

Northern Bobwhite *Colinus virginianus*



Folk Name: Partridge, Quail, Bobwhite

Status: Resident

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common—but declining

Habitat: Brushy fields, hedgerows, thickets, forest edges, open woods



The Northern Bobwhite is arguably the single most talked about bird species in Carolina history. More has probably been spoken about, written about, and argued over this bird than any other. Known variously as the “partridge,” “quail,” “bobwhite,” or “bobwhite quail,” this bird has meant a great deal to many people. For centuries, the meat of this plump 9- to 10-inch “chicken-like” bird has been considered a delicacy. The Bobwhite has been almost invariably ranked as the Carolina’s top game bird, and for over a century many Carolina landowners have made a living by allowing quail hunting on their property. Today, the population of this species is in serious decline and great efforts are being made to protect and manage habitat for the benefit of this beloved bird.

The Bobwhite gets its common name from the loud, rising, two-noted whistle the male makes. This clear, ringing call carries a long way on a calm day. For many, hearing the call instantly stirs up memories of growing up in the rural South. This ground-dwelling bird is well camouflaged and usually remains well hidden. If threatened, it will either run away or burst into explosive flight—sounding like a blast of “sudden thunder” as it flies to safety. After breeding season, the new families join together in small flocks called coveys. The Bobwhite was once an abundant bird spread throughout the Carolina Piedmont, part of the mountains, and into much of the Coastal Plain. Its population thrived in conjunction with early agricultural activities.

Our earliest written accounts of hunting “partridges” in the Carolinas come from English explorers, hunters during the American Revolution, and landowners of the Antebellum period. In his South Carolina hunting book published in 1859, William Elliott described the partridge as a tasty “great dainty” and noted that he believed it to be the only game animal that “had increased instead of diminishing [*sic*] with the clearing of the country.” Elliott noted some animals like the buffalo and elk had been extirpated, and many species of birds had been fairly decimated during colonization. In a detailed analysis of the history of Southern hunting titled *Southern Hunting in Black and White*, author Stuart A. Marks concludes before the twentieth century: “Quail and passenger pigeons were probably the most important small birds killed in the South. Of small size, quail could be obtained



with traps, nets, or guns in sizable quantities.”

In the nineteenth century, the Carolinas became known throughout the eastern United States for its wealth of partridges and sensational partridge hunting. Local “Nimrods” (skilled hunters) in the Central Carolinas became very efficient at hunting and trapping these birds and acted as quail hunting “mentors.” After the Civil War, a market developed for partridges and other wild game to be shipped north to cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Wealthy “Northern Hunters” also began to visit the Carolinas each winter to pay to hunt quail and other game. Hunting pressure resulted in calls for conservation as early as the 1870s. On December 14, 1874, *The Charlotte Democrat* reported: “A very judicious cry has been raised in this State for the protection of the partridges against net and trap.” Over the next five decades, a variety of local and state hunting seasons and game laws were enacted to try and help protect partridges and other game species, but they were ineffective and seldom enforced. Accounts drawn from regional newspapers help illustrate quail hunting during this period:

“Sportsmen are priming their fowling pieces and whipping their untrained dogs, preparatory to the partridge hunting of the coming season.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, September 23, 1876

“Partridge hunting having proven a failure this year, the Nimrods are turning their attention to wild turkeys and ducks, which are said to be more abundant.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, February 20, 1878

“500 dozen PARTRIDGES WANTED, B.N. Smith”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, January 17, 1879

“Partridge hunting will be at its best within the next few weeks. There is plenty of game this year, though the supply near the city is not large.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, November 23, 1879

“When the OBSERVER got to Pineville yesterday morning with its report of the forty birds bagged by the Northern hunters, Dr. J.A. Ardrey and two of his friends got their guns and went out to beat that record. They succeeded in doing it. When they arrived home last night the three had to show for their hunt, seventy partridges and six squirrels. They were out but a half a day at that.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, December 11, 1884

“A prominent sportsman was complaining recently of the number of quail that were being shipped out of the State.

He said that thousands of birds were weekly shipped to Northern cities. There is a law against this and the proper authorities should see that it is enforced. ... Quail hunting is one of the principal amusements of many of our businessmen as well as one of the chief inducements to wealthy Northern men to spend the winter in this State and the birds should be preserved from extermination in every manner possible.”

—*The Charlotte Democrat*, January 6, 1888

“Quail on toast is not yet entirely prohibited though it is becoming something of a rarity. The bird-law expired in Mecklenburg some time ago. A bill has been introduced into the Legislature to prohibit hunting in this county without the consent of the owners of the land.”

—*The Charlotte Democrat*, February 25, 1897

“The Charlotte market has been glutted with birds for the past week. Every farmer that comes in these days brings along with him a string of partridges. The price still remains at a dollar a dozen.”

—*The Chatham Record*, December 2, 1897

“In Mecklenburg county, as the bird is at present, the open season for hunting quail is from December 1 to January 10. A petition is in circulation asking the Legislature to make the open season from January 1 to February 1; to forbid the sale of birds throughout the year, and to allow a hunter to kill not more than 25 birds during one day’s hunt.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, January 7, 1907

“The pot hunter is a nuisance and he is dreaded by every farmer and very properly so. I happen to know of one who shoots a heavy-bore gun with an enormous amount of powder and shot and who makes it a point to shoot partridges on the ground, he having been heard to boast that he had killed every bird in a covey at one shot.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, January 20, 1907

“The activities of Weatherly, the Guilford county game warden, stationed at Greensboro, are worthy of all commendation. His latest capture was that of boxes supposed to contain butter and eggs, but which yielded 1,000 partridges to confiscation. It is against the law

to ship birds out of the State, yet here is a firm in Pilot Mountain shipping a thousand birds in one lot to the Philadelphia market. If it had been a thousand gallons of booze shipped from Philadelphia to Pilot Mountain, it would have been no more grievous violation of the law, yet we would have heard a greater howl about it. Wouldn’t we? The man engaged in smuggling birds out of the State is not a whit better than...who is engaged in the art of blind tigerism. Game Warden Weatherly is a fine officer. It is a pity the Audubon Society has so few like him in the State.”

—*The Evening Chronicle* (Charlotte), December 13, 1911

By the 1920s, quail had become scarce in much of the region. North Carolina created a State Game Commission in 1926 and tasked it with replenishing the state’s game supply. The Commission began to pen-raise and release quail in many parts of the state, and in 1927, the state began to purchase and release thousands of Mexican quail (a smaller race native to Texas and southward). It was front page news when crates of hundreds of Mexican quail were delivered by rail to J.E. Steele, sixth district game commissioner in Charlotte, for release in the area. The headline read “Quail by the Carloads—Good Shooting Ahead.”

New conservation measures such as the 1930s farm game program, better enforcement of existing regulations, and as some believed, the possible mixing of the native quail with the introduced Mexican quail, helped bolster local populations, and quail hunting thrived in the region for another 50 years. However, some hunters lamented the introduction of these foreign quail. One Stanly county hunter wrote:

I believe anyone who grew up on our “old native Bob” will agree with me that our present day sparrow-size quail are very different from the original. They vary considerably also being much faster and more erratic in flight. Color and voice are the same but that is all. ...The first I knew to be brought into Stanly County was around 1927. The Mexican, though smaller, is more aggressive, somewhat like game chickens, and amalgamation was swift and sure. ...It may be for the best, for being slow and less adept at caring for himself, “Old Bob” might not have survived.

In the early 1940s, the beloved Bobwhite was one of the lead candidates for selection as the “State Bird” of North Carolina. An editorial in *The State*, a Raleigh newspaper, on January 23, 1943, included the following:

We don’t want to influence the voting, but our personal preference is for the cardinal. We are very fond of quail—fried, broiled, or roasted. However, we don’t believe it would add to our enjoyment of this delectable dish if we knew every time we were

taking a bite, we were devouring a piece of our State Bird. What's the sense of picking out a State Bird and then trying to kill it and eat it at every opportunity?

Of course the Cardinal was the eventual winner. To rectify this identical problem, several other states chose to designate the ever popular Bobwhite as their state "game" bird instead.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, North Carolina's Cooperative Farm Game Habitat Development Area program taught farmers how quail production could be dramatically increased by planting seed-producing plants on the borders of their cultivated fields. Federal and state aid provided farmers with Bicolor and Sericea lespedeza seeds and Multiflora rose plants to help provide secondary sources of food, good cover, and nesting sites. Farmers in both Carolinas participated in the aid program. In July 1965, the Mecklenburg County agricultural extension agent reported that the quail population was "increasing rapidly" along the outskirts of Charlotte, the state's largest city, and two quail-hunting preserves had recently been established in the county.

However, within two decades the Bobwhite faced a new dilemma. Breeding populations plummeted once again as intensive modern-farming practices replaced traditional-farming methods that had once greatly benefited this bird. The hedgerows and brushy, grassy, and weedy landscapes preferred by quail were systematically eliminated. The Northern Bobwhite soon became the symbol of this lost habitat. It was also recognized as a "keystone species," a species that signifies by its presence or absence the presence or absence of many other species of animals dependent upon these early successional areas.

Once again, conservation efforts were begun in order to preserve this habitat type in both Carolinas. Both states joined the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative and established statewide management programs. The North Carolina Wildlife Commission established the CURE program to benefit bobwhite through habitat restoration. Special habitat sites have now been set aside and are being managed in the Central Carolinas and elsewhere, on both private and public land, including the South Mountain Gamelands. South Carolina has established a special Piedmont focal region for quail management. The Northern Bobwhite appears to be recovering well at these heavily managed sites, but only time will tell as many factors are involved in the final outcome.

Unfortunately today, the once familiar and resounding call of the Northern Bobwhite may soon become just an echo of the past in much of the Carolina Piedmont. An analysis of 40 years of Breeding Bird Survey data shows a statistically significant, steep and steady, long-term declining population trend from about 40 birds per route to below 5 per route today. Where it was once an abundant bird, the quail is now on the verge of being entirely lost in Mecklenburg County and in many other rapidly developing areas. Immediate action is needed to

protect both the quantity and quality of early successional habitat in both Carolinas to help prevent further declines.

Even near Charlotte, all hope is not yet lost. Frank Bragg, a lifelong landowner in northern Mecklenburg County, shared this account on September 7, 2010:

Very few birds whistled this summer and I had just given up and just now at 7 pm, I was walking home from a day of farming at a remote area of the farm when I jumped a great covey of about 16 birds...I would say they are about 3 weeks old, fat, slow to rise and only flew a short distance. They were in the edge of a planted native grass area that is a sea of yellow with the partridge peas, coreopsis, and various sunflowers in brilliant bloom. They were absolutely beautiful. So, just maybe, the hard work of planting natives, treating for fire ants and praying is working. I would say that I have two known coveys and possibly a third. Just wanted to share the good news...

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers confirmed breeding in two blocks and tallied probable breeding in two other blocks. Each site had large field areas with lots of brushy, weedy habitat. In this region, nesting can occur one to three times in a season. Males start calling in mid-April, and females have been found on nests here as early as 22 April, with 10–14 or more eggs hatching within 23 days. Newly hatched young have been found here as late as 8 September. Broods with young "a quarter grown" have been found as late as the third week of September, which means they won't be fully grown until November. Raccoons, foxes, and fire ants are believed to regularly prey on quail eggs in the region and may be a major cause of nest failures. In addition, recent studies have shown that increased pesticide use

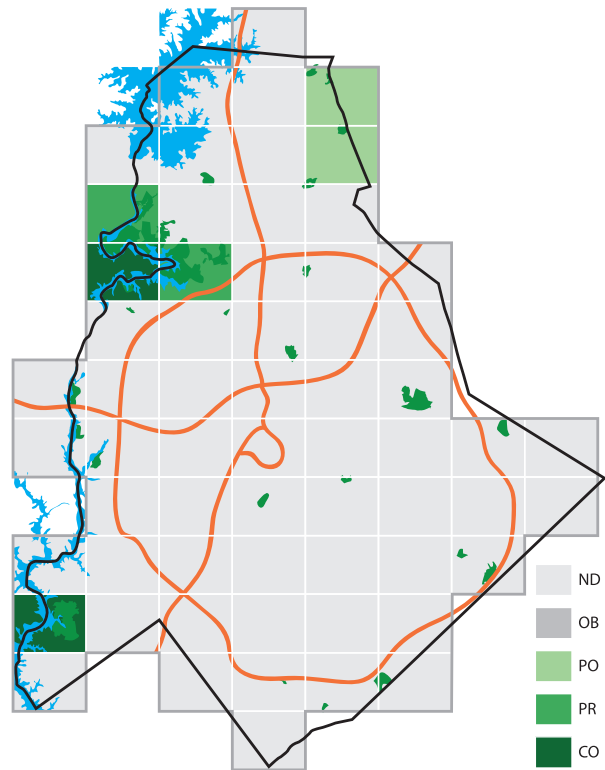


Male Northern Bobwhite. (Jeff Lemons)

is resulting in the death of hatchlings who are unable to find sufficient insects to survive.

BBA volunteer Sue Gardner provided this account of a pair of Northern Bobwhite seen on the entrance road at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on July 31, 2010: "I observed them for a second or so and then seven young emerged from the right side of the road and crossed over the road following the pair—when the young were half way across they flew up and over to the other side!! Saw me maybe? Or, the pair may have signaled 'danger.' Very much a highlight of summer birding for me!"

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the population of the Northern Bobwhite is rapidly declining throughout its entire breeding range.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/2, CO/2)