



THE COVEY



A NEWSLETTER FOR LANDOWNERS, QUAIL HUNTERS,
ENTHUSIASTS, AND SCIENTISTS

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at Texas A&M University-Kingsville

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The Covey's "Fall Shuffle" of Editors

Although the idea of a fall shuffle is a debated concept in quail biology, it occasionally occurs in the real world. Dr. Andy Radomski, the previous coordinator of the South Texas Quail Project and editor of this newsletter, recently accepted a faculty position with the University of Minnesota. I am excited to report that I will be filling Andy's shoes as project coordinator and editor.

My name is Fidel Hernandez, an assistant professor with Texas A&M University-Kingsville and the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute. I am a native of Texas, being raised on a ranch just north of Brackettville. My education extends from west Texas (B.S. and M.S. from Angelo State University) to East and South Texas (joint Ph.D. from Texas A&M and Texas A&M-Kingsville). I researched nest depredation ecology of bobwhites and wild turkeys for my thesis, while my dissertation addressed the potential impacts prickly pear control has on bobwhites. Upon graduation, I was very happy to join the TAMUK and CKWRI crew. I could not have chosen a better place to work!!

Below is my first issue of this newsletter. I hope you enjoy the article.

Does Every Cloud Have A Silver Lining?

Most of you have heard the saying, "Every cloud has a silver lining," meaning behind every disappointment in life, something good can be obtained from it. In South Texas quaildom, clouds certainly do have silver linings, as proportioned rain means lush vegetation, hopping insects, and many bobwhites. However, are there instances when rain is detrimental to quail?

On the 24th of August 1999 a drive through Kingsville gave the impression that a nuclear holocaust was approaching: gas stations out of fuel; closed restaurants; boarded houses; and streets clear of vehicles.

However, it was no nuclear holocaust, but rather Hurricane Bret heading straight for Kingsville with 140-mph wind gusts and torrential rain. With the structural damage such storms may cause, the question arises "How were bobwhites impacted by Bret?"

Flooding rains are the most likely catastrophe during the bobwhite breeding season. It is reported that about 30% of nest abandonment may be attributed to the elements. Heavy rains may flood nests built in low areas or maintain nests in saturated conditions that they are eventually abandoned. Further, summer deluges can take a toll on broods. Chicks found in low areas may be drowned, or the vitality of chicks may be lowered by wetting and chilling. Fortunately, due to the South Texas Quail Project, we had the opportunity to monitor bobwhite survival during such a summer storm.

We were monitoring 83 radio-collared adult bobwhites and 14 broods prior to the hurricane. Bret passed "inches" away from our study area, which received over



Photo by Fidel Hernandez

Hurricane Bret flooded much of South Texas rangelands. Drowned bobwhite chicks were often found in low areas.

12 inches of rain and experienced wind gusts over 100 mph. This resulted in large expanses of inundated areas over a foot deep. So how did our bobwhites fare? Adult bobwhites were not severely impacted as 72 adult bobwhites remained alive after Hurricane Bret. Of the 11 bobwhites mortalities, 4 were due to exposure (the storm) and 7 were depredated. However, of 14 broods, only 8 survived. The 6 broods killed by the storm were all less than 2 weeks old. It is interesting to note the conditions under which some of these broods were found. One brood was found drowned in a puddle of water, with the attending hen dead less than a foot away on dry land. Another brood was found scattered on dry land, surrounding the dead attending hen. The youngest brood being monitored was a shocking site. The nest hatched the weekend of the storm, and thus the chicks were only 2-3 days old. We found the brood within a small "island" (< 1 ft diameter) at the base of a mesquite tree. This island was surrounded by water over a foot deep. The remains of this brood only were comprised of 8 sets of chick wings, and 2 sets of adult bobwhite legs that had the meat stripped. This mortality site is typical of an hawk kill, where the wings are clipped and the skeleton is stripped of the meat. It is possible that this brood was taking refuge on this small island and, because it was confined to this small area, was depredated entirely by an avian species.

Our limited information suggests that Bret had the greatest impact on brood survival. However, its impact on production may be minimal. Peak nesting season for bobwhites is May-July, thus most of the broods probably were old enough to survive the storm. Further, the month of June potentially accounts for 1/3 of nest production and 2/5 of chick production. Any broods or nests lost to Bret may only represent a small portion of the overall production.

After our assessment, we sincerely began to appreciate the efforts bobwhites put forth into raising a brood. It is no wonder why quail have endeared themselves to so many people, or why the first *bob-whites* heard in early spring stir such excitement in the surrounding countryside. Such joyful whistling only causes me to believe clouds certainly do have silver linings in quaildom.

Closing Covey Calls

I extend my deepest gratitude for the continued financial support and enthusiasm you continue to offer The South Texas Quail Project. This project would not be possible without this sincere dedication. I will strive to provide useful and interesting information with every issue. If you are ever in the Kingsville area, stop by and visit or feel free to call me at 361-593-3926. Until next time,

Fidel Hernandez

If you or someone you know would like to receive a free copy of **THE COVEY** Newsletter, please write to the address below.

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