

Small Game Management Plan

Research and management of rabbits and quail -- two of N.C.'s most popular small game species -- will be emphasized more in the near future. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission recently reviewed a statewide small game management plan at its meeting in Raleigh on Jan. 28.

"We're very concerned about the declines that have been affecting rabbit and quail populations," said J. Robert Gordon of Laurinburg, chairman of the NCWRC. "Hopefully this plan will determine what is causing these declines, and may offer some solutions."

Officials expect no easy answers to the problem, and indeed, declines in rabbit and quail numbers are not confined to North Carolina. "Wildlife professionals across the Southeast, and even in the Northeast, are concerned about widespread declines in small game species," said Vernon Beville, executive director. "These declines are not caused solely by conspicuous losses of habitat -- such as construction of shopping centers on old farm land. Relatively undeveloped areas that have traditionally offered good small game hunting -- and still offer apparently good habitat -- are just not producing the numbers of quail and rabbits that one would expect. We suspect that these declines may be caused by a number of subtle cause-and-effect relationships involving many different complex factors. Among the things we'll be looking at are changes in weather patterns, environmental quality, changes in land use, habitat factors such as food availability on an annual cycle, predator-prey relationships, and others."

"The first step in the small game management plan is to conduct the type of research that will help us determine exactly what the problems are, then to attempt to develop workable solutions. However, it is possible that some of these problems may be so complex that they may not have a solution in today's world. Fortunately, for the first time in many years, however, the Wildlife Commission is in the position where it has funds available for quality research. I'm very excited about the potential that this program has to offer, and there is enough concern about small game throughout the Southeast so that regional solutions to some of the problems may be found. I would also like to commend the Wildlife Commission for challenging the staff to come up with an innovative plan which features a strong research program. This plan has been several years in the making, and has undergone several revisions. The input and the constructive criticism offered to the staff has been valuable."

In addition to basic research, the plan emphasizes working with landowners to improve habitat for small game. "We plan to offer additional technical guidance to landowners who are interested in improving small game populations," said Carl Betsill, small game and migratory bird program coordinator. "Although the decline in small game populations is widespread and has been going for several decades, offering better habitat will boost populations considerably. We also plan to work with corporate landowners and with land management agencies to incorporate the needs of small game into their existing programs."

"We're also planning to set up a small game research demonstration farm. This will serve two purposes -- the effects of agricultural practices and habitat management on small game will be monitored, and the area will serve as an educational facility for landowners and others. A similar facility, known as the Penny Bend Rabbit Research Station in Durham, has already produced good information, and work will continue there. Also, we plan to institute some basic population studies of rabbits and quail. In fact, some of this is already being done. Our avid hunter survey assesses hunter effort and success rates statewide and our quail win survey on the Sandhills game lands furnishes up with good information on that area. In addition, cooperating hunters send us information used to determine harvest and hunter success rates."

"Many small game populations are directly tied to private land ownership patterns," added Hal Atkinson, chief of WCDWM. "We'll need to evaluate these exchanges, and structure our programs accordingly in the future as the state continues to change and grow."

Ultimately, however wildlife officials feel that the future of our small game populations will depend on private landowners.

"In the past, North Carolinians have always prized their rabbit and quail hunting, and we hope that enough landowners think highly enough of this sport to include provisions for small game on their farms," said Beville. "Unfortunately, some landowners have experienced enough problems with hunters who trespass or don't ask permission to hunt so that they're no longer interested in supporting wildlife populations on their land. This is tragic. It's up to each of us to help build a better future for wildlife in our state, and as the human population increases and less land is available for hunting, practicing good outdoor ethics will be more important than ever before. We hope that this new plan will result in some workable solutions to the small game problem, but it will take a long-term effort of Wildlife Commission personnel, landowners and sportsmen to bring this about."

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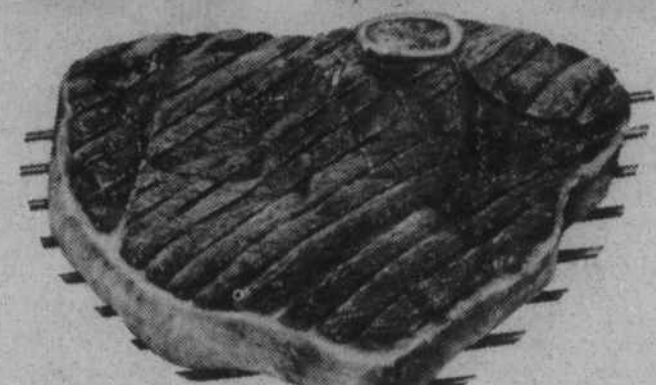


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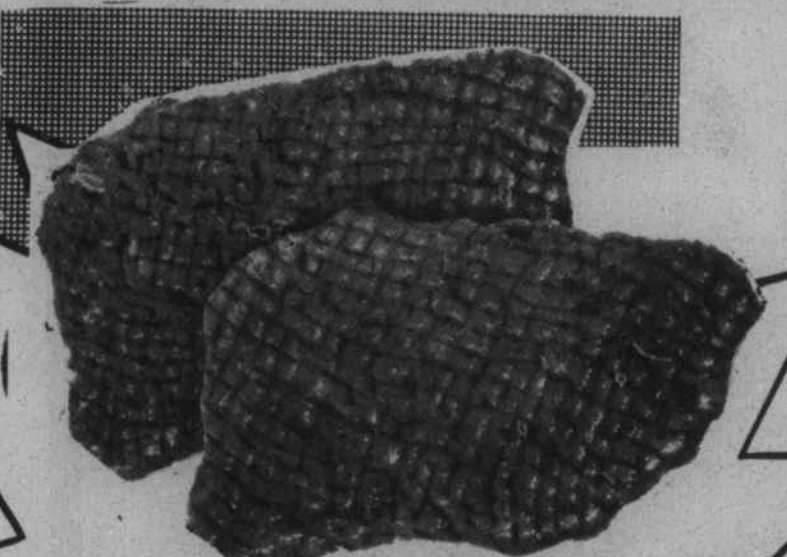
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