



Wildlife Habitat Federation Improves Quail Habitat in Texas

In Texas, the iconic whistle of the northern bobwhite quail and the fleeting sprint of the scaled quail are sounds and sights that evoke a deep connection to the land for most outdoor enthusiasts. However, decades of habitat loss, fragmentation, and changing land management practices have led to significant declines in quail populations across the state. Wildlife Habitat Federation (WHF), a nonprofit organization headquartered in Cat Spring, Texas, has been at the forefront of addressing these challenges through innovative conservation efforts for more than twenty years. The WHF team is dedicated to its mission to restore, manage, and sustain grassland habitats to support thriving quail populations while promoting broader ecosystem health.

A Legacy of Quail Conservation

Founded in 2004 by Jim Willis, Bob Moore, and John Webb, WHF initially focused on restoring degraded ranchlands in Colorado and Austin Counties to support northern bobwhite quail populations. Over the past two decades, the organization has expanded its reach to over 100 Texas counties, impacting more than 200,000 acres through education, outreach, consulting, and on-the-ground restoration. WHF's work emphasizes native grassland restoration, prescribed grazing systems, and the protection of sensitive areas, all of which create the diverse habitat structure quail need for nesting, foraging, and roosting.

In 2023, WHF rebranded to simply "WHF" to reflect its growth and expanded mission. As President & CEO Garry Stephens notes, "While assisting landowners in putting conservation on the ground for the benefit of quail, we realize that those conservation practices also contribute to improving all of our natural resources." This holistic approach has positioned WHF as a leader in the Texas conservation community, benefiting not only quail but also soil, water, air, and all native wildlife species.

Habitat Restoration: A Cornerstone of WHF's Efforts

Quail are ground-nesting birds that require specific habitat conditions to thrive. Native grasslands with a mix of bunchgrasses, forbs, and shrubs provide nesting cover, food sources like seeds and insects, and protection from predators. However, urbanization, agricultural intensification, and invasive species have fragmented and degraded these habitats, contributing to quail population declines in many areas of the state.

WHF prioritizes habitat restoration to counteract these threats, and we collaborate with landowners to implement practices such as native grassland restoration, prescribed burning, brush management - both mechanical and chemical, planting of cover crops and rotational grazing.

Photo one shows the results of a project implemented by WHF in early 2024 that involved chemical control of an extreme infestation of prickly pear. With timely rains and good growing conditions, even in extended drought, the grass cover exploded resulting in great nesting and brooding conditions in 2024. Quail were rarely seen on this property and Turkey poults had never been observed but following this application successful hatches of both occurred, to the great delight of the landowner. Funding for the total project that includes fence, water development, aerial spraying, rangeland plantings and prescribed grazing was provided by the South Texas Quail Coalition Chapter.

Education and Outreach: Empowering Landowners

A key component of WHF's strategy is educating landowners to become better stewards of their natural resources. In 2024, WHF expanded its outreach through site visits and participation in events like the upcoming Statewide Quail Symposium. At this symposium, WHF will showcase statewide efforts to restore and enhance quail habitats through a cooperative agreement with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

This agreement enables WHF to provide planning services at "no cost" to landowners, assess their properties' resources and objectives, and present them with a suite of conservation alternatives to improve the condition of the land. WHF continues to work with property owners and land managers to finalize plans; aid in seeking financial assistance through NRCS programs like the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Working Lands for Wildlife; supervise implementation of the prescribed practices; certify completion, and aid in monitoring the effects on the natural resources present on the landscape.

Collaboration and Research

WHF strengthens its impact through partnerships with organizations such as the Rolling Plains Quail Research Foundation, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, Texas Grazing Lands Coalition, Coastal Prairie Conservancy, and the Texas Wildlife Association. These collaborations support research and land management strategies that promote healthy quail populations through the restoration and maintenance of diverse, functional habitats that WHF is able to implement on the landscape in large part due to the generous support from several Quail Coalition Chapters around the state.

Impact and Outlook

Looking ahead, WHF aims to reach more landowners and restore additional acres for the health and livelihood of our native quail populations and all grassland bird species. Our website, whf-texas.org, offers resources, including an online questionnaire for landowners seeking conservation services, and opportunities to support WHF's mission. With Texas' quail populations showing signs of recovery, WHF's science-based, collaborative and put it on the ground approach is proving vital to sustaining this iconic species and the ecosystems they inhabit.

Conclusion

WHF is committed to reversing the decline of quail populations in Texas. Through habitat restoration, landowner education, and strategic partnerships, WHF is creating a brighter future for bobwhite and scaled quail while enhancing the natural resources we all depend on. By fostering resilient habitats and empowering landowners, WHF ensures that the whistle of the bobwhite and the legacy of Texas' wild spaces endure for generations to come.



Photo one: Nesting and brooding cover development as a result of prickly pear control in 2024.