



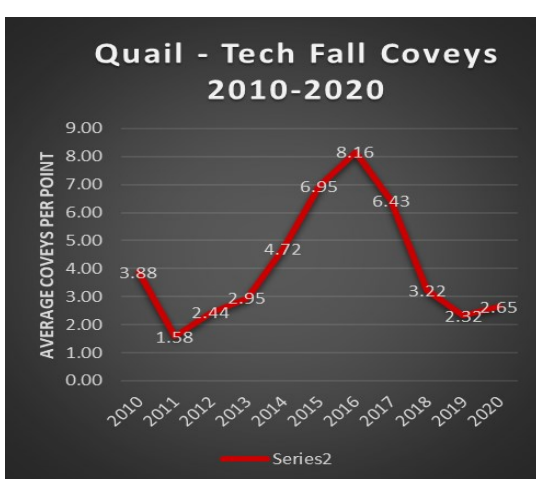
QUAIL-TECH ALLIANCE

2020 Covey Count Results

KEY POINTS:

- 1) QUAIL POPULATIONS ARE SIMILAR TO LAST YEAR.
- 2) INTENSIVELY MANAGED LANDS FARED WELL OVERALL THIS YEAR.

Last year, we categorized the 2019 autumn covey count results as a “sidestep” because across the Alliance, the average decreased less than one covey from 2018. Using the same metric, 2020 was yet another sidestep (2.32 coveys per point in 2019 and 2.65 coveys per point today). Overall, the 25 ranches in the Quail – Tech Alliance are an average 0.33 coveys higher than last year. Due to the

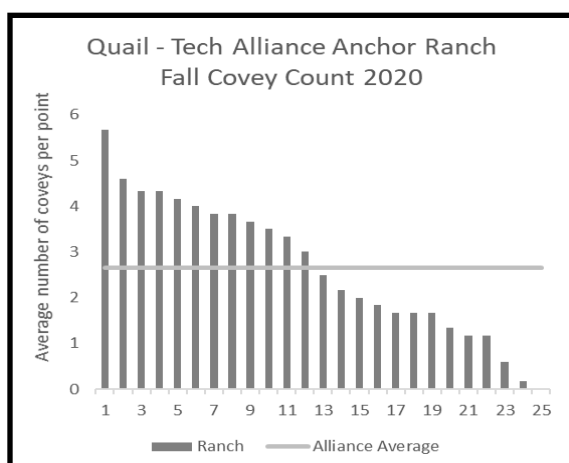


vagaries involved in counting two dozen ranches spread across an entire ecoregion (the length of time, differences in the hearing abilities of the observers, changing weather conditions) it is unknown if our index is sensitive enough to detect changes of less than a covey. However, we can confidently say the Rolling Plains’ quail crop this year is similar to last year’s. This data also agrees with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s roadside counts: https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/hunt/planning/quail_forecast/forecast/.

How did we get here?

The Rolling Plains entered the 2020 nesting season mostly drought free with a relatively young quail population as indicated by our age ratio data from fall 2019. Our spring whistle counts were within 1 bird of the 2019 average. Based on that, we made the hopeful comparison between 2019 and 2013, stating “the breeding population potential is there for explosive growth if conditions are right.” However, between completing our spring surveys and publishing the results, drought had already crept back into the western Rolling Plains, and would spread across much of the ecoregion during the summer. For most of our ranches the 2020 nesting season was a holding action, with most ranches neither losing nor gaining more than a covey per point on average. There is a lot that gets lost in discussing averages however: Two of our ranches using intensive management that also got a little rain at the right times experienced increases between 3.5 and 4.6 coveys per point. Meanwhile, another well managed ranch which spent the entire nesting season in drought (including weeks of exceptional drought conditions) lost over 3 coveys per point, but was still within 0.5 coveys of the overall QT average.

Intensive management is the deliberate alteration of resources used by quail through manipulation of the vegetation, broadcasting supplemental feed into the habitat, and/or predator management to specifically promote bobwhite populations on a local scale. Much like last year, the ranches with increases had things in common from simply more rainfall and various levels of management ranging from conservative grazing, brush management, discing, to supplemental feeding and predator management. We often



think of the long-term changes in data as a series of waves with peaks and troughs, and I’m sure everyone is now familiar with the term “flatten the curve.” However, the Rolling Plains is too dry a place for such wavy talk, so let’s think of the other end of “flattening the curve” as “filling the ditch.” That is, to attempt to keep the lows from being quite so low.

Intensive management cannot overcome overgrazing and poor habitat management! However, in conjunction with good management, it may help “fill the ditch” by increasing the percentage of surviving hens entering the breeding season and increasing the percentage of successful nests to keep the ditch from becoming an abyss.

Where are we going?

Like any biologist and fortune teller, I have to say, “it depends.” On two sites in the western Rolling Plains our juvenile to adult ratios obtained from trapping ranged from 2.1 to 5.2 Juvenile/Adult. This indicates somewhere between a slight decline to a slight increase if all other factors (drought and management) are equal. However, the pandemic has forced us to reduce some of our fall trapping, so this data represents only two sites and a fairly small sample. My recommendation is to be conservative in your grazing and harvest, keep “filling the ditch” with the good management, and hope against hope for a mild-yet-wet winter.

How can I help?

As mentioned above, if you manage land in the Rolling Plains, continue to manage for drought with conservative grazing, and if your habitat is in order, consider some intensive management such as broadcast supplemental feeding. If you want to help fund conservation, consider visiting and donating to us at www.quail-tech.org in particular or the great people at your local Quail Coalition. Without the help of Park Cities, Permian Basin, and Cross Timbers chapters of the Quail Coalition, the Burnett Foundation, Mr. Chuck Ribelin, Mr. Jim Cone, and all our Anchor Ranches this effort would not be possible. **THANK YOU!**

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