

# QUAIL ALLEY

*Some of the last remaining bobwhite habitat is bringing top dollar as sportsmen scramble for the last pieces of the pie.*

*"To those devoid of imagination, a blank spot on a map is a useless waste. But to others the most valuable part."—A. Leopold*

ig men are chasing little birds in some of the most desolate regions of Texas while spending and making millions of dollars in the process.

"For the quail guys, it's like the land rush of the 21st Century," says land manager Rory Burroughs. "Just recently I had a guy selling his Scurry County place go up 100 percent on his asking price in just eight months—100 percent."

It has been called "Quail Alley" and is shaped like a box of roses (see graph) that quail mahatma Dr. Dale Rollins says runs about 75 miles either side of the "Sweetwater line." That would be as in Sweetwater, Texas, the Nolan County community on the west and Sweetwater, Oklahoma on the east.

Rollins says to look at one of the maps of Texas shot at night from outer space to clearly view the territory. The lights of our big cities pepper most of the state, but, as you move out to Northwest Texas, you see only blackness. That, says Rollins, is where all the quail congregated.

"I guess the bobwhites are like cockroaches," Rollins says. "When the lights come on, they don't like it."

A few millionaires like it. Entrepreneurs, NYSE CEOs and all kinds of big time money are drawn to this area populated with as few as three folks per square mile. It has long been said that "deer hunters arrive in pickups and quail hunters arrive in jets." Today, the unequivocal quail jet setter is T. Boone Pickens, who has bought, fixed up, sold, bought back, and fixed up again ranches all over Quail Alley. Pickens has made money—lots of it—in a variety of ventures, but his heart is truly in producing and sustaining wild quail populations.

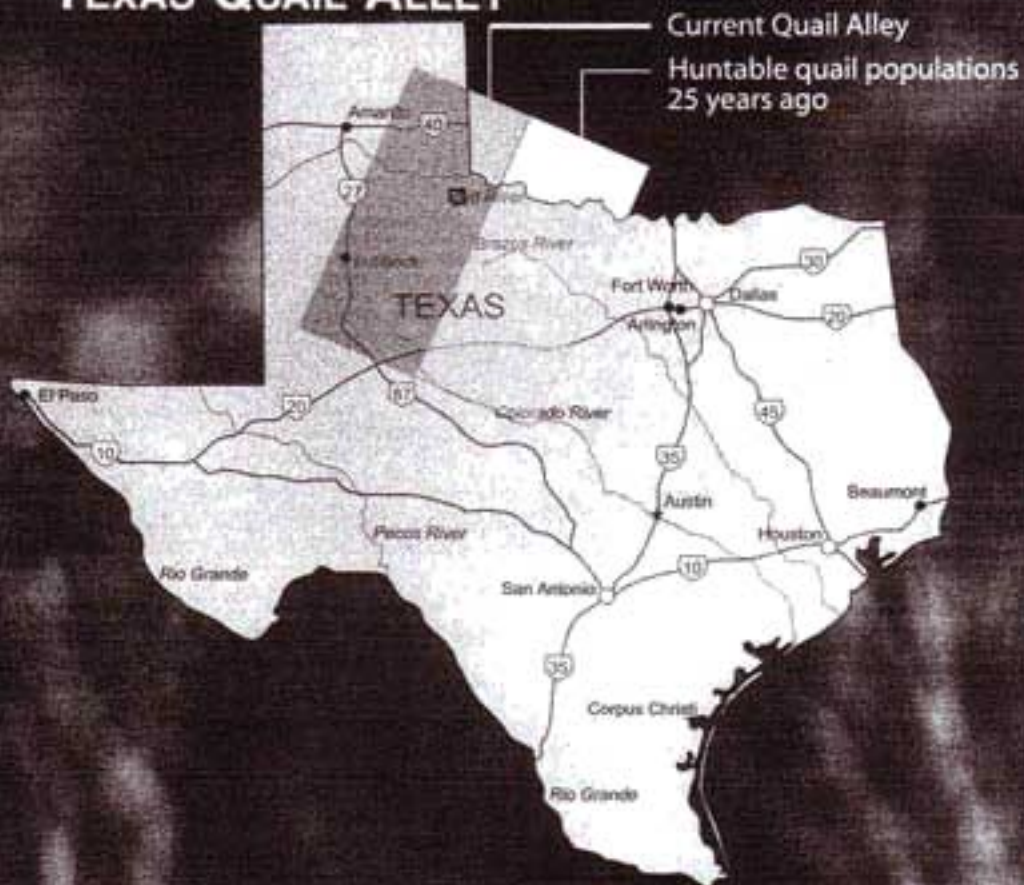
Paul Melton, who himself has bought 11 quail ranches, tries to explain the allure: "Look, the next record whitetail deer could come from anywhere—a cornfield in Iowa, a swamp in Alabama ... just about anywhere because deer are adapting and habitat is increasing. But your next limit of wild quail will probably be shot in a radius of 200 miles." In other words, somewhere in Quail Alley.

