

Special Reprint

What does the DFW know about long-term quail declines in state?

By JIM MATTHEWS

www.OutdoorNewsService.com

I saw an interesting graph on a Facebook group from the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. It charted the population of bobwhite quail in the state from 1990. The data was derived from a series of surveys across the state that measured quail numbers annually. That agency also has data that shows how the range of the species has declined over the past 50 years, and the work the state was doing to restore and enhance quail habitat and grow numbers back to historic levels.

How is that relevant or of interest here in Southern California? Stay with me. I have been poking around our mountains, foothills, and deserts for over 50 years now, and I think I can say with certainty that quail distribution has declined dramatically from when I was a teenager starting bird hunting in the late 1960s. Vast areas of the West Mojave Desert, the desert around Inyokern and Ridgecrest, much of the East Mojave, and all along the Colorado River once had lots of coveys of quail on the desert flats and foothills where there are simply no birds today — or only an occasional remnant covey.

These are NOT areas where the habitat has been overrun with housing tracts, OHVs (less now than ever), or other human population impacts. These are little-changed areas that simply have lost their birds. So what is the cause of the decline?

Unlike Oklahoma, our state wildlife agency — the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) — has no idea there is even a decline. They have no data on historic and contemporary range of our quail. They have no idea on long-term or short-term trends because no data is gathered any longer. Other agencies still doing real research and science have used some historic data (not from DFW) on bird distribution in our deserts and noted drastic declines when compared to contemporary surveys in the same areas. (Of course, they want to suggest — and “suggest” is the key word here — this is due to climate change and not far more likely and easily explainable and provable scenarios.) But the point is that the DFW has nothing but speculation.

Back in the 1990s, when the DFW was starting its

abandonment of annual surveys or doing real data-collection and scientific studies under the guise of funding, they started working with bird hunting groups to initiate a new funding source for this important work. Starting in the fall-winter seasons of 1993-94, all quail hunters were required to buy the new Upland Birds Stamp. We were told that money would be added to what was already being spent on upland birds.

That was a lie.

It was almost immediately that all other Fish and Game Preservation Funds — funds that used to be allocated to upland birds — were diverted to other programs. The Upland Game Stamp money was used to backfill the loss in the upland program budget. Within a short couple of years, we ended up with a net loss in upland program funding. We continue to pay more for less.

I don't believe the DFW has done a spring quail/chukar survey (at least in Southern California) for over a decade. So how would it have any long-term data on quail numbers or distribution? It has repeatedly said that data isn't necessary. *Quail numbers are driven by weather and habitat. They will be fine. Long-term drought is a problem, they say. Climate change is an issue, they say.* But they can't show you any data because they have none. They simply can't explain why we have vast areas where quail used to be present but no longer live. Frankly, I'm not sure any of them care.

(A quick story, a couple of year ago, I found sage grouse in two spots in the Eastern Sierra Nevada where I'd never seen them before. They were also in areas where the DFW did not have them listed them as exist-

O.N.S
OUTDOOR NEWS SERVICE

Originally Published:
November 10, 2019
www.OutdoorNewsService.com



ing. I had photos and GPS coordinates. In one case, I even had feathers collected from a carcass of a predator kill, so they could get DNA. I contact the DFW and asked if they wanted the information. At the time, the sage grouse were being proposed as an endangered species. The agency was not interested.)

If the DFW would talk to any hunter over the age of 60 — heck, over the age of 30 — who has hunted for more than 15 years, those hunters could mark up maps to show where they once saw quail but no longer do. The DFW would have a good baseline on where populations have been lost. It will not do that. It could survey the notes of its old field biologists to see where they surveyed birds in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. They could see the numbers they counted in that era. Sadly, most of these old notes have been destroyed or shunted away in locked file cabinets by the DFW.

What does the DFW know about quail numbers or long-term declines? What does the state's lead wildlife agency know about why vast areas of our deserts are losing other bird populations? The answer is nothing. It knows nothing.

But it's not just birds that have been disappearing from our landscape. How many of you alive in the 1960s and 70s remember driving up Highway 395 and counting squashed jackrabbits? There were millions of them in our deserts for at least those two decades. Then numbers declined to what we have today, where it is almost a novelty to see them. What happened to the jackrabbits? Does the state wildlife agency care?

This an agency that *can* do effective restoration and recovery. The tule elk and bighorn sheep stories are great examples. Both species' populations have gone from historic lows to historic highs over the same period of time that we've lost our birds and jackrabbits. That is because of sound science and work done by the DFW. Does a species have to be near extinction before the DFW notices or cares?

Usually, the solutions are pretty simple. With bighorn sheep, the problem was domestic livestock diseases and the lack (or loss) of water in suitable desert habitat. The DFW worked with other agencies to keep domestic livestock away from bighorns, built man-made desert

water sources, and captured and relocated animals back into historic habitat once the water was restored. We have more sheep in California than we've had in 100 years. We should have more, but the DFW has pretty much ceased doing this work. They merely monitor today. With tule elk, it was even simpler. Protect the herds and move surplus animals back into historic range. Bingo. There are so many today, we again have hunting seasons. But there are even more public and private lands where tule elk could and should be relocated (and lots of private land owners who would love to have the DFW trap and move some of the animals), but the DFW seems to have abandoned this work, too.

The time hunters started noticing a serious decline in quail numbers happened to coincide with the DFW's end to mitigating for lost habitat and water sources (mostly due to ground water pumping and long-term drought). By the 1970s, the DFW was no longer building or maintaining guzzlers (man-made devices that capture and store rain water for wildlife). By the 1990s most of the guzzlers were in various states of disrepair. That was when the current long-term drought began, but it was also the beginning of the era when hunter-conservationists started voluntarily repairing and filling these guzzlers. A lot of that effort was too little, too late. Bird populations were declining and had already disappeared in some areas.

Permanent water might not be the whole problem for desert and foothill birds, quail included, but it seems likely a big chunk of the problem. The places where quail and other bird numbers remain good are where there is permanent water that has been around as long as anyone can remember and probably long before many of us were alive. The man-made water is more important than ever.

Yet, the DFW has been an absent voice on the National Park Service's desire to remove or abandon over 120 guzzlers, dozens of developed springs and old windmills to make the desert "more natural." This mitigation for lost natural water due to drought (or even global warming if you prefer that currently hypothesis) is important in the southern half of the state.

The DFW is failing at its basic task today.