

BOBWHITE QUAIL ENTHUSIASTS TOUR ALABAMA BLACK BELT

By DAVID RAINER

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The bobwhite quail opportunities in the Alabama Black Belt were put under intense scrutiny recently. As expected, the Black Belt quail experience received nothing but praise.

Alabama Black Belt Adventures and sponsors hosted representatives of Quail Forever and the outdoors media for a grand tour of the quail hunting in the Alabama area famous for its rich, dark topsoil and abundant wildlife.

The tour started at Shenandoah Plantation in Union Springs, followed by a day of hunting at High Log Creek Farm and Hunting Preserve near Hurtsboro. Great Southern Outdoors Plantation in Union Springs entertained the group with dinner prepared by Iron Chef winner David Bancroft. Another award-winning chef, Chris Hastings, prepared one day's lunch for the hunters at Gusto Plantation in Lowndes County. A trip to the Boggy Hollow Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Conecuh National Forest was included in the tour.

Howard Vincent, president and CEO of Quail Forever and Pheasants Forever, said the programs he represents have three main purposes.

"We're a habitat organization with three enduring strategies," Vincent said. "We raise dollars, and we drive them in the ground. We do advocacy in Washington, D.C., typically on the Farm Bill. We are the face of the Conservation Reserve Program. And then we do education and outreach – how do we introduce more youth into the outdoors and shooting sports and hunting sports? How do we generate the next conservationists? That's what we do every single day.

"The unique feature of Quail Forever and Pheasants Forever is the local chapters raise money, and then they retain control of that money. We just started a new chapter in Alabama, the Alabama Black Belt chapter in Union Springs. That makes six chapters in Alabama right now."

Vincent and many of his Alabama excursion companions are based in Minnesota. Therefore, they enjoyed a break from the February cold up north and were treated to one of our main traditions.

"In Alabama, we learned that Southern hospitality is no cliché – it's the absolute truth," Vincent said. "Pam (Swanner of Alabama Black Belt Adventures) pulled all of this together. It was seamless. The Quail Forever team couldn't be more proud to be down here to learn. We look forward to working together."

To cap the week focused on Alabama quail, about 100 guests gathered at the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) NaturePlex in Millbrook to hear a presentation by Bill Palmer of Tall Timbers Research Station in Tallahassee, Fla., where the bobwhite quail is one of the main focal points in its Game Bird Program.

Tim Gothard, AWF Executive Director, introduced Palmer and said interest in bobwhite quail restoration is as high as he has seen it in his 25 years in conservation.





"I don't know that we have all the answers to make quail like they were in the 40s and 50s and 60s, but the interest in quail has really not waned," Gothard said. "That is really the impetus for this event and the landowners we've talked with through the years. We knew that interest was still vibrant."

Palmer, who has been at Tall Timbers (talltimbers.org) for 21 years, agrees with Gothard's assessment.

"We've got a lot of people who are really passionate about returning quail to the landscape, returning fire to the landscape," Palmer said. "This is probably the most difficult conservation issue that the nation has faced. It's a really tough turnaround for bobwhites."

Palmer said Georgia is a perfect example of what has happened to quail populations and quail hunting over the years.

In 1961, 142,000 hunters harvested more than 3.5 million quail, likely all wild birds, in Georgia alone. By 2009, the number of hunters had shrunk to 22,000 and the number of birds taken was a little more than 800,000. The telling number, however, is that 97 percent of the birds taken in 2009 were pen-raised.

"That is a real shocking statistic," Palmer said. "It's just mind-boggling that millions of wild quail were shot just 50 years ago, and we no longer have those numbers."

"We'll never go back to the 60s and 70s. That's just not going to happen. But that doesn't mean we can't have significant success and significant opportunities for young folks to enjoy our wild bird hunting again."

Palmer said a variety of issues have been blamed for the decline of wild quail populations including land use, predators and even fire ants.

Tall Timbers' research indicates it's the lack of fire that is likely the main factor in the quail's demise.

"The loss of fire in the South, the stamping out of fire in the South, is largely the reason for quail decline, frankly," he said. "The idea that people were burning the South for fun. They were burning the South because they were bored. There was a strong federal and university effort to stamp out fire in the South. We bit into it. The nation bit into it, and we've got to dig out of that problem."

Palmer said the evidence in the burn frequency in tree-ring studies (dendrochronology) shows that fire happened frequently.

"If you look at pre-settlement basis, the landscape was burned on about a two-year fire frequency. The South was burned. The Native Americans were burning in the West. The Native Americans were burning in the Northeast. That's the bottom line."

However, prescribed fire cannot be applied indiscriminately or it will adversely impact the quail habitat.

"There are more than a million acres of prescribed fire in this region," Palmer said. "Probably no other area in the country burns as much as we do here. It's up to us to make sure 25 years down the road there is more fire, and it's safely and wisely used."



"On public lands, it hasn't been as successful for one main reason – the scale of fire. When you burn on a 100-acre scale you have very normal breeding season survival. When you burn on a 1,000-acre scale, survival is half that amount. That population can't grow. It's going to go down or stay flat."

Tall Timbers set up different plots, starting in 1962, that were burned by prescribed fire on different frequencies. Plots were burned every year, every two years, every three years and never.

"By the time you get to three years, you've lost your quail habitat," Palmer said. "By the time you get to unburned, which is most of the Southeast these days, you've really lost your quail habitat. It's great Cooper's hawk habitat, but it's not good quail habitat."

Palmer said quality quail habitat includes pine or oak savannas, prescribed fire every two years, reasonable timber density and good ground cover. Predation management and supplemental feeding can also increase annual quail survival.



Translocation of wild birds is another technique Palmer discussed that has proven to be successful.

"What can we do to expand wild bird populations?" he asked. "Translocation is a key factor in that. Our research shows it's a very viable technique. If you moved birds to a site, if the habitat was there and predators were managed, the quail did just as good or better than the site they came from."

In the past few years, Tall Timbers has moved more than 2,000 quail to different sites around the Southeast. Alabama was the first state to work with Tall Timbers on relocation efforts.

"That's from 50 to 100 birds per site," Palmer said. "That adds up to a lot of landowners who had no hope, who, all of a sudden, are investing in wild quail management because they have a chance to build a population relatively quickly. We're really focused, with our partners, on expanding our impact. Leveraging our translocation project is a big deal on both public and private land."

Palmer said other than supporting groups like AWF and Quail Forever, those who wish to see the return of wild quail should contact their elected officials.

"Encourage your representatives to increase funding for prescribed fire," he said. "This is key. We need to increase ecological management on public lands. And we need focal areas on public lands."

The Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division has such a focal area in the Boggy Hollow WMA, which is being converted into bobwhite quail habitat through selective timber thinning and more frequent, smaller prescribed burns. These efforts will encourage the growth of native grasses and forbs to provide opportunity for an increase in the current bobwhite

population.

"We're doing call counts on 22 WMAs; we're doing habitat work on WMAs," said WFF Director Chuck Sykes, who managed a quail plantation for seven years earlier in his career. "The Division recently purchased property where a portion is dedicated to quail. We are working on Boggy Hollow in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service.

"We know what it takes. Give us a little bit of time. Partner with us and I can assure we can get things done. We have people in place. We have projects in place. Boggy Hollow is going to be a good thing."

PHOTOS: (By David Rainer) Officials with Quail Forever and members of the media enjoyed a tour of the quail operations in the Alabama Black Belt recently, including a trip to High Log Creek near Hurtsboro, where the group enjoyed many covey rises.

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