen for the fall call of Bobwhite Quail as they form coveys and prepare to survive the winter (Figure 1). A loud squeaky “koi-lee” is

often given by one or two quail within a covey of sometimes 12 or more individuals. The fall covey call can be used as an estimate of your fall quail population if coupled with average number of quail per covey, which can be counted when coveys flush. The peak of calling occurs in late October, November and into December. Unlike the loud “Bob White” call of the cock during spring that can last all morning the covey calls typically last a few minutes just before the sun crests the horizon. Both the covey call and spring call can be heard and downloaded at the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (<https://bringbackbobwhites.org/>), and methods for counting fall coveys are well described by the Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy (<http://talltimbers.org/how-many-bobwhite-coveys-are-there/>).



Figure 2: A 1920's Florida brace of bobwhite quail. (no copyright, see below)



Figure 3: A Bucket load of bobwhite Quail, Hardaway Florida. (no copyright, see below)

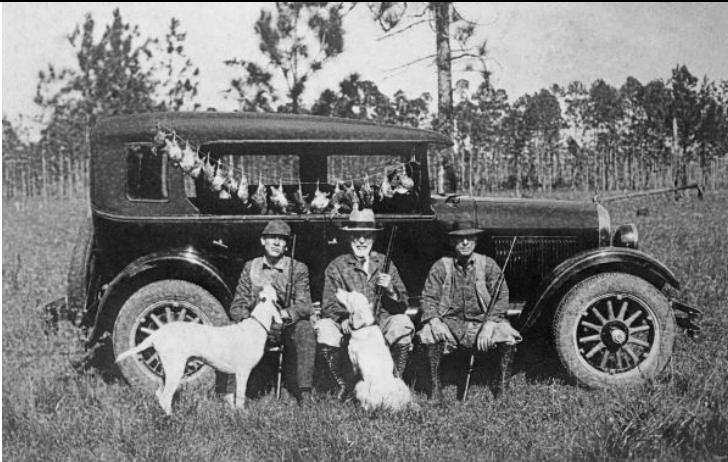


Figure 4: Hunting Quail around Jackson in Long-leaf Pine circa 1920's. (no copyright, see below)

Counting quail is an important part of wildlife game management and doing so will supply you with an abundance indicator of how well the population is doing from year to year and what your bag limit could or should be. The old timer stories of braces of quail, or even bucket loads are unfortunately in the past (Figure 2, 3, 4), and careful consideration of hunting quail and its additional stress on the local population should be undertaken. Counting quail is also important in understanding population ups and downs overtime and which management strategies are helping in the conservation of the species. If you want to engage more in quail conservation and management on your property please reach out to the Rangeland Wildlife and Ecosystems Program, and look out for the coming spring Quail course.

Bobwhite are also an indicator species and their decline across most of their range signifies a degradation of the grassland ecosystems of the United States, at a continental scale. The longleaf pine-wiregrass and prairie systems of the south have forever been changed. Systems that were once maintained through fire and grazing sustained diverse vegetation communities that Bobwhite thrived upon. They were not the only one, as a myriad of species relied upon these grasslands. Modern agricultural and silvicultural practices that became intensified following World War II, as well as decreased use of fire within agriculture practices and natural resource management, caused severe declines in the diverse ground cover needed by bobwhite and many other species. Using the North American Breeding Bird Survey data, the decline of Bobwhite in the last 60 years across the south, central, and panhandle region of Florida is clear (Figure 5). These surveys are quite reliable as Bobwhite male calls throughout the breeding season are very loud and distinct.

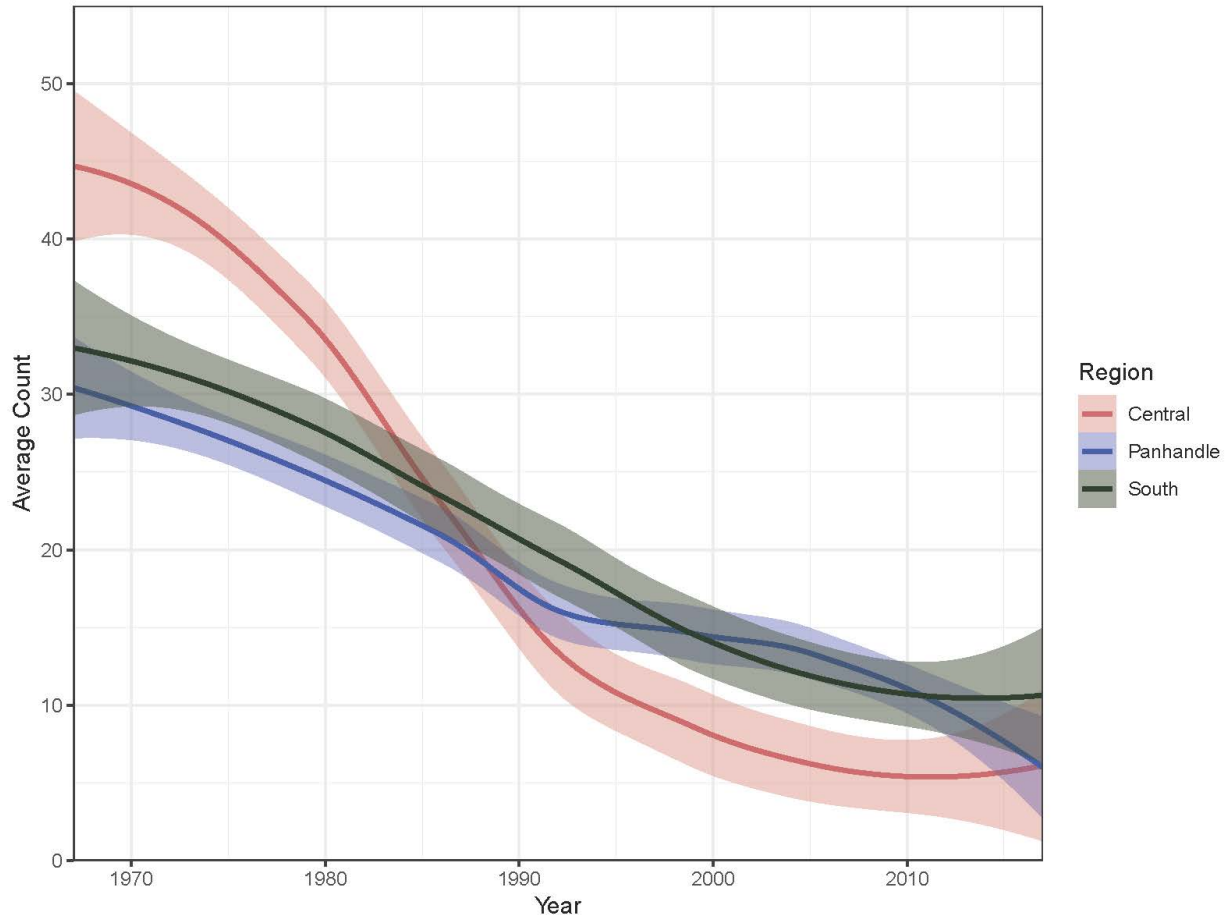


Figure 5: The decline of Florida Bobwhite using Breeding Bird Atlas Data from 1967 to 2018. The severest declines occur in central Florida where development and loss of habitat has been the greatest. (graph credit Raoul Boughton)

Although, extensive declines have occurred the good news is that bobwhite quail are still present in many locations across Florida in sufficient numbers, and that with targeted initiatives to improve and restore habitat, populations will strengthen and grow. To stop the decline, it will take habitat restoration across landscapes, restoring desirable prescribed fire cycles at the appropriate scale and frequency, on our remaining native habitats on private and public lands. As well as, providing quail friendly alternative habitat on farms and ranches, leaving old fields for cover, patches of native habitat where you can, fence rows, and the continued use of fire. Ranches in Florida provide a significant portion of diverse grassland habitats for many wildlife species. It would be a very sad day if the iconic whistle of the Bobwhite quail became silent.

If you have any questions please contact me at [boughton@ufl.edu](mailto:boughton@ufl.edu) call 863-735-1314 ext. 216.

Credit for data used in graph. Pardieck, K. L., D. J. Ziolkowski Jr., M. Lutmerding, and M. A. R. Hudson. 2018. North American Breeding Bird Survey Dataset 1966 - 2017, version 2017.0. U.S. Geological Survey, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. <https://doi.org/10.5066/F76972V8>.

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