One thing is certain. Ranchers are not buying ranches in this area. Income from cotton, dry land wheat and cattle cannot possibly make a mortgage

When it comes to preserving a future for bobwhite quail in Texas, the sky's the limit in Quail Alley.



# TEXAS QUAIL ALLEY



The rush before the flush is just one of the reasons Quail Alley is taking center stage in Texas conservation efforts.



PHOTO BY DALE ROELINS

payment on this terrain of sand burs and rattlers that has quadrupled in value over the last 25 years simply from the influx of quail dollars.

"In 1979 the best cotton farm in Scurry County might have sold for \$500 per acre, and the nappy land next to it for just \$75 per acre," says Melton.

Today that cotton farm is worth

about the same and the land next to it could be sold for \$1,000 per acre.

Cattle punchers feel it too. Land that they used to lease for \$3.00 per acre is now fetching twice that just for the second half (January and February) of quail season. Of course, the first thing a quail manager will probably do is pull all the cows off a place for the first two

years to see what kind of grass he has.

In the past, my friend Folsom Bell ordinarily operated as a pretty sane man despite his keen devotion to quail hunting and field trialing. He has now bought a few quail ranches in the alley and runs around behind grubbing machines like some kinda crazed Johnny Quailseed.

Ask Folsom—who was supposed to be retired—how the project is going and sit back to listen to a pageant about roller choppers, mulchers, maintainers and natural seeds. Rarely seen now at his lavish Dallas home, Folsom often lives amidst the shunery, mesquites, weeds and sandy soil illuminating us about a brush clearing project with the enthusiasm and detail that I might employ in describing Ms. Sharon Stone crossing her legs.

All of these quail ranchers mentioned have made big profits, but they also share other features. They wish they had never sold one place because all those

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sales have now proved to be "too cheap." They realize that quail can be found in South Texas—sometimes in bounteous numbers—but the brush country there does not often fit the calendar pose of dogs locked, barely breathing while the two pipe-smoking shotgunners make their impertable approach. In Quail Alley, the goal is really quite simple as landowners and managers attempt to create what Melton calls "a place where dogs can confront the maximum number of birds."

To these folks, increasing the quail population is the clear objective, and everything else is secondary. If there is enough cover so that cattle can graze, that is fine. If dove or whitetails are drawn to these quail patches, that is fine, too—but not at the expense of a single quail bird.

Quail aficionados will stop at nothing and save no expense in experimenting with procedures that just might help them better understand the

## Researchers will be looking for quail management solutions at the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch.

little birds. Dr. Rollins has recently drawn on one technique long used by deer biologists—counting the species by helicopter.

In a new experiment being conducted at Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch (see sidebar) Rollins and other experts are—get this—evaluating the ability of a helicopter to buzz low enough to flush coveys of quail. Personally I think they would be better riding hang gliders and following my old dog Luke, who did nothing but bust coveys all day.

Money is truly no object to the enormously affluent Quail Alley rancher. In the arid Canadian River valley at the Mesa Verde ranch, T. Boone is growing pine trees (about eight inches



PHOTO BY DALE ROLLINS

in diameter) amid waterfalls, a chapel and a million-dollar dog kennel. It's a giant \$1,000,000 dog condo. One visitor told me, "I saw this great-looking stone structure and walked up there just figuring that had to be the house. But, instead, it was a fancy kennel for 40 or 50 bird dogs." Studious speculators estimate that Pickens has already spent as much as \$200 million on the property; and, no, that is not a typo.

