The Vanishing Species

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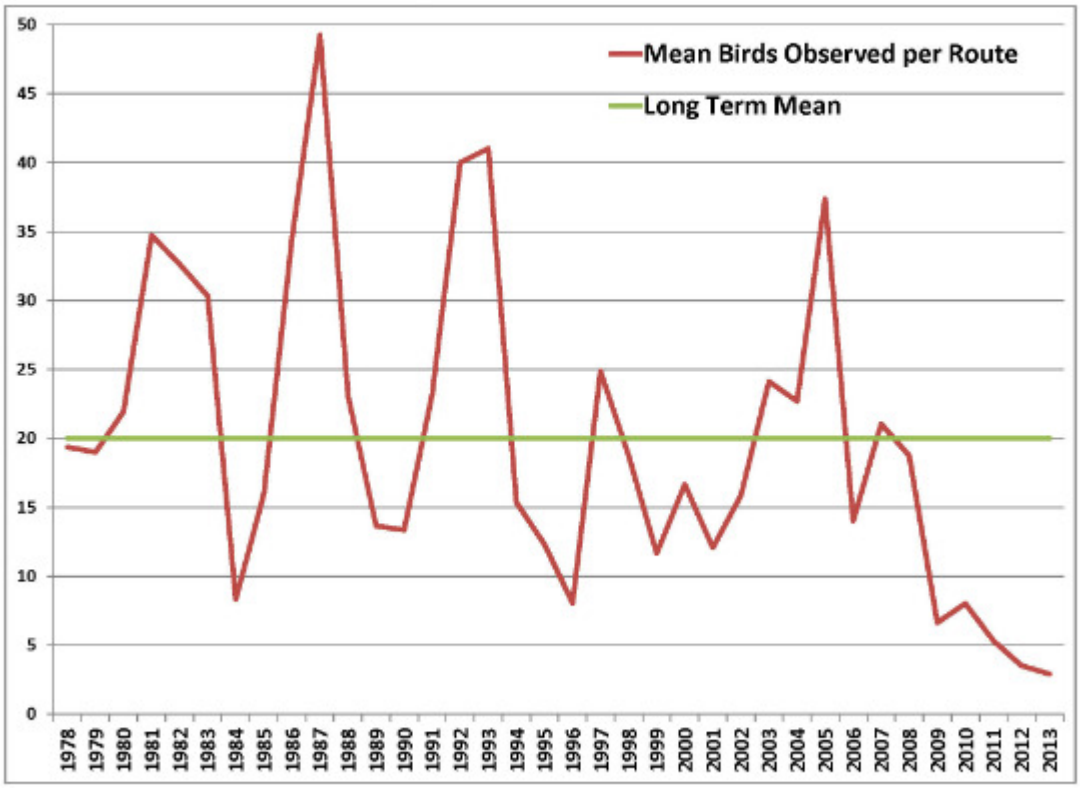
The sound of little feet rustling in the shinnery leaves and whimpering distress calls just before an explosive covey rise. The intensity in the body language of a pointing dog as his eyes follow the movements of the tiny missiles he knows are ready to fire with one muscle twitch or eye blink. The adrenaline rush inside the hunter as he moves into position. The mental strategy that flashes in his mind. Which way will they fly? Are they walking? I hope it's a big covey. Relax…… then it comes. That familiar yet unnerving burst of feathers that one is never quite prepared for. It's a scenario that was played for generations of quail hunters. I remember as a child tagging along with my Dad and Granddad in an old jeep as they pursued wild bird dogs pursuing wilder quail through shin oak, plum thickets, and mesquite thickets. It is an addiction I have harbored to this day. It is also an addiction with little opportunity of satisfying for the past several years. Where have all the quail gone?



The graph above (courtesy of **Texas Parks & Wildlife**) shows the dynamics of the Rolling Plains quail population. It has been a common idea that quail are a "boom or bust" species but the trend indicates that "bust" years are becoming the norm. Some research done in the 1990's suggested that the species would become extinct by 2005 but we are nearly a decade past that deadline and the fragile little bird is still among us. It must also be noted that their numbers are at their lowest point since records have been kept. Extinction is a real possibility but hopefully it can be prevented through management, cooperative climate conditions, along with research. Now let's look at some possible causes of decline.

For several years the decline in quail numbers has been attributed to habitat fragmentation due to urban and suburban sprawl. Quail can cohabitate with humans but healthy populations need large tracts of good habitat to maintain long term existence. This is probably not a major factor in the rolling plains but it is worth mentioning.

Parasites are also potential cause of large scale quail mortality. There is still much work to be done but there has been substantial research into discovering the effects of eyeworms in the population which gets behind the eyelids of and into the tear ducts of the quail, affecting their vision. In a recent study of 1200 birds, roughly fifty percent were infected with eyeworms. The worms are tiny but not microscopic and the average number found in each quail was six with one individual bird carrying 82 worms. Quail are fragile birds that depend heavily on all their senses and a bird with limited vision is at a major disadvantage to predators as well as hindering its foraging ability. There is currently research being done on potential eyeworm treatments. It is also possible that this problem may correct itself to some degree with such a small population that the parasite could run out of host birds.

Another unknown factor is extent of predation on the population. Coyotes, bobcats, skunks, opossum and others have always been natural predators of quail. In recent years there has been some speculation that due to the exponential distribution of deer feeders over the last 20 years there has been an explosion in the raccoon population. Along the same lines, it is thought that wildlife feeders make predation an easier game for any animal that include quail in their diet, especially under poor range conditions. Feral Hogs have also come under the microscope as a potential predator. In Uvalde researchers have noted as much as 30% predation on quail nest by the

omnivorous rooters. A question that needs to be answered is the possibility that feral hogs can develop a sense of timing to target nesting quail. Every year early in the spring, while everything is still dormant I have observed a group of hogs disturbing areas of CRP and fallow farm land that have healthy populations of Johnson grass and other weeds. This process goes on for a few weeks and then the animals move on.

In light of the ongoing drought. loss of habitat through overgrazing is probably also a major contributor. Poor range conditions affect the birds in several ways. First, It takes away their nesting habitat. Secondly, it removes some of their food sources. Third, it exposes them to heavier predation pressure. And lastly, it could play a factor in available water sources. Quail have very small water requirements and can survive in areas with no surface water because they are able to extract moisture from their food sources. In an extreme drought however, it is possible that water intake could become an issue.

In conclusion, there are many factors that seem to contributing to the continued downward trend in the quail population in Texas. In fact, the only thing we know for sure is that they are declining. There has been extensive research and still no solid answers to the little bird's problem. Hopefully, we still have time to discover how we can help them rebound to an acceptable number that can tolerate the "normal" boom/bust fluctuations.