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ROD & GUN

By Tom Walker

QUAIL TROUBLE - The quail season ending tomorrow (Jan. 31) goes down in the books as a disappointment, which is no surprise to the Division of Game and Inland Fisheries because pre-season prospects were for a low quail population in many sections, and which is no news to the vastly increased (31%) number of hunters who went after the king of Tar Heel game birds. This season completes a string of three successive years in which the bird population was low while more and more hunters tramped out in search of the small bundle of flesh and feathers whose thunderous rise before dog and gun can make even the steadiest heart do jitterbug steps. The 1942-43 season was the last during which the bird supply was large enough to satisfy the hunting pressure.

What's behind the decline of bobwhite? The reasons are numerous, and they are complicated. The list does not apply to the entire State, but at least a part of them apply to every section. Boiled down, the reasons principally are: (1) poor breeding seasons (because of abnormally heavy rains); (2) an intensification of detrimental farming practices (clean farming, the tendency toward fewer, larger farms, increasing use of land for livestock); (3) over-shooting (hunting license sales were 92,588 in 1943-44, 115,978 in 1944-45, 138,710 in 1945-46, and up to January 1 this year, approaching 170,000); and (4) in a small way, a greatly increased predator population.

Tied in with the quail decrease as part of the whole farm-game problem in North Carolina is the decline of squirrel and rabbit populations. Quail and quail management are stressed in this discussion not because of greater importance, but because quail present a more difficult management problem than do the other species.

The quail problem turns up its biggest headache in the fact that restoration must be accomplished on privately owned lands, with-

out any Division control over management of these lands except that provided for through seasons and bag limits for hunting. The extent of publicly owned lands on which small-game management could be carried on is so small that it can be ignored.

With that background of trouble as a preface, let's take a look at what can be done to restore quail, what is being done, and what program the Division intends to put into motion.

KNOWN - Known quantities in the quail picture are these:

- (1) Quail can be increased through proper manipulation of food and cover, supplemented by predator control and managed hunting;
- (2) the farmer (landowner) is the key to the problem;
- (3) the Division can tell the farmer what to do to increase quail;
- (4) hunter cooperation is essential in a good farm-game program;
- (5) in such a program the Division must supply technical advice, initiative, field assistance, and so far as possible, materials;
- (6) hunters must provide incentive.

DONE - A few wildlife clubs are working with farmers or farm-youth organizations and are supplying some incentive to manage lands or game production through furnishing seed for cover planting and offering cash rewards for wildlife projects. Action is scattered, however, and the Division has not been made an active partner to work or Statewide continuity, although its representatives have been asked for technical advice.

An unknown number of individuals are providing incentive for individual farmers through supplying seed, fertilizer, labor, or cash in return for the privilege of hunting.

The Division is carrying on a cooperative project with Soil Conservation Service districts providing seed and advice for planting wildlife borders and making suggestions as to improved wildlife practices, all of this on SCS cooperating farms. Publications outlining good practices to follow in small-game restoration have been prepared and distributed. Field inspection and assistance have been given when called for. Enforcement of hunting regulations has been intensified.

AHEAD - The sad fact that

always winds up talk about quail restoration is the conclusion that there is no simple, quick way to increase the supply. It used to be thought that artificial propagation was the answer, but North Carolina found some years ago that it is no go. The Division is approaching the problem from the viewpoint that a successful restoration plan must be based on close protection and habitat improvement.

Three groups - landowners, hunters, and the State, represented by the Division - can make the program work. And it will take all three, working together, to bring bobwhite back to satisfactory numbers. In general, each group can do these things:

1. Landowner can provide the land, and with proper incentive, they can do the work.
2. Hunters can provide the incentive and, to some extent, the work. This can be done best through organized effort. Examples of incentive are providing seed and fertilizer, personal association, with the landowner, purchase of farmer's goods, prizes for farm youth projects, and fair treatment of landowners. The hunter can help push constructive legislation. They can provide cooperation in reporting and testifying to violations of hunting regulations.
3. The State can provide technical

advice and general field assistance to both landowners and hunters; can provide printed material outlining club programs and projects; can close breeding areas and furnish refuge signs to post these areas; can furnish a limited amount of seed; can initiate and maintain an educational program with all agencies involved; can serve as the driving force in keeping the program moving ahead; can experiment with trapping and moving wild quail from State-owned lands to badly depleted areas; can promulgate sensible hunting regulations; can distribute instructions and give field advice on predator control; can spearhead action for more adequate legislation; can study and investigate the biological problems involved; can provide efficient, trained personnel and the police power to enforce laws and regulations.

The Division is now taking steps to organize its share of this program so as to lead the way for other groups to cooperate; necessary personnel to carry out the required assignments will be put on the job.

The other groups? Experience has shown that landowners can be expected to do no more than provide the land. The Division is awaiting the hunters' response about shouldering their share of the load.

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