While I was attempting to construct

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## SEARCH RANCH TAKES WING

field birds. They can be as tough as barbed wire one year, and as fragile as wet coffee shop wisdom holds that "if it rains we'll have quail, if it don't, we won't." But as bird hunters and lease-minded landowners, the old adage often comes up short. A research ranch dedicated to quail, perhaps answers to old questions will be access.

is, Texas Cooperative Extension wildlife specialist at San Angelo announced that ranch in Fisher County has been made available to him for quail research by The Fund.

merly the W.L. Martin Ranch, and now known as the Rolling Plains Quail Research - used as a research and demonstration facility to foster our understanding and of bobwhite and scaled quail in West Texas," Rollins says. "The vision for the ranch is as wild quail hunting heritage for this and future generations."

re ranch donation is the first of its kind in Texas dedicated to quail management, topographical location was sorely needed.

quail research in Texas has been conducted in South Texas," he says. "Thanks to ation Fund, we hope to initiate our own legacy of quail research here in West ng the ranch is a great first step.

forward to developing collaborative research projects with other colleagues, most A&M-Kingsville, and also Texas Tech and Angelo State University."

one of the last strongholds of wild quail across the south, and according to Rollins, here have been ebbing over the past decade. The 2006-2007 season was poorest observed in over 20 years according to Rollins. And the repercussions go hunting.

ounce ingots of gold ... 'quail escargot' is what I call them," Rollins says. "Land such of West Texas are dictated as much by a property's ability to sustain covets of ds of beef or bushels of wheat produced. And rural economies in this region benefit sion of mostly urban hunters who trek westward to pursue the sporty game birds."

the ranch will be used to develop and evaluate management schemes for uail abundance. Already studies are in progress evaluating helicopters as a tool ail populations and studies on patch-burning will begin in January.

quail on the ranch are bobwhites, but there lesser numbers of scaled "blue" quail. species on the property just makes it that much more interesting, according to

to be using the ranch to demonstrate quail-friendly technologies and nt techniques," he says. "I fully expect the ranch to soon become a forum for exchange among land managers, hunters, and rural economies interested in quail hunting in Texas."

the ranch is blessed with excellent quail habitat, and currently supports a quail igher than most Rolling Plains properties. It has 700 acres in the Conservation gram, about 80 acres of cropland, with the balance being native range. "Quail will in all we do on the ranch. We'll be testing various burning and grazing methods l in mind as to how to best manipulate plant communities for quail habitat."

ational programs for quail enthusiasts have already been conducted on the s says the ranch will host an annual field day in October.

ation is available at the TeamQuail website <[teamquail.tamu.edu](http://teamquail.tamu.edu)>.

this article, I had a quail hunting guide call to say that the hunting land across from the lodge where we work dogs just leased for \$15 an acre. Trust me, the deer population had nothing to do with that number.

Two years ago, I guided some quail jet setters on a ranch that featured seven sections in Oklahoma and four in Texas. My Oklahoma friend, Warren Henry, set this all up and greeted me with the salutation that he had been out filling feeders with the ranch manager.

"You know," he allowed, "We have 430 feeders here."

Amazed, I responded, "I couldn't afford the yearly feed for those."

"No," Warren said. "You couldn't."

Today an invite to hunt wild birds in Quail Alley is an opportunity not to be missed, and it would be considered a mortal sin amongst the quail hierarchy to decline such a summons. Rollins talks about how as a young man he "had to get married." The impending nuptials had nothing to do with a delicate condition and everything to do with her father owning one of the prize quail ranches in the country.

Of course, there is no guarantee that these quail barons of the 21st century will continue to buy up land, spend millions and make more millions. As Folsom Bell says, "You certainly have the purchase price at risk before you start doing anything." And there are only a minute number of candidates who could make T. Boone whole on his Mesa Verde fabrication.

None of that is of much concern to these men. The profit is only as a secondary byproduct of the activity. The cultivation of this land and nurturing of the quail in this black hole is exactly what Aldo Leopold said, "the most valuable part." \*

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*The author is TSJ's upland bird authority. He's still looking for his piece of the quail pie.*

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