

Bobwhite Hunting Report: If You Build It, They Will Come | Part II

Tom Dailey | *NBCI Science Coordinator*

The 2018 NBCI Hunting Inventory is redefining expectations for recovery of wild bobwhite hunting. In a departure from the traditional 5-year hunting trend summaries (2011/2012, 2016, etc.), recent annual Inventories (2017 and 2018) are intended to identify the upward trend in quail hunting resulting from increased bird populations following a few years of mild weather in the Great Plains and Midwest.

The NBCI Inventory continues to report the gross number of quail hunters, disregarding distinctions between wild and pen-raised quail that a few agencies report, thus providing an index of current potential interest in wild quail hunting. Data for the Hunting Inventory are reported by state agency quail coordinators in March based on post-season statewide surveys, usually from the previous hunting season, rarely the current year, and sometimes several years prior to the current reporting period. Most of these surveys do not collect data from classes of hunters who are not required to have a permit, for example land owners, those <16 years-of-age, and seniors.

The 2018 report (Figure 1) uses new data from the 2016-17 hunting season for 12 states (Alabama, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas) and data from the 2017-18 season for one state (Delaware). Some states in Figure 1 collect statewide data less frequently than annually, and Arkansas, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia seldom collect statewide wild quail hunting data.

Results

The number of quail hunters reported in 2018 was 259,873, and they spent 1,366,365 days in the field. Quail hunters ranged from 196 estimated in Delaware to 83,384 in Texas, with the latter representing a record high for the NBCI Inventory. Quail hunters in the four states on the western boundary of NBTC represented 76% of total NBCI-reported number of quail hunters (Nebraska: 21,789; Kansas: 62,653; Oklahoma: 29,072; and Texas: 83,384), and 78% of total NBCI-reported hunting trips (Nebraska: 144,026; Kansas: 300,441; Oklahoma: 184,316; and Texas: 430,606). As noted in previous reports, most of the hunting in these top-performing states is of wild bobwhites. Outstanding hunts also occur in states to the

east, albeit increasingly of released pen-raised bobwhites (reviewed in the 2011 report).

As previously reported in the 2011, 2012, and 2016 Bobwhite Hunting Reports, quail hunting was on a long-term downward trend associated with dwindling habitat and declining wild bobwhite populations. Following several years of regional drought, rain, and snow up to 2012, both the 2016 State Conservation Reports and Bobwhite Hunting Report recorded the worst cases, low quail populations, and subsequently record low numbers of hunters in several states.

The initial recovery of bobwhite populations and hunting as a result of mild weather was reported in 2017 (Figure 1), and the recovery continued markedly in the 2016-17 hunting seasons in the Midwest and Great Plains states of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas. Compared to the low numbers of quail hunters reported in 2016, number of hunters reported in 2018 is up 106% for Texas, 87% for Nebraska, 53% for Iowa, 40% for Oklahoma, and 21% for Missouri.

A common question is *How many quail hunters are there in the 25 NBCI states?* This was estimated as 357,542, 249,846, and 255,927, in 2011, 2016, and 2017, respectively. Using data reported sporadically for the past five years (i.e., assuming steady state in hunter numbers for Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Ohio, and South Carolina), and continuing to use zero for the past five years for hunting activity for the NBCI Inventory for Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, NBCI conservatively estimates there are 302,364 bobwhite hunters, and that they spend about 1.5 million days in the field each hunting season. The estimate is conservative because of lack of data for several states and classes of hunters (land owners, youth, seniors, etc.).

Discussion

The NBCI Hunting Inventory has set a new standard for what we can expect for the recovery of wild bobwhite hunting, and the 2018 reported hunting levels might be the peak. Final annual state hunting survey results are just being published, but reports and news during 2017-18 have been less optimistic for both quail populations and hunting success (e.g. Texas Parks and Wildlife 2017 hunting



season forecast, Oklahoma 2018 news release on poor hunting season weather, Quail Forever blog on summer bobwhite prospects).

The 2016-2018 hunting recovery occurred across a wide variety of private and public lands, on a foundation of habitat and subsequent quail response, and was aided by hunting access programs (e.g., in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma) and special opportunities for youth and women (e.g., Kansas and Missouri youth seasons, women-focused bird-hunting programs by many state agencies, Quail Forever youth programs, etc.). Similarly, NBCI has been working with the Resident Game Bird Working Group of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies on specific steps to protect and enhance the future of bobwhite hunting. A key step is understanding quail hunting as a recreational activity. The latest published data on desires of quail hunters, economics, etc., were covered in the 2012 *State of the Bobwhite*, with a few good pieces of data for Florida, Georgia, and Texas, vague federal data (lumps pheasants, grouse, and quail), and decades-old data for the southeast region. The *Eighth National Quail Symposium Proceedings* included five studies published on hunting efficiency with recommendations for attracting hunters (see www.quailcount.org). Developing plans for maintaining or increasing bobwhite hunting as a recreational activity will require more comprehensive study of former, current, and potential quail hunters.

Although programs and research about hunting per se are beneficial, continuation of quail hunting as a robust recreational activity is dependent on habitat, and the states identified with the current hunting recovery have much potential, as indicated by their NBCI 2.0 Biologist Ranking Index, an estimate of the potential for bobwhite recovery. The potential number of coveys that could be added to the population based on habitat management are about 800,000 coveys each for Kansas and Texas (34% of all estimates for NBTC states), about 400,000 coveys each for Missouri and Oklahoma, and about 160,000 coveys each for Iowa and Nebraska. All NBTC states show considerable potential for recovery per NBCI 2.0, a total of 4.6 million coveys added to the landscape. Maintenance of habitat and quail at levels that support *any* wild quail hunting is important in the eastern US. In the short-term, across the NBTC range, quail habitat, populations, and hunting prescriptions are being demonstrated on NBCI Coordinated Implementation Program areas (page 30).

Regardless of uncertainty about future participation in quail hunting, with an estimated 1.5 million days afield, the sport continues to be extremely valuable to our culture and economy, and the remaining hunters and their bird dogs are enjoying success in the field.

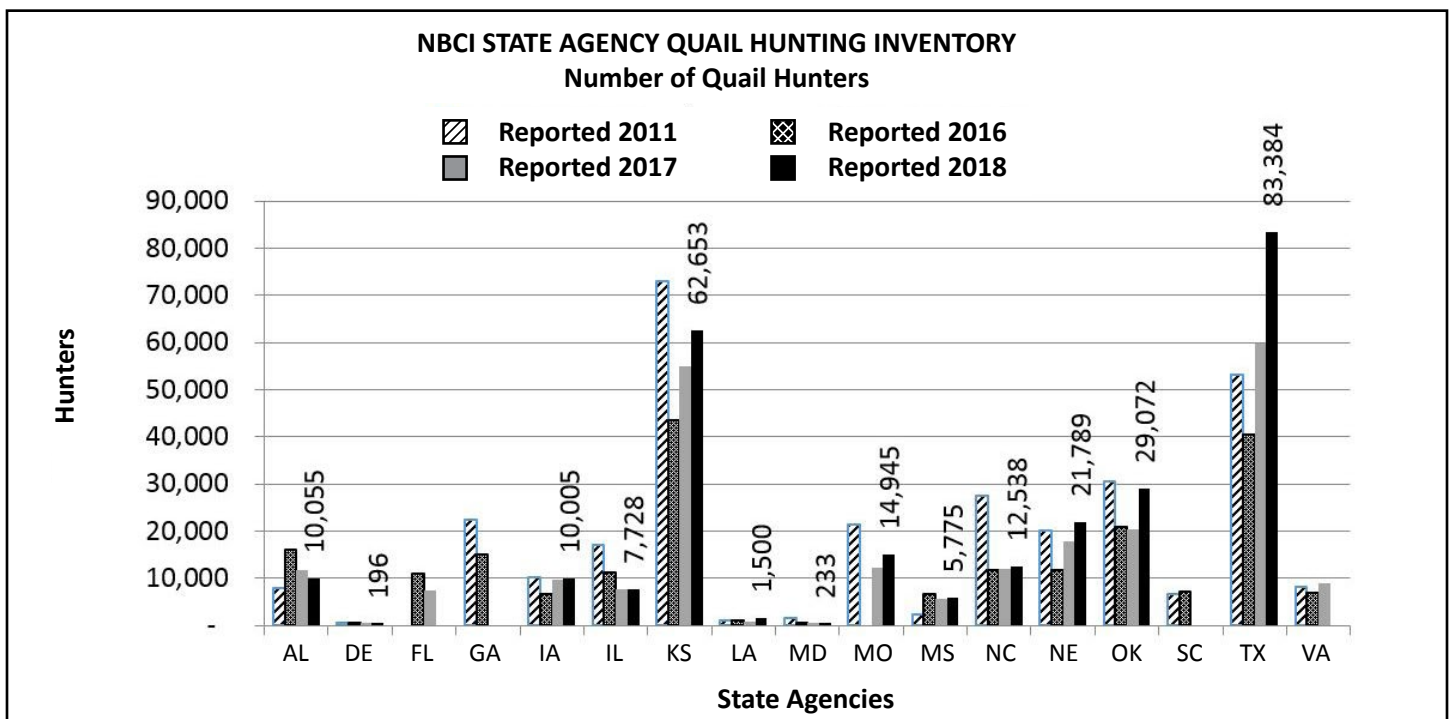


Figure 1. Estimated number of quail hunters reported by state agency quail coordinators for NBCI Inventory in 2011, 2016-18